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The Belt and Road Initiative as continuity in Chinese foreign policy

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of China as a major power has been accompanied by an unprecedented level of external activism, concretized in several regional and transcontinental projects among which the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most comprehensive one.

This article aims to assess the contribution of previous foreign policy initiatives to the BRI, and to evaluate potential implications for Chinese strategic autonomy. It argues that while the Chinese-led initiative based on increasing interdependence and connectivity has a high potential to contribute to common development and regional integration, it also presents some destabilizing risks. The cooperation patterns promoted within the BRI strengthen Chinese strategic autonomy by enhancing its key positions along networks of capital and infrastructure around the world, foster asymmetric partnerships, maximize its influence and consolidate its control over land routes from Central Asia to Europe and the SLOC beyond the South China Sea.

In discussing the implications raised by these aspects the article contends that in the long term, the BRI offers China significant opportunities to shape geo-economic landscape and the security architecture.

KEYWORDS

continuity, multilateral frameworks; strategic autonomy

1 Research background

The emergence of China as a major power has been accompanied by an unprecedented engagement in several regional and transcontinental projects among which the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most ambitious one. Although Chinese growing engagement in world's affairs have been welcomed and accepted by many states, the increasing discrepancy between Chinese political discourse that emphasizes "win-win cooperation" and its concrete behavior in international relations, that reveals growing assertiveness and inflexibility, start raising concerns among several countries. In this context, the Chinese-led initiatives aiming to promote interdependence, connectivity, and integration, and particularly the BRI, come under intense scrutiny reigniting the debates about Chinese behavior in international relations, and giving rise to a continuously growing scholarship.

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Since its announcement, the BRI has been examined through different theoretical lenses based on traditional paradigms of international relations, geopolitics, geo-economics, as well as through a multidisciplinary combination of different approaches.¹ Despite the wide range of interpretations, there is a certain common understanding among scholars that the BRI is a multifaceted, global, or grand strategy with significant potential to shape the existing international relations.² However heated debates are ongoing over the motivations and in-deep implications of such initiative.

For some scholars, the BRI can be seen as a clear indication of China's intention to maximize its presence and influence at global level. As a mechanism through which China is pursuing its geopolitical and geo-economic interests with the final aim of replacing the US as hegemon, the BRI brings significant challenges to existing institutions, norms, and international order.³ On the one hand, as China becomes integrated in the world affairs, its initiatives, including the BRI, are actually reshaping global trade and economy by creating parallel financial institutions, global networks of transport and communication with China as their core challenging the current world economic system.⁴ On the other hand, China is using the BRI as a mechanism through which can set the global agenda by ensuring the diffusion of its own values, ideas, and norms. In long term the diffusion of particular values and norms through the BRI might create a favorable perception that can lead to a wide-acceptance of Chinese approach to international order.⁵ Significant debates have revolved around the potential implications of the BRI which is seen as a means of economic statecraft that in long term might provide China with an increased political leverage and coercive power on its partners.⁶ Bringing evidence from Africa and Latin America, some scholars described the BRI as a neo-colonialist project that will lead to the exploitation and domination by China of the less developed countries through the so-called "debt trap diplomacy" with significant political implications.⁷

While some consider the BRI as potential danger to the current world system, others tend to focus on its positive aspects. Accordingly, the BRI makes significant contributions to common development, regional stability, or international cooperation. As China is becoming the main provider of public goods, the BRI might attract other countries and regions into a "Chinese system of accumulation", so that participating countries can enjoy significant benefits.⁸ From this perspective, and due to its focus on integration and infrastructure, the BRI was even defined as a new Marshall Plan, aiming to fulfill the regional or global needs.⁹ At the same time, by socializing others into the "Chinese way of doing things", the BRI allows China to surpass its position of rule-follower by becoming

¹Garlick, *The impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative*; Xing, *Mapping China's One Belt, One road initiative*.

²Zhou and Esteban, "Beyond balancing: China's approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative"; Aoyama, "One Belt, One Road": China's New Global Strategy"; Rolland, "China's Vision".

³Mayer, "China's Rise as Eurasian Power: The Revival of the Silk Road and Its Consequences"; Callahan, "China's 'Asia Dream': The Belt Road Initiative and the New Regional Order".

⁴Clarke, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Exploring Beijing's Motivations and Challenges for Its New Silk Road"; McKinsey&Co. "China's One Belt, One Road: Will it Reshape Global Trade".

⁵Vangeli, "A Framework for the Study of the One Belt One Road Initiative as a Medium of Principle Diffusion"; Mierzejewski and Kowalski, *China's Selective Identities: State, Ideology and Culture*.

