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# Europe and the “Belt and Road Initiative”: Responses and Risks

■ Liu Zuokui ■



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CHINA SOCIAL SCIENCES PRESS

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## Preface

The “Belt and Road” is a brand new initiative introduced by China in the new era. It mainly aims to promote the connectivity and the economic cooperation between China and the countries involved. Moreover, it actively pushes forward the policy coordination, currency circulation as well as the people-to-people bond. Europe or the EU plays quite a significant role under the “Belt and Road” Initiative. For China, the EU is the most important trading partner, the leading source of foreign investment, a key supporter of Chinese economy and the very focus of the “Belt and Road” Initiative. The “Belt and Road” Initiative will undoubtedly become the crucial link between the two major civilizations and two huge markets and further contribute to the comprehensive cooperation between China and Europe.

When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Central Asia and Southeast Asia in September and October of 2013, he raised the initiative of jointly building the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road” (hereafter referred to as the “Belt and Road”). Ever since then, the work of building the “Belt and Road” has been in full swing. On the 8<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Central Committee’s Leading Group for Financial and Economic Affairs held in November of 2014, the leaders proposed to accelerate the building of the “Belt and Road” and introduced the top-level design for the Initiative. In February of 2015, the leading group of the “Belt and Road” Initiative were officially unveiled, signifying that the “Belt and Road” Initiative has entered a substantive phase of the operation.

In terms of the construction, both the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road” are closely linked to the Europe, especially the Central and Eastern Europe.

At present, there are basically two routes in the layout of building the “Belt and Road” in Europe, namely, the north route and the south route. The north route refers to the Eurasian Land Bridge which starts from the inland provinces and the west of China and reaches Europe via Xinjiang, China, the Central Asia, Russia and the Central and Eastern Europe. Many freight trains have come into operation on this route including the Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe International Freight Train (from Chongqing, China

to Duisburg, Germany), the Wuhan-Xinjiang-Europe International Freight Train (from Wuhan, China to Prague, Czech), the Chengdu-Europe Express Rail (from Chengdu, China to Rodz, Poland), the Zhengzhou-Xinjiang-Europe Freight Train (from Zhengzhou, China to Hamburg, Germany), the Yiwu-Xinjiang-Europe Freight Train (from Yiwu, China to Madrid, Spain), the Suzhou-Warsaw Block Train (from Suzhou, China to Warsaw, Poland) and the Hunan-Europe Express Rail (from Changsha, China to Duisburg, Germany).

The south route is a sea route which starts from the coastal cities in the south of China and ends at the Piraeus Port in Greece via the Mediterranean Sea. The Piraeus Port, the largest port of Greece, is known as the “South Gate of Europe”. In the past, Chinese goods had to be delivered to Europe through a circuitous route as passing through the India Ocean, rounding the Cape of Good Hope in the south of Africa, crossing the Atlantic and traveling through the West African coast. Now, through the Piraeus Port, Chinese freighters are able to directly cross the Red Sea and the Suez Canal and unload the cargo at the Port which will be directly transported to European hinterlands via the Greece-Macedonia-Serbia-Hungary Railways. The new route has become the shortest sea route between China and Europe, cutting 7 to 11 days of delivery by sea. So far it has become a project under the “Belt and Road” Initiative pushed by the Chinese decision makers in recent two years. When the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Serbia in December of 2014, he had an in-depth exchange of views with the related parties and confirmed the plan of building the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Passage on the basis of above-mentioned routes.

The China’s “Belt and Road” Initiative has caused diverse repercussions in European countries, especially in Central and Eastern European countries (16 CEE countries were listed as the countries along the “Belt and Road”). The EU has been following the “Belt and Road” Initiative and expecting the synergy between the Initiative and the existing projects and plans of the EU.

The EU’s response to the “Belt and Road” Initiative suggests that the Initiative enjoys a popularity in Europe and Europe expects to get a lift from the rise of Chinese economy and develop economic and trade relations with China by making full use of the various initiatives and mechanisms launched by China. However, to understand the real attitude of Europe towards the initiative, the official declarations of the European countries are far from enough. Therefore, it is necessary to further analyze the motives behind European responses and the potential of the bilateral cooperation between the two

sides. In this book, the author has made a concrete analysis on the European responses through multiple field trips and on-set interviews, and then put forward some specific policy suggestions on the future cooperation between the two sides.

Another focus of this book are the risks of building the “Belt and Road” in Europe. It is of great significance to strengthen the awareness of risk prevention in case of emergencies. After all, a stitch in time saves nine. The landmark project, the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Passage, for instance, has encountered a series of obstacles such as the political turmoil of Greece, the political crisis of Macedonia and the refugee crisis of Europe. In addition, the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, which is the land route between China and Europe, also faces an array of difficulties and challenges. The regulation limit, the technological barrier and the lack of mutual trust between China and Europe have made it difficult for China to build the “Belt and Road” in Europe. In view of this, China should be conscious of the situation and think ahead.

