



Grand Vision: China's OBOR in Context

BY ANOUSH EHTESHAMI

China celebrated the progress of its ambitious One Belt, One Road initiative in Beijing in May 2017. The OBOR is vast in scale, dwarfing the last major multilateral development initiative of our times, the US-led post-War Marshall Plan for the reconstruction of western Europe. It is also geographically vast, encompassing virtually all of Asia, much of Europe and Africa's eastern regions. This Initiative has the potential to transform Eurasia and also major parts of Africa, so

what it is about and what does it tell us about its architect?

Introduction

The BRI is vast, building six vast economic corridors – China-Mongolia-Russia, New Eurasian Land Bridge, China-Central and West Asia, China-Indo-China Peninsula, China-Pakistan and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar – across Eurasia and it is set to become the centrepiece of China's development strategy, according to Vice-Premier Zhang Gaoli.¹ Combined,

these corridors will create an intricate network of 56 European and Asian countries working alongside each other, generating billions of dollars in investment capital and revenue, and creating employment opportunities across Asia and much of Europe and Africa. China today projects its influence westwards, in the context of the BRI, through investment, construction, extraction and commerce – through the exercise of soft power on a massive scale. The sum of \$4 trillion allocated to the OBOR has the potential to be transformational in its impact. Inter-OBOR trade of over \$2.2 trillion is anticipated. The OBOR is also the focus of China's direct investment largesse, which provides the vehicle for the mobilisation of Chinese businesses in Asia. So, in 2015 44% of China's engineering projects were in the OBOR countries, but the figure had jumped to over 52% in 2016.² This will inevitably rise as projects across the Initiative's frontiers get under way. That China has embarked upon it is a measure of the country's self-confidence and a public



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So, the (BR) Initiative should not be taken lightly by outside observers; nor should it be viewed in isolation of China’s other strategic policies. These other policies take different forms and manifest themselves differently too. The OBOR (and the associated AIIB) forms the latest ring of the circles in China’s strategic priorities in Asia, which combines cooperation with ASEAN as a strategic imperative, and the strengthening of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a security priority, as the other. Together, it seems to me, these spheres form China’s three circles of influence in Asia. These, in different but complementary ways, contribute to China’s efforts of building security and economic bonds across its neighbourhood. Using different mechanisms arguably enhances and accentuates China’s strategic reach as each of these circles has the material power to change and shape countries’ policies and regions well beyond their immediate areas of attention. Together they multiply China’s policy instruments and give it a credible voice across continents – from the Pacific to the Atlantic.



China’s New World Order

Viewed as a major foreign policy initiative, the articulation of BRI and the construction of it represents a concerted effort to build what the English School of international relations might see as the building of what could be termed an “international Asian society” based on shared norms and rules. What Hedley Bull, arguably the founder of the English

School, might point to as illustration of “conscious of certain common interests and common values”.³ Indeed, the Chinese leadership’s statements regarding the BRI have come very close to invoking values long cherished by the liberal bend of international relations community: Elements of cosmopolitanism are discernible for example – in the ways through which the tendency of peoples in different countries embracing each other as fellow Asian citizens is being promoted,⁴ and also the unserved promotion of the market. So, in March 2015 President Xi strongly promoted the OBOR initiative at the Boao Forum for Asia and articulated a vision of harmony, mutual respect and cooperation consistent with what he said would be a new “common community” in Asia emerging in the wake of this initiative.⁵ A community of partners along the OBOR will emerge thanks to the network of relationships that the Initiative would give birth to. For the Chinese leadership, this will come to represent a “chorus of countries” working together along the route (in Bull’s terms, “share in the working of common institutions”).⁶ This will not be, President Xi emphasised, a “solo of a single country”. Common community and common destiny will go hand-in-hand. The OBOR has envisaged the building of a concert of inter-state and inter-communal relations. This is a pre-emptive Marshall Plan unleashed on a massive continental scale, but unlike the post-1945 American Marshall Plan for western Europe (which the Soviet Union saw as a direct assault on its interests in Europe), the BRI has apparently been accepted unopposed by the marginal states, emerging powers, as well as the established giants of Asia. In presenting the Initiative as an expression of common destiny, moreover, the Chinese leaders have invoked the cognitive power of the Initiative, with proclaims common goals without invoking ideology or notions of superior values. The strategy is not about making Asia communist,

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nor about the imposition of China's values, or the imposition of its (rich) civilisation on others. It is, rather, about practical inter-state engagement.