⁶Moore, "Racing to integrate, or Cooperating to Compete?".

⁷Holslag, *The Silk Road Trap: How China's Trade Ambitions Challenge Europe*; Mastro, "The stealth superpower: how China hid its global ambitions"; Ferchen et al., "Evaluating Latin America's Commodity Dependence on China".

⁸Xing, *Mapping China's One Belt, One road initiative*.

⁹Simon Shen, "How China's Belt and Road Compares to Marshall Plan".

a rule-settler and asserting itself as a normative power able to reshape global governance. Supporters of the BRI tend to minimize the Chinese geopolitical and geo-economic intentions, in arguing that the potential hegemony of China can be seen as an “unintended consequence of China’s development trajectory”.¹⁰

They also point to the significance of the internal-external nexus, specifically the interplay of domestic and external factors, shaping Chinese foreign policy behavior. Accordingly, China is readjusting its foreign policy based on the emerging domestic and international realities. On the one hand, the BRI is seen as a modality to solve China’s internal problems related to overcapacity, while maintaining a good economic performance and sustainable growth rate.¹¹ On the other hand, the BRI is seen as resulting from external competition with the US or more specifically a reaction to the US Rebalance Strategy promoted by the Obama Administration in Asia-Pacific and perceived by China as an attempt of containment.¹²

2 Theoretical arguments

While some scholars have indicated that China makes use of both new and old multi-lateral mechanisms to promote the BRI agenda, hinting to potential linkages between the BRI and previous foreign policy initiatives¹³, this aspect still remains understudied. The present article seeks to bridge this gap by exploring how previous initiatives promoted by China facilitated the advancement and acceptance of the BRI and with what future implications. The main argument is that the BRI should be seen as a continuation and expansion of previous trends of Chinese foreign policy indicating just a new stage in China’s long quest for strategic autonomy.

Strategic autonomy is understood here as the ability “to decide and to act freely in an interdependent world”, specifically to “pursue its national interests without being constrained in any manner by other states.”¹⁴ Although, strategic autonomy is a concept specific to defense and strategic fields, recently its use has expanded beyond these domains to encompass economy, technology, or trade, etc. Strategic autonomy allows a given state to resist external pressures to compromise on its core interests or to alter its policy irrespective of the costs involved.¹⁵ Thus, it is considered by states as “a means to realise their sovereignty” by allowing for a broad independence of action.¹⁶ Traditionally, strategic autonomy implies the existence of an “overwhelming superior power” in terms of economic, industrial, military, and technological capabilities. However, in a growing interdependent and integrated world, strategic autonomy can be also a result of what at first looks to be mutually beneficial development, but in which a state is able to maximize and make use of the benefits offered by integration and interdependence.¹⁷ Consequently, it can result from asymmetries existent within a partnership, it can be

¹⁰See above 8.

¹¹Garlick, *The impact of China’s Belt and Road Initiative*; Xing, *ibid.*

¹²Rolland, “China’s Vision”.

¹³Aoyama, “One Belt, One Road”: China’s New Global Strategy”; Garlick, *The impact of China’s Belt and Road Initiative*

¹⁴Kempin and Kunz, “France, Germany and the Quest for European Strategic Autonomy: Franco-German Defence Cooperation in A New Era”; Kalyanaraman, “What is ‘strategic autonomy’? How does it help India’s security?”

¹⁵Kalyanaraman, “What is ‘strategic autonomy’? How does it help India’s security?”

¹⁶Timmers, “Strategic Autonomy and Cybersecurity”.

¹⁷Baru, “India and the World: A Geoeconomics Perspective.”.

¹⁸Blackwill and Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft*

obtained through the use of economic tools (e.g., imbalanced trade, FDI, restrictions, etc.), by supporting state or private domestic entities to achieve competitive superiority¹⁸, by creating cooperation mechanisms that maximize influence, or by controlling key position across networks and corridors of trade, infrastructure, finance, or digital communication.¹⁹ In these situations, the strategic autonomy stems from the power to shape the external environment.

Applying these arguments to the Chinese context the research further theorizes that for China strategic autonomy implies the preservation of its ability to pursue a foreign and security policy free from external interference, especially in regard to its core interests (*hexin liyi*).²⁰ However, as China becomes integrated in the world affairs, interdependent with other states with divergent interests and operating in cooperation frameworks based on liberal rules and norms, it also becomes more exposed to external pressure and democratic diffusion. As a result, China has adopted strategies and initiatives that can tip the balance in its favor. On the one hand, China has sought to increase its capabilities, by enhancing the so-called National Comprehensive Power, defined as a combination of material and non-material elements, varying from military, economic, technological capabilities to national cohesiveness. The current “Made in China 2025” strategy²¹ is a new attempt to increase its self-reliance and improve its comprehensive power. On the other hand, China has created or used multilateral cooperation frameworks, which allows it to shape in a favorable way its external environment. Consequently, the string of foreign policy initiatives put forward in the last two decades, including the BRI, referred in this article as external activism, has allowed China to achieve increased autonomy by securitizing transport corridors and acquiring material assets that increase self-reliance, while promoting some of its Five Concepts of Peaceful Coexistence, especially noninterference and sovereignty, as shared norms aiming to decrease potential pressure for democratization.

Therefore, this article aims to contribute to the debates on China’s BRI, by focusing on a less explored issue. Concretely, it seeks to understand how the previous foreign policy initiatives have paved the way for the broad acceptance of the BRI and how they contribute to increase Chinese strategic autonomy in international relations. To answer these questions, the article will examine the BRI in the framework of Chinese external activism in focusing on some multilateral initiatives, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, FOCAC, and Europe 17 + 1. The article is structured as follows: next section presents the BRI in the broader context of Chinese external activism; following two sections focus on a comparative analysis of Chinese use of the SCO and FOCAC; the next section examines the 17 + 1 as an expansion of Chinese foreign policy; lastly, in discussing some of the achievements of the BRI in the last seven years, the article summarizes the findings and presents potential implications of growing Chinese strategic autonomy in the international relations.

The documents on which this study is based come exclusively from public sources, such as primary and secondary data and academic papers. Methodologically, this

¹⁹Farrell and Newman, “Weaponized interdependence. How global economic networks shape state coercion”.

²⁰“China’s Peaceful Development 2011” White Paper lists China’s core interests as: state sovereignty; national security; territorial integrity; national reunification; political system and social stability; and basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development..

²¹State Council, “Made in China 2025.”

research uses mixed methods by combining descriptive observations, comparative analysis, and discursive practices with statistical data related to trade and investment. The data concerning different investment projects in selected areas were compiled from several databases or from the official websites of countries involved. The data used in this paper were collected, categorized, coded, and compared using NVivo data management and analysis software.

3 The BRI within the Chinese external activism

While the world has been deeply immersed in debates about if and how China will shape or shake the international order, China has been quietly and steadily advancing on the development path designed by its paramount leader Deng Xiaoping and eloquently expressed in his words “*tao guang yang hui* (hide brightness, nourish obscurity),” which is often translated as “bide our time and build up our capabilities” – and “*jue bu dang tou*” – literally, “don’t stick your head out,” but often translated as “never be the leader.”²² In this period, Chinese behavior in international relations was characterized by a preference for bilateral dialogue and certain reticence for joining or creating multi-lateral initiatives, by economic pragmatism and a desire to avoid confrontation in shelving disputes.²³ After the Tiananmen Incident and the end of the Cold War in 1989, the domestic situation’s stabilization and improvement through economic performance and social reforms represented the main focus of Chinese political leadership.

At the end of the 90s a shift toward a more proactive behavior in terms of Chinese foreign policy can be observed. This shift was explained by scholars as an evolution from “keeping a low profile” to “actively seek to achieve something”.²⁴ It is also the moment when the concepts of “peaceful development” and a “harmonious world” started to be promoted in the Chinese discourse by the President Hu Jintao²⁵

Following years of sustained economic growth – of an average growth of GDP of nearly 10% per year until 2012 according to World Bank data – in which China benefited from international cooperation, technology transfer, and foreign investments, China joined the World Trade Organization and has become deeply connected with the world economy. In 2010 China became the second largest economy in the world by nominal GDP after the United States and the world’s largest economy by purchasing power parity and it is expected that will completely surpass the US by 2030.²⁶ China’s economic development was complemented by rapid modernization of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), which became one of the top five armed forces in the world, in terms of capabilities and budgets.

²²These expressions come from Deng Xiaoping’s 28-character foreign policy guideline (*leng jing guan cha, wen zhu zhen jiao, chen zhuo ying fu, tao guang yan hui, shan yu shou zhuo, jue bu dang tou, you suo zuo wei*) reported in several places with different variants (sometimes as the 24-word foreign policy), see Chen and Wang, “Lying Low No more?”

²³MOFA of the P.R.China, “Set aside disputes and pursue joint development”.

²⁴Aoyama, “One Belt, One Road”: China’s New Global Strategy”.

²⁵The concept of peaceful development (*heping fazhan*) was used by Hu Jintao at the Bo’ao Forum in 2004, as a replacement for a previous term “China’s peaceful rise” (*Zhongguo heping jueqi*), see Guo, “Introduction: Challenges and Opportunities for China’s “Peaceful Rise””. The concept of “harmonious world” was used in 2005 in a speech given by President Hu Jintao at the United Nations world summit, see <https://www.un.org/webcast/summit2005/statements15/china050915eng.pdf>.

²⁶IMF, Country Report No. 19/266..

At discourse level, “tao guang yang hui” and “jue bu dang tou” have been completely replaced by “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” redefined as “Chinese Dream” (Zhongguo meng) since Xi Jinping became president. Accordingly, the “Chinese Dream” implies “a community of common destiny” (mingyun gongtongti) and “win-win cooperation” (hezuo gongying) and there is no intention to challenge the existing world order by seeking “expansion, hegemony, or sphere of influence”.²⁷

Although the trend of increasing external activism in Chinese foreign policy can be traced back to Hu Jintao’s leadership (2002–2012), it has significantly intensified during Xi Jinping tenure. Examined in detail, Chinese external activism reveals a coherent and unitary strategy that aims to create in the long term a favorable regional and international environment for China. Based on the specific target of the initiatives that were promoted by Chinese government five dimensions of external activism can be identified: (1) initiatives seeking to establish new mechanisms for multilateral cooperation (e.g., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for cooperation with Central Asia and Russia, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and Europe 17 + 1, etc.); (2) initiatives aiming to create the image of China as a responsible power and promoter of world peace through development and security assistance to developing countries; (3) initiatives promoting alternative concepts and mechanisms in the security domain (e.g., Xiangshan Forum, Conference on Interaction, and Confidence-Building Measures and the Asian Security Concept launched in 2014); (4) initiatives for cultural and public diplomacy seeking to create a favorable image of China (e.g., Confucius Institute, etc.); (5) transcontinental initiatives, such as BRI with links previous frameworks in a Sino-centric system.²⁸

The BRI (known previously as “One Belt and One Road”) has initially encompassed two components: The Silk Road Economic Belt, designed to link China, Central Asia, and Europe, which is reportedly built on an early idea expressed by the premier Li Peng in 1994 during a tour in Central Asia and retaken by Xi Jinping in September 2013²⁹; and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, planned to link China to Europe and some parts of Africa through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, which was proposed in October 2013 by Xi Jinping. However, its components continue to grow revealing the expansion of Chinese interests across the world. Thus, the BRI was further expanded to include the “Digital Silk Road” introduced by Xi Jinping at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in 2017³⁰ and the “Polar Silk Road”, seeking to develop the Arctic shipping lanes, which was revealed in the first Arctic Policy White Paper (“China’s Arctic Policy”) released in 2018 by the State Council Information Office. The BRI’s fluid character is further revealed by the fact that while there are six clearly nominated economic corridors and several free economic zones, many other projects taking place at the bilateral and multilateral level can be easily labeled and included under the broader umbrella of the BRI. The proposal, described by Xi Jinping as the “project of

²⁷The concept of “common destiny” was mentioned in the keynote speech given by Xi Jinping at the Boao Forum on April 7 2013.

²⁸Parepa, “China’s Change.”.

²⁹For more details about this proposal see, Gladney, “La question Ouïgour. Entre islamisation et ethnicisation” and Houben, “Les nouvelles routes de la soie: le cauchemar de Brzezinski passe par l’Asie centrale”

³⁰The first mention of DSR was in 2015 in a White Paper jointly issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce and China’s National Development and Reform Commission.

³¹The list of countries can be consulted at the Belt and Road Portal (Yi Dai Yi Lu) https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/info/iList.jsp?tm_id=126&cat_id=10122&info_id=77298.

the century”, has attracted the interests of 138 countries that are expected to take part in different projects and which have already signed cooperation documents with China.³¹ The BRI covers five cooperation priorities: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, free flows of trade and investment, financial integration, and people-to-people relations.

China has sought to increase the BRI’s legitimacy by working with the UN Development Program (UNDP) to present the BRI as a modality to achieve UN Sustainable Development Goals. It has also obtained support for mentioning the efforts for common development and free trade made within the BRI framework, in three UN Security Council Resolutions from 2016, 2017, and 2018.³²

As a modality to support BRI implementation, China has created a state-backed investment fund, the Silk Road Fund, whose major stakeholders are State Administration of Foreign Exchange, Export-Import Bank of China, China Investment Corporation and China Development Bank and has officially launched in 2014 the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) in order to address the funding gap for infrastructure BRI.³³ The AIIB started its operations in 2016 with a capital of 100 billion USD of which half is provided by China making it the largest shareholder. The bank, from which Japan and the United States are the most notable absentees, has already attracted 82 member-states among which are some of the most important US allies, such as Australia, Canada, UK, France, etc. The AIIB was considered by some as one of the initiatives that aims to set up a parallel institution to existing ones, a measure expressing Chinese discontent with US-dominated economic institutions, such as the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.³⁴

4 Paving the way for the BRI in Central Asia and Africa

4.1 Building a common ground

The wide-acceptance of the BRI was facilitated by previous strategies and initiatives pursued by the Chinese government. In 1999, Chinese government launched the “Western Great Development Project” (*xibu dakaifa*) and the “Going Out Strategy” (*zouchuqu zhanlue*) aimed at developing poorer western provinces (e.g., Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Province) and supporting Chinese companies expanding their operations abroad in the event of accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001.

This period coincides with the emergence of the first dimension of Chinese external activism of creating regional frameworks for cooperation, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Central Asia and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). Central Asia, which holds a significant position within the BRI, was the main experimental ground for Chinese multilateralism, given that the SCO – developed in 2001 from the former Shanghai Forum – is the first cooperation framework initiated by China. FOCAC, initially known as China-Africa Consultative Forum and established in 2000 for developing cooperation with African countries, was

³²Reuters, “U.N. Security Council overcomes Chinese veto threat to renew Afghanistan mission”.

³³China Center for International Economic Exchanges and UNDP, “The BRI: a new means to transformative global governance towards sustainable development”.

³⁴He, *Dragon’s Footprints*.

the second Chinese-led multilateral framework. Using a similar approach based on security-development nexus, China could penetrate the regions economically and militarily without attracting too much attention and adverse reactions. Although, between the SCO and FOCAC there are differences related to the degree of institutionalization, scale of the organization (in terms of member-states), and frequency of interactions (in terms of high-level meetings), there are also significant similarities.

Both organizations can be regarded as an example of the so-called “New Diplomacy” that China promoted since the mid-90s and which is based on new concepts of civilizational outlook, harmony, security, and development. The goal of this new approach was to promote the creation of a “harmonious world” that can provide to its members “continuous peace and common prosperity” regardless of the differences between them.³⁵

Given the broad ethnic, religious, and cultural differences between the member-states within the SCO and FOCAC, Chinese discursive practices have been focused on constructing a common ground by emphasizing shared norms, shared interests, and pragmatism.³⁶ The political discourse promoted the idea that Chinese behavior in international relations is guided by its long cultural and historical traditions which are based on a specific set of norms that encourage peaceful and harmonious conduct, emphasizing China’s preference for coexistence and cooperative approaches. While differences might exist, convergence over long-term goals, such as development, prosperity, and security represents the basis for a cooperative relationship. Building on the Confucian idea of “harmony in difference,” the political discourse argues for a non-confrontational approach that implies a harmonious relationship while maintaining its own specificity.³⁷ In doing so, China has sought to alleviate potential concerns of the Central Asian republics in regard to its desire to reestablish a Sino-Centric regional order, as well as the potential concerns of African states that could see China as a new colonizer.

Within both organizations, China has sought to create a normative framework that governs the relations between member-states by promoting the Five Principle of Peaceful Coexistence (sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, noninterference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence) representing the key tenets of Chinese foreign policy since 1950s. They have been included in the SCO Charter adopted in 2002 and the “Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation” adopted in 2000, China being able to promote its principles, especially those related to state sovereignty and noninterference, to the level of common norms recognized by other states.

In the case of the SCO, China has further used the concept of “Shanghai Spirit” which was mentioned for the first time by Jiang Zemin in June 2001 at the founding meeting of the SCO in Shanghai. The concept is based on the notions of mutual trust, equality, common development, and consensus in decision-making process. In the case of FOCAC, China has further used the concept of South-South cooperation based on notions of equal rights, mutual respect, and solidarity. The normative framework was

³⁵Gao, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and China’s New Diplomacy”..

³⁶Jia, “The success of the Shanghai Five: Interests, norms and pragmatism”.

³⁷Zhang, “Chinese exceptionalism in the intellectual world of China’s foreign policy”.

³⁸Alden and Alves, “China’s regional forