



智库丛书
Think Tank Series

China-CEECC Think Tanks Book Series

China-CEECC Cooperation and the “Belt and Road Initiative”

Editors-in-chief

■ Huang Ping Liu Zuokui ■



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Preface

China's The Belt and Road initiative has attracted worldwide attention. As Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is an important region along the Belt and Road, CEE countries have made growing cooperation with China. Before the formal initiation of the Belt and Road, China has established "16+1" cooperative framework in 2002. In the past few years, under the promotion of this mechanism, bilateral exchange and cooperation in political, economic, cultural and other fields have been greatly deepened, which have achieved remarkable achievements and have effectively promoted the construction of the Belt and Road initiative in Central and Eastern Europe.

Both the construction of the Belt and Road initiative in CEEC and "16+1" cooperative framework are important practice of China's opening up policy in the 21st century and they have also become the topical issues that pay attention by scholars from think tanks. Think tanks in CEE region have attached more importance to the current situation, prospect and challenges of China-CEEC cooperation under the Belt and Road initiative and "16+1" cooperative framework. They also made in-depth study from the level of countries, CEE region and even the whole Europe in the perspective of politics, economy and culture. As bilateral cooperation is increasingly deepened, we need to understand and analyze further that how CEE scholars consider the Belt and Road initiative and "16+1" cooperation as well as their analysis about current cooperation and challenges. It will be helpful for both sides to get acknowledge of the essential characteristics and latest progress of the Belt and Road initiative and "16+1" cooperation, to achieve the effect of "telling Chinese stories by foreigner's mouth". What's more, it also provides useful ideas for the promotion of the Belt and Road initiative in CEE region and the deepening of "16+1" cooperation.

Therefore, under the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, China-CEEC Think Tanks Exchange and Cooperation Network (shorted as 16+1 Think Tanks Network) has organized many activities such as seminars, joint projects, to make close cooperation with CEEC think tanks, which has achieved a lot of research fruits. The papers in this book is selected from the outcomes of the Compass Plan of China-EU Relations Fund by Chinese Foreign Ministry in 2015, and Project of China-CEEC Relations Research Fund in 2016.

The book includes ten scholars' papers about China-CEEC relations under the the Belt and Road initiative and "16+1" cooperative framework. The themes cover the possible connection of national strategies, economy and trade, investment, infrastructure, cultural exchanges. Countries from the Baltic Sea, Central Europe and the Balkan region are involved. All these papers are the most cutting-edge and in-depth research from CEEC think tanks. We hope that it will bring positive effects for the CEEC study both at home and abroad, and the procedure of decision making by related ministries.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the team for the fruitful works they have made during the project. They are Liu Zuokui, director of the Secretariat of the 16+1 Think Tank Network and director of the Department of Central and Eastern European Studies, Institute of European Studies, CASS; Ju Weiwei and Ma Junchi, researchers of the Department of Central and Eastern European Studies; Bing Xue and Zhang Tong, programme officers of the Secretariat of the 16+1 Think Tank Network.

Huang Ping

Secretary-General of the 16+1 Think Tank Network
Director-General of the Institute of European Studies, CASS

Contents

- 1. The Belt and Road: Gently Rebuffing Geo-politics?1
- 2. China-CEEC Cooperation in the 16+1 Platform and Its
Role in the Belt and Road Initiative.....13
- 3. The Grand Strategic Nature of China’s Current
International Infrastructure-related Projects.....27
- 4. The China-Europe Land-sea Express Line: Significance,
Opportunities and Challenges Ahead39
- 5. The Current Situation and Prospect of Policy Coordination of
the Belt and Road between China and the EU.....52
- 6. Chinese Investments in Serbia-joint Pledge for
Future of the “New Silk Road”64
- 7. Central and Eastern European Countries and Serbian
Perspective and Position towards the Belt and Road Initiative86
- 8. A Romanian View on China’s Image in CEEC: From the
Perspectives of 16+1 and OBOR105
- 9. The Impact of China in Albanian Economic Development.....126
- 10. Small and Big Economy Encounter-Montenegro and China
Cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative141
- 11. The Possibilities of Further Promotion of Cooperation of
China and Slovakia within the “16+1” Cooperation.....158

1. The Belt and Road: Gently Rebuffing Geo-politics?

Vlad Vernygora*

I. Introduction

Global multi-polar redesign is not just an ordinary feature of the present—an increasing number of scholars consider it independent variable for their research in the field of international relations. The framework that was established by a trio of human beings at the Yalta Conference in 1945 is looking like an atavism of the ancient past. It ends up to be that the UN-bound mechanisms are hardly in use when it comes to finding solutions on a number of important issues related to global security. Moreover, contextualizing it with our prospective discussion, this paper is in full agreement with Bisley (2012, p. 79) who argued that the post-WWII interactions between the US and the USSR—“the most important relationship in post-war international security”—were not part of the UN Security Council’s activities. These days, the UN’s evident incapability to adequately respond to the challenges produced by the Russo-Ukrainian War, Boko Haram and the existence of ISIS/Daesh is legitimately turning students of international relations into search for a set of new paradigms and assumptions in political science. Indeed, this is a good timing to do so. Indirectly supporting the latter, Katzenstein and Sil (2004, p. 21) pointed out that

the totally unanticipated end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union [...] generated not re-examination of whether and why theories drawn from the major research traditions had proven inadequate. Instead, these events yielded another round of ad hoc explanations and bold predictions that essentially served to protect the natural worldviews embedded in each of the traditions.

Arguably, there is a hypothetical probability that even, for example, China’s the Belt and Road (OBOR)—not an ordinary initiative by any means—could simply be intentionally or unintentionally misinterpreted in the explanatory “jungles” of the existing theoretical mega-concepts (Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2003). From the first perspective, such a situation represents an opportunity for scholars from Asia to offer their own vision on how this world operates. In general, not many experts within the discipline, if any, can claim that the Asian continent has been geo-politically and geo-strategically invisible for the West, but, what is more important, it is that the time of having a condescending

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glance on Asia-associated affairs has long gone. Scholars started seriously talking about different paradigms of governance and administration, namely Chinese, Western and Islamic (Drechsler, 2013). This is, of course, not to mention that Asia has them all, including combinations of different paradigms in one given country. A nowadays-Asian nation has a wide variety of roles in its portfolio of actorness—it can be equally comfortable in possessing a nuclear bomb and trying to promote itself as a peace-loving country.

From the second perspective, however, in a noble search for a *nouvelle* interpretation of mechanisms in the field, there is a definite danger to throw the “baby” out with the bathwater. Arguably, there could be something that this complicated discipline got it right a while before. Or, at least, there could be a paradigm or two, which, if gently imposed into a new vision, could carry plenty of meaningful information for those researchers who are in denial of the disciplinary dogmas. The whole debate in the academic field will only be enriched if such a linkage is made. In a significant addition, as it was well picked up by Chan (2013, p. 365), plenty of West-originated writing “have normative implications and some may have even been intended to influence policy agenda”, and the situation in China is identical. The “March West” theory pushed forward by Wang Jisi in 2012 is as influential as geo-strategic. After all, once again, metaphorically, should we think about an explanatory theory as of an old-fashioned photographic *vignette* with a particular ornament or scene, we would always prefer the style of an image (or, in our case, a reality), which is to be framed by the *vignette*, to match it up with it (or to make sense). Surely, a photographic image of a person holding a football will look awkward, were it imposed within a *vignette* with a Rocky Mountain scene or a *rococo* ornamental motif.

This paper concentrates on China and assumes that OBOR evidently represents a highly advanced example of interconnections-building activity, not only within China’s neighborhood but globally. Significantly, the factor of OBOR’s existence is gradually becoming a major driving element of both Chinese political economy and foreign relations. Here, there is no place to hide away from the classic “economy is political” (Keohane, 1984), and the Chinese side truly feels “historic ownership of the Silk Road” (Fallon, 2015, p. 141)—the route’s modern understanding brings up multiplicity of prospective options and outcomes. Presuming the factor of functional imminence for OBOR to be comprehensively developed and, perhaps, even institutionalized, this, with necessity, must logically lead to an inquiry in regards of finding an original academic procedure on identification of relationships between China and those countries involved in the initiative’s implementation. Plenty of inter-connectivity is forecasted to be developed in years to come; gigantic efforts are to be made to get dozens of nations linked by infrastructural elements of inter-continental importance; foreign policy strategies throughout the world are to be re-designed due to OBOR-bound diversification of trading routes. All these future moderators have nothing to do with science fiction—they are realities of tomorrow.

It is where this paper would like to take an opportunity and present its modest contribution to this high-profile Seminar. The idea is to offer an interpretation-

based opinion on whether or not China's contemporary academic vision on OBOR is compatible with a West-originated view of China as a modern political empire. Even if OBOR is indeed gently, and officially, rebuffing geo-politics by promoting its original narrative on genuine inclusiveness, China-based students of international relations still need to understand how the outer world could treat the initiative. More specifically in terms of this paper's argument, there is a good chance for imperial paradigm to fit naturally well into Chinese academic discourse of the present time. Rather than promoting a new theory, this research is offering a new approach, while trying to trigger further discussions—all in order to illuminate and better understand the level of complexity that China as a global actor currently represents and, to some extent, visibly enjoys.

From the other side, this discussion has a distinct introductory element. The red-hot academic debate on modern political empires is on its peak in Europe and the United States now, but this imaginary "debating chamber" is apparently not featured by a high number of those prolific Chinese academicians who publish their works in English. The contrary has a similar *status quo*: in the West, OBOR does not get plenty of attention as a subject of decent conceptual discussion, except those examples of excessively descriptive research that reiterate the common knowledge every now and again (i.e., Sutter's *Chinese Foreign Relations*, 4th edition, 2016)

This paper will get unfolded, firstly, to identify and underscore the dominating approaches on OBOR offered by contemporary Chinese scholars. Then, in the subsequent part before concluding, it will make an attempt to introduce imperial paradigm as a positive value added component to be employed in the process of identifying the essence of cooperation, which is taking place between China and its OBOR-bound partners elsewhere.

II. The Belt and Road as it is Seen in China

Asia, the world's largest continent, is not only a rapidly emerging economic "hub", but also a fertile political ground for integration-based build-up and global inter-connectivity. On a more general side, there is a decent depth in international scholarship that has been relentlessly doing its "Asian homework". For example, Pollard (2004, p. 2) saw it logical to combine "domestic, intergovernmental and transnational politics of foreign policy" under the analytic "roof" of the so-called "intermestic politics" when the discussion would be about Asia. Chen and Yang (2013) offered an excellent innovative study on explanatory typologies of ASEAN nations' strategic stance to the rise of China. Beeson (2011) talked about Asia's response to crisis and its comparative implications for interconnected dynamics on the continent. Bisley (2011, p. 108) argued that Asia-Pacific "is in a historically unusual period of flux". Hamilton-Hart (2003, p. 239) detected a certain level of "demand for cooperation on an intra-Asian basis". Lincicome (2005) contributed with a vision on "regionalization" and "regionalism" in Asia-Pacific. The

existence of the aforementioned works as well as myriads of other positive examples of scholarly research on Asia (i.e., Weatherbee's *International Relations in Southeast Asia: The Struggle for Autonomy*, 3rd edition, 2015) underlines one important issue, and it is as followed: students of international relations have not yet found a predominant system-bound paradigm that could be driving their analytical thought forward in regards of debate on Asia. Arguably, OBOR, a major Asia-originated initiative on inter-connectivity, could provide academia with a fresh inflow of empirical data. The much-needed research-binding paradigm could, however, be granted by the debate on contemporary empires. At the same moment, before linking these two bits up, there is a definite need to see how the OBOR's country of origin is treating the initiative.

Three years before Xi Jinping had assumed his presidential office, Narramore intriguingly stated that China "remains a work-in-progress" (2010, p. 509). Having assumed the country's highest political post and using a distinctly abstract philosophical set of categories, the new Chinese leader quickly specified how his China would be planning to move into the future. On 7 September 2013, in the carefully chosen location that ended up to be the Kazakhstan's capital Astana, President Xi (2014, pp. 315-318) made his vision public:

Today, as I stand here and look back at history, I can almost hear the camel bells echoing in the mountains and see the wisps of smoke rising from the desert, and this gives me a specially good feeling. [...] This land has borne witness to a steady stream of envoys, caravans, travelers, scholars and artisans traveling between the East and the West. [...] The envisaged economic belt along the Silk Road is inhabited by nearly three billion people and it represents the biggest market in the world, with enormous, unparalleled potential for trade and investment cooperation between the countries involved.

The above key speech was also featured by notes on opening up "a major transport route connecting the Pacific and Baltic" and intentions to "actively discuss the best way to improve cross-border transport infrastructure and work towards a transport network connecting East Asia, West Asia and South Asia" (Xi, 2014, p. 318). These were the "outward" -aiming words of the country's President, but discourse wise they were linked to the "inward" -aiming statement made on 29 November 2012 by the same personality who had just been appointed as the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China: "We are now all talking about the Chinese Dream [...] [to achieve] the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Xi, 2014, p. 38).

Visibly, the ancient "outward" Silk Road—and the modern "inward" Chinese Dream—bound metaphorical way of presenting the concept was intended to place an emphasis on both economic and cross-cultural dimensions of the grand-initiative. Any possible security-related geo-political aspects that could be deemed to be speculatively associated with OBOR are literally non-existent in the official primary sources and, quite often, denied by China's leadership. This approach is the official point of reference for

China-originated scholarly discussion on OBOR. What is the academic reflection on it?

For example, Yong Wang (2016, p. 1 and p. 7) claims that OBOR is an “international economic cooperation project” that has plenty to do with economic liberalism, even though the initiative “will produce influence on regional and global order”. Summers (2016, pp. 1-7), a Hong Kong-based scholar, does not deny “the relevance of geo-politics” in this particular equation, while still arguing about “political elevation of pre-existing policy ideas and practice at the sub-national level in China” and claiming that the whole concept is about “spatial fix” rather than geo-politics.

Wang Jisi’s (2013) major standing point is that “China is neither east nor west; not north nor south”, while denying that China is either a developing or a developed country. Despite this middle-ground position, Yun Sun (2013) argued that Wang’s theorizing with his “March West” vision is still to be centered on “enhancing China’s presence, resources, diplomatic efforts and engagement in Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East” since this direction “bears no [...] risks” in terms of generating prospective difficulties in China’s relationship-building process with the United States. It could be suggested that the Wang’s “middle-ground” interpretation is conceptually associated with particularities of “Chinese characteristics” that are linked to almost everything in China, including politics, power, democracy, family, socialism, way of life and even cuisine. In this respect, the most resent revision of the super-holistic concept of “Tianxia” (天下) (all-under-heaven) strikingly resonates with OBOR-related activities that are certainly “all-on-the-ground”.

Thuy Thi Do (2015, pp. 21-22) offers her comprehensive review of opinions produced by Chinese contributors to international relations theory over time, and the generalized outcome of the review detected a distinct commonality-goal found in those writings “to introduce China’s unique way of understanding international politics”. The Australia-based Vietnamese scholar states that the Zhao Tingyang’s attempt “to provide a Chinese vision of world order by revising the concept of ‘Tianxia’” can be considered “the most notable work” (Do, 2015, p. 22). Having been exemplified by a high number of cases, another important conclusion that is generated by the Do’s review highlights the dynamics of China-based scholarly research in the field of international relations. The whole debate that sees active involvement of globalists, realists, English School proponents and others does not only reside on “the diverse visions for building a Chinese I[n]ternational R[elations] theory”, but it also detects many inquiries on “how to harmonize the ‘Chinese essence’ (*ti*) and the ‘Western function’ (*yong*) in constructing new knowledge” (2015, p. 37).

Back to our case, it could be argued that OBOR is an initiative that creates an environment for substantial policy-changing activities and bringing international relations theory on a new level. Conceptually, China has unified its previously separate policies towards different parts of Asia as well as the Black Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, the Caucasus, and the Baltic Sea areas into the comprehensive one. Global multipolar redesign should be assumed as being underway, OBOR could be definitely treated as the

most outstanding example of China's active participation in the process. President Xi's remarks regarding an "in-depth exchange of views [...] on a new model of major-country relationship" (2014, p. 306) that he had with US President Obama directly confirmed that a "major country" China, together with a "major country" USA, will be attempting to build "a new model" that will bring "benefits to [...] the people of the world at large". Should this official view be combined with an academic argument that the Chinese Dream as a modern political myth could be linked to China's strategic communication (Zhong and Zhang, 2016), a foundation to academically interconnect "Chinese essence" with "Western function" will be found. This paper argues that an academic discourse that consists of such "heavy" terminological constructs as "major country", "model of relationships between major countries", "strategic communication", "functional capacity of cooperation" and "modern political myth" can only benefit from incorporating "imperial paradigm" into its instrumentarium of arguments. The following chapter will have more on it.

III. The Belt and Road through the Prism of Imperial Paradigm

Remembering about Keohane's note on his own interpretative work that was focused "principally on states" (1984, p. 25), it could still be argued that "the demise of the territorial state has not occurred" (Light, 1999, p. 100). The international system, however, has evolved since then, creating few geo-political "know-hows", with the European Union (EU) being perhaps a prime example of these. It has been strongly argued that, together with a small number of large as well as conventional state-based formations, the EU indeed "'look, talk and walk' like empires" (Zielonka, 2012, p. 502). In addition, whilst Waltz and Mearsheimer are still well-cited and will be, the Yalta-1945-based ranges of paradigms are becoming overshadowed by a new "today", which is increasingly seeking for a set of *nouvelle* technics to be tested in the process of scholarly research in social sciences. For example, the international readership have already been salved by a vision on post-imperialism offered by Hardt and Negri's seminal work, even though "a single logic of rule" (2000, XII) is not quite a reflection of reality; not yet, at least. Does it mean that the anarchy continues ruling? If so, who is, figuratively speaking, in charge of it? This is not an academically naive question, because a number of tectonic changes, which the international system has experienced in 2013-2016, have already dismantled the "Westphalia"-*"Vienna Congress"*-*"League of Nations"*-*"UN"* build-up. Bisley miraculously predicted it to occur with a bold statement on "the assumptions of great power managerialism" that have been "severely challenged by contemporary circumstances" (2012, p. 182). The "great power" vs. "small power" narrative is no longer sufficient, even for structural realists these days. A "permanent member of the UN Security Council" and a "great power" are not synonyms in 2016.

In this context, an imperial paradigm has plenty of justification to appear in order

to significantly improve our understanding of linkages, which involve participation of those entities that, in Orwell's surprisingly non-dystopian terms, are "more equal than others" (1945). Most probably, the ulterior nature of modern empires can frame up a big academic hurdle to overcome. Indeed, as it was noted by Parker (2010, p. 127), "[a]n irony of arguing for the prominence of empire in geopolitics is that it is so often a form of geopolitics which dares not to speak its name".

However, there is something specific in an imperial course of action, and this factor dramatically increases the degree of a modern empire's detectability by watchful observers in the field. It has almost become a daily routine for students of international relations to converse on "the geopolitics of empires" (Parker, 2010, p. 128), splashing the debate by the academically picturesque examples of the United States, China, Russia, and the EU. Rephrasing Luc Plamondon's immortal line of lyrics from a popular musical, "*Il est venu le temp des ... [empires]*" (1998). Even more significantly, starting from the front-rank theoretical works of Mommsen (1981) and Doyle (1986), and finishing with a more recent range of great examples of research on modern empires such as Motyl (1997, 1999, 2001), Howe (2002), Terrill (2003), Zielonka (2006, 2011, 2012, 2013), Gravier (2009), and Parker (2008, 2010), particularities of empires' behavioural patterns are confirmed by them all. There was also a decent account on empires presented by Blanken (2012), but a set of distinct strategies toward imperialism was described by this author through the prism of imperial entities from the past, which is not our case now. Zielonka, instead, offered his view on typology of contemporary empires, stating that "[i]n the field of diplomacy it is virtually impossible to conclude any global negotiations without the consent of [the U.S.A., the EU, Russia, and China]" (2012, p. 509).

How useful this paradigm for analyzing China as well as its grand initiatives like OBOR? In principle, discourse on modern empires has no negative connotations; the idea is not to "attach" a label on a country that does not want to be called an empire, but to academically treat a highly influential political entity as it is. China is this world's major country, and it is a nation that has in-land borders with 14 sovereign states. On the top of that, in a distinctly philosophical way, China, as much as the US, Russia and the EU do, is positively answering a classic's eternal question on "whether I am a trembling creature or whether I have the right" (Dostoyevsky, 1917). Intriguingly, the Russian language translation of "all-under-heaven" goes to be "*Поднебесная*", a positively mysterious word that, if understood as an adjective of the feminine grammatical gender category, is always associated and assumed to be with a corresponding noun "*империя*" or "empire", even in those situations when the latter noun is not verbally pronounced. On many occasions, both academic world and media in Belarus, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine use their own linguistic equivalents of "Tianxia" as a synonym for "China". Therefore, to completely rebuff a good discussion on China's imperial characteristics would be extravagant for a scholar in the field of international relations.

Should we get back to this paper's inquiry on identification of relationships between China and its OBOR-bound partners, we cannot avoid mentioning that the initiative is

primarily linked to China's interconnections with its neighbors. This argument is fully confirmed by the fact that, in his book *The Governance of China*, President Xi (2014) placed his major initial speeches on OBOR delivered correspondingly in Kazakhstan and Indonesia (namely, "Work together to build the Silk Road Economic Belt" and "Work together to build a 21st century Maritime Silk Road") within a chapter titled "Neighborhood Diplomacy". In a far more explicit way, as cited by Fallon (2015, p. 141), the People Liberation Army's Major General Ji Mingkui allegedly noted that "'New Silk Road' provides a useful economic carrot to deal with the majority of security problems China has with its neighbors".

Imperial entities, due to "the unstoppable inertial empire-forming process" (Vernygora et al., 2016) and in order to adequately respond to a number of diverse challenges, have to practice different types of strategic "communication" with its periphery. In imperial terms, "communication", with necessity, means "cooperation" or, in some cases, "enforcement of cooperation". The EU, for example, established the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, responding in a functional way to an obvious requirement to create a working framework for accommodating an intricate set of relationships with the entity's neighborhood. The Russian Federation has always plenty to say about "the bear" and its own "taiga" (Putin, 2014), clearly knowing that Russia and China as well as Russia and the EU can, theoretically and practically, compete externally against each other for dominance over their respective peripheries. Apart from many other factors, which assist a researcher in detecting its imperial nature, the U.S. have North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and will eventually have Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) within its neighborhood. In that respect, OBOR is China's understanding of how a neighborhood policy needs to be implemented by a major country. Moreover, the initiative is genuinely associated with China's civilizing mission. When describing the concept of the Chinese Dream to a group of reporters from Latin America, President Xi (2014, p. 62) noted that "[w]e will bring benefits to both the Chinese people and the people of the whole world".

IV. Conclusive Remarks

This paper, being visualized as a modest attempt to establish a nexus between different academic approaches in the field on international relations, has evidently argued that imperial paradigm can be highly exponential and advantageous in the process of analyzing the present day's examples of inter-connectivity. What is even more significantly, it could represent an additional linkage between the discipline's well-established schools of thought and the new wave of scholarship that is striving to make a difference.

Having had its focus on OBOR, the China-originated extra-ordinary initiative that could be considered a highly advanced example of inter-continental cooperation, this

work underlined that the initiative is inevitably to become a major element of China's political economy and foreign relations, be it within the country's diverse neighborhood or in global affairs.

It could also be argued that the process of OBOR's implementation as well as the initiative in itself are fitting well enough in the broad framework of China's prime interests, key sources of power, essence of the country's civilizing mission, and shape of its governance. These factors altogether, as discussed, represent a typo-logical set that could assist students of international relations to identify relationships between China and the OBOR-bound partner-countries through the prism of the academic debate on modern political empires. There is a principal point here that the discourse on contemporary imperial entities does not carry any negativity and/or groundless speculations in terms of its connotation—a major country is simply treated as it is. Finally, the OBOR-related interactions, with necessity, will be influencing the process of the international system's redesign that is currently under way. China is and will be playing a key role in that process.

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