Further, China's strategy westwards (Central, South and West Asia) should be viewed in the broader context of its complex position in the international system and a relationship which is shaped by the "continual tension in the dual-identity of China as a rising power and at the same time a developing country".⁷ The notion of a rising/emerging global power – terms which have been used by Western leaders and international NGOs alike about China – impose on China certain expectations that it simply is not, yet, equipped to meet. The conditionalities which follow the assumptions regarding major power status imposed on China, moreover, are expectations which Beijing either does not intend to accept at all – seeing these as a straightjacket – or are simply beyond its abilities as a still-developing country to fulfil.⁸ Furthermore, it is a long leap of faith to assume that a dominant China in a post-American multipolar world order would necessarily act in the same way as its twentieth century Western predecessors did and develop a "vision" or "agenda" for global leadership – aim to reshape the world in its own image.⁹ China is keen to separate notions of great power status from assumptions about hegemony. Evidence, arguably, speaks to China seeking to become Asia's "indispensable power".¹⁰ Evidence also points to the reality that China's rise is so conditioned by its dual-identity that it will continue to devote energy towards securing its position and interests at the subsystem level in Asia. Surrounding areas are China's first priority. Working on the assumption that the BRI is a key element of Beijing's grand strategy, embedded in its strategy of building an international Asian society, it is possible to argue that to legitimise Beijing's drive westwards it has to articulate the idea of a "common destiny". But this not only has to be associated with being the founder of the OBOR, but being welcomed, indeed desired, by the countries and communities which are to find themselves along China's new "Silk Lanes" (on land, rail and sea).

China Dream 2.0

China must be seen as the embodiment of the Initiative, and for this to gain momentum it must create a set of principles and priorities which will drive the BRI. The first of these principles is surely

historical legacy; that there are real historical parallels to draw on for the purpose of building the belt and roads and pipelines. In terms of observations regarding the Initiative's strategic aims and planning, it is significant that China has "packaged" the proposed transport links in maritime, concrete and steel terms. These make an unprecedented transport strategy! The like of this Initiative has not been seen anywhere in the world and the scale of the operation

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surpasses the infrastructure that past European empires had built in parts of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Initiative is not only multifaceted and multidimensional but is, in its approach, integrated and comprehensive.

Cognitively and materially China has opened up itself to Eurasia and has taken this risk in order to secure its own place, to change Asia's economic dynamics in its own favour, to improve the socio-economic conditions of its western regions, to check other powers' influence in its own backyard, and to tie into its own sphere of influence a whole host of resource-rich countries who can guarantee the necessary ingredients for China's maturing economy for decades to come. The BRI then is not hegemonic but pragmatic. Further, the Initiative and the AIIA in this broader context, I venture, are not about China looking back, reliving an old "China dream", but looking forward and creating the conditions for the fourth stage of what Kim has articulated as the three transformations of the "evolving Asian system".¹¹ The fourth phase which China has begun with the BRI has given Asia's new regionalism centre stage.

A Word of Caution

But China and its BRI partners will need to be mindful of four potential complications. The first

Can China afford to spend the estimated \$1.0 trillion needed for the very many planned projects? The question is does it have the resilience and the conviction, as well as the reserves, to be able to continue to prioritise the BRI without prejudicing its other priorities?

issue relates to the adverse effects of geopolitical tensions, which could destabilise the whole project while also keeping potential investors away. Secondly, can China afford to spend the estimated \$1.0 trillion needed for the very many planned projects? The question is does it have the resilience and the conviction, as well as the reserves, to be able to continue to prioritise the BRI without prejudicing its other priorities? Thirdly, can Beijing continue to promote and “sell” the BRI if and when local resistance forces its partner governments to stay commitment-neutral or be pressed to renegotiate terms of projects? And finally, how will China manage the resistance being raised in India, the United States, Japan and other quarters against this ambitious and Asia-changing Initiative? Can it avoid alienating these powerful actors while pressing ahead with the wide-ranging and multiple-geography projects which can have a transformatory impact on so many Asian and African countries? Can China build a new Eurasia in its own image without appearing to be wiping out the images imprinted on so much of Asia and Europe by the United States? These are searching questions and not ones that the Chinese leadership are unfamiliar with, but Beijing’s response will only become clear once one of its fast-moving projects hits the buffers; only then will we know if this massive investment initiative was worth the price. 



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Beijing, China Skyline