The book was published with the help of many sponsors and supporters. To begin with, the author’s research project named “the Role of CEEC under the ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ Initiative and the Risk Assessment on Building the ‘Belt and Road’ in Europe” (Grant No. 14BGJ013) was funded by the National Social Science Fund in 2014, which made it possible for the author to carry out relevant research.

In 2015 the research group of the Institute of European Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences carried out two research projects of great significance funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. One is the research on the China-CEEC relations centering around the influence of the CEE stakeholders on the China-CEEC cooperation. The other is the study on China-Europe relations with the focus of the China-Europe cooperation under the “Belt and Road” Initiative. These two research projects enabled the author to conduct more extensive research and thus laid the foundation for the book.

Funded by the innovation project of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (the project of “exchanging with internationally-recognized think tanks” in particular), the author paid a visit to CEEC for three months in 2015 to conduct a field study on the CEEC and the “Belt and Road” Initiative. During that period, the author studied mainly at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), but he also visited most of the CEE countries and met with the politicians, members of parliament, scholars from think tanks and universities as well as the staffs of the foundations in those countries. More importantly, he received plenty of detailed and first-hand materials that turned out to be very helpful for writing this book.

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## Abstract

This report is made up of four parts: the first part analyzes the responses to the “Belt and Road” Initiative from Central and Eastern European countries and EU institutions; the second part elaborates a survey of European elites on their opinions towards the “Belt and Road” Initiative; the third part assesses potential risks of building the “Belt and Road” in Europe; the fourth part provides policy suggestions on the “Belt and Road” Initiative in Europe.

The responses from Central and Eastern European countries (shorted as CEEC) to the “Belt and Road” Initiative have two sides: on the one side, most of CEEC support and respond positively to the Initiative. On the other side, they lack information about the specific content of the “Belt and Road” Initiative and therefore hope China could put forward more concrete layout plans. The European Union (shorted as EU) shares similar responses with CEEC towards the “Belt and Road” Initiative. For one thing, it acknowledges the significance of China’s initiative in promoting the connectivity and trade cooperation within Europe; For another, the EU worries that the initiative is China’s strategy to “divide and rule” the EU which will disturb the implementation of the EU regulations; hence it actively constrains China through its regulations and rules.

The questionnaire survey of the European elites on their opinions towards the “Belt and Road” Initiative is the first thematic and authoritative research on the China-EU cooperation under the “Belt and Road” Initiative both domestically and internationally. The questionnaire survey was conducted from June 2015 till September 2015. The main target groups of the survey are policy makers, think tanks, entrepreneurs and media reporters from 25 European countries including major EU member states and candidate states.

The key conclusions are as follows. Firstly, the European elites have a relatively accurate understanding and positioning of the basic spirit of the “Belt and Road” Initiative and basically acknowledge the positive significance of the Initiative for trade cooperation and the connectivity between the two sides.

Secondly, despite that the European elites have a basic understanding of the the “Belt and Road” Initiative, they seem to be unclear about its deep-seated purpose and specific

contents. As a result, they hope China to give more interpretations.

Thirdly, the European elites attach great importance to the establishment of specific mechanisms in promoting the "Belt and Road" Initiative. They consider reasonable mechanisms as the basic guarantee of the Initiative.

Fourthly, the European elites consider that people-to-people bond is of much importance, which provides public support for implementing the "Belt and Road" Initiative.

Fifthly, the European elites also attach great importance to the China-EU cooperation with the third parties under the "Belt and Road" Initiative, mainly with Russia and the US.

Sixthly, the elites are not familiar with the integration of the "Belt and Road" Initiative with the Juncker Investment Plan and are pessimistic about it.

Last but not the least, the elites recognize the importance of people-to-people exchanges and they do not view the ideological differences as the main obstacle to the bilateral exchanges; instead, they consider differences in culture and thinking patterns as more significant but not decisive factors.

The third part of this book analyzes the risks which the "Belt and Road" Initiative faced in Europe, particularly the risks in the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "China-Europe Land-Sea Express Passage". The Silk Road Economic Belt faces a series of domestic and international challenges. Domestic challenges include unhealthy competitions between logistics transportation caused by the mismanagement; the overprice asked by overseas partner countries due to the lack of coordination among Chinese provinces and cities; deviation of the logistics transportation products from the market demand. Global risks are as follows: to begin with, the economic situation, industrial development, trade structure and development tendency of the countries along the "Belt and Road" need to be further investigated and analyzed. Apart from that, the countries along the "Belt and Road" Initiative are in great numbers with big powers sharing extensive interests, which increases China's investment risks.

The China-Europe Land-Sea Express Passage faces five crucial risks including the continuous crises happened in Greece, the Macedonian political crisis, the non-traditional security issues such as the terrorism existed in Balkan region, the constraints from EU's institutions and regulations and the European refugee crisis.

At the end of this book, the author puts forward certain policy suggestions. Efforts

should be made to strengthen the internal and external coordination to facilitate the building of the corridors linking the Silk Road Economic Belt; concentrate on the regions of greatest strategic importance to build them as the breakthrough of the deeper cooperation; establish mechanisms to unblock channels of cooperation; wisely handle the relationship with the European Union; cooperate with influential sub-regional organizations in a pragmatic and flexible way; accurately interpret the essence of the “Belt and Road” Initiative and uphold its key principles; properly solve the regional crises on a case-by-case basis; develop abilities of detecting issues through questionnaire surveys; establish innovative and application-oriented mechanisms; promote the cooperation with the third parties and multilateral institutions.

**Key Words:** the “Belt and Road” Initiative; the European Union; Questionnaire Survey among CEEC; Risk Aversion; Policy Suggestions

# Chapter 1

## The Responses to the “Belt and Road” Initiative from Central and Eastern European Countries and the EU institutions

The responses to the “Belt and Road” Initiative vary from four geo-dimensions of Europe, namely, Southern Europe, Northern Europe, Eastern Europe and Western Europe. The responses from CEEC are the most positive compared with those from other sub-regions. The EU, as the most important actor in Europe, has also responded to the “Belt and Road” Initiative while taking both the China-CEEC cooperation and its overall development strategy into account. In view of this, the author has conducted empirical analysis on the responses from CEEC and EU institutions. To compensate for his insufficient attention paid to other parts of Europe, the author has conducted a questionnaire survey among European elites in a larger scale of Europe for their opinions on the “Belt and Road” Initiative. As for the research methods, the author has adopted both qualitative and quantitative methods with a combination of empirical study and academic analysis.

### I. Various Developing Stages of China’s Policy towards CEEC: From Regional Cooperation to the Connectivity to the “Belt and Road” Initiative

Since the China-CEEC Warsaw Summit was held in 2012, China’s policy towards CEEC has gone through four phases which are as follows:

The first phase centers around the regional cooperation as shown in China’s proposals at the 2012 China-CEEC Warsaw Summit and its subsequent actions. Stuck in the 2009 European debt crisis, Central and Eastern European countries chose to “look to the east”, which was viewed by Chinese policymakers as a window of opportunity to invest in the CEE markets after the European debt crisis. China thus started to “rediscover” the CEE region<sup>①</sup>. “Economic interests” and “traditional friendship” have fostered

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① Cui Hongjian, “Rediscovery” between China and CEEC, Xinhua News, September 7, 2012, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2012-09/07/c\\_123686311.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2012-09/07/c_123686311.htm).

cooperation between China and CEEC<sup>①</sup>. During the Warsaw Summit, China proposed twelve measures for pragmatic cooperation with CEEC. Seen from this phase, it is quite obvious that China initiated the cooperation process and actively promoted the bilateral cooperation to a new high on the basis of mutual willingness.

The second phase focuses on the comprehensive and balanced development of China-Europe relations as well as the connectivity between China and Europe. From the standpoint of China, the China-CEEC cooperation is an emerging key driver for the China-Europe Cooperation which will push forward the more balanced and sustainable development of the China-Europe relations and contribute to the European integration process. This phase is marked by China's propositions at the Bucharest Summit in 2013 and its following moves. Accordingly, the Chinese government actively promoted the connectivity between China and CEEC, and between China and Europe.

The third phase mainly aims at promoting the building of the "Belt and Road" in Europe and is marked by China's initiatives at the Belgrade Summit and its subsequent actions. The construction of the "China-Europe Land-Sea Express Passage" became one of the biggest highlights of the Belgrade Summit. More importantly, the "Belt and Road" Initiative has become a new driving force for the China-CEEC cooperation.

The fourth phase puts emphasis on the synergy between the development strategy of China and those of European countries as well as the mutually beneficial cooperation under the "Belt and Road" Initiative. Specifically, China has worked actively to create synergy between the "16+1 Cooperation" and the "Belt and Road" Initiative, between the "16+1 Cooperation" and the China-Europe Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and between the "16+1 Cooperation" and the development strategies of countries along the Belt and Road.

China's policy towards CEEC features as follows: it has gradually developed from the initial model of regional cooperation into an important driving force for the China-Europe cooperation (the connectivity in particular) and into the key to the building of the "Belt and Road" Initiative as 16 CEE countries are all countries along the Belt and Road. To a certain extent, the cooperation process embodies China's strategic needs for Europe and even for the world. Since the second phase, the same time when Premier Li Keqiang

① Economic Interests and Traditional Friendship, Cohesive Forces in China-CEE Relations, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-11/27/c-132923488.htm>.

visited Romania and actively promoted the connectivity between China and CEEC, the implementation of the "Belt and Road" Initiative has been carried out in CEE region. Till the third phase, the objective of the "Belt and Road" Initiative has been crystallized. In view of the above, the "16+1 Cooperation" under the "Belt and Road" Initiative, so to speak, has emerged ever since the Bucharest Summit. In the fourth phase, the role of the "Belt and Road" Initiative in promoting the China-CEEC cooperation has been strengthened comprehensively, and the Initiative has become one of the main driving forces of the "16+1 Cooperation".

## **II. The Analysis of the Responses to China's Initiatives in Different Phases from Central and Eastern European Countries and EU Institutions**

### **1. The Promotion of the China-CEEC Regional Cooperation**

There exist some controversies among CEEC and the EU institutions over the promotion of the China-CEEC relations through the regional cooperation, which can be seen from the following aspects:

First, Central and Eastern European countries differ from each other. Some policymakers and think tanks from CEEC noted that 16 CEE countries are different from each other in terms of language, culture, religion, social customs and traditions, economic size and self-identity. State Secretary of Slovenia Mr. Igor Sencar has pointed out that China should not overlook the differences among 16 CEE countries. Instead, China should attach great importance to them. Some of the 16 countries are EU members that must obey the EU law and regulations. Moreover, they should shoulder due obligations and responsibilities prescribed by the EU<sup>①</sup>. Differences and diversity are the basic characteristics of the CEE region in which countries develop their ties with China based on their distinct needs. The regional cooperation supported by CEEC, different from the one by China, actually refers to the cooperation in three different sub-regions: Central Europe, Southeastern Europe and the Baltic region. Central Europe includes four countries within the Visegrad Group with Austria being included sometimes, while Southeastern Europe includes not only the six countries in the Western Balkans, Romania

① Opening Speech by State Secretary at the MFA of Slovenia, Mr. Igor Sencar, at the 2<sup>nd</sup> High Level Symposium of Think Tanks of the People's Republic of China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2 and 3 September, 2014, Bled, Slovenia.



and Bulgaria, but also Greece and Turkey. Officials in the Baltic region noted that the three Baltic states are closer to the Northern Europe from geopolitical perspective, therefore, they feel more inclined to join the regional cooperation initiatives in the Northern Europe<sup>①</sup>.

Second, China hopes to receive an integrate response from the CEE region regarding its regional policy. A CEEC think tank scholar considers that under the framework of the "16+1 Cooperation", CEEC do not have a clear agenda in mind, which is not in the right development path of bilateral relations between China and 16 CEE countries. CEEC should have a clear perspective of developing their relations with China. As ununique and distinctive partners of China, CEEC should make a difference and voice their opinions on sustaining and vitalizing the "16+1 Cooperation" mechanism.<sup>②</sup>

Third, the EU has always been suspicious of the "16+1 Cooperation" mechanism. The EU has made it clear through various channels that 16 CEE countries should rely on the EU in the long run, and efforts have been made in different ways to facilitate the accession of 16 CEE countries to the EU. The EU also claims that any emerging regional framework created by the external forces will disturb the solidarity and unity of the EU. One think tank scholar from Slovakia held that the EU had been suspicious of China's motives of seeking regional cooperation in the first place as it considers China's initiative as a way to establish a new "Central and Eastern European" group that would remind CEEC of their history and previous social system and thus cause harm to the European integration<sup>③</sup>.

It should be noted that, bearing the regional cooperation in mind, some CEEC react positively to the development of their ties with China.

A case in point is the initiative of establishing a dialogue mechanism between China and the Visegrad Group (shorted as V4) that was put forward by scholars and policymakers from the V4 countries. The international academic conference on cooperation between China and the V4 has been held for many times, some of which

① From a talk conducted between the author and an official of Lithuania's Embassy in China on June 5, 2015.

② Remarks by Matvez Raskovic, 2<sup>nd</sup> High level Symposium of Think Tanks of the people's Republic of China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2 and 3 September, 2014, Bled, Slovenia.

③ From an interview conducted by the author to a scholar from the Institute of Asian Studies, on 9 September, 2014 at Bled, Slovenia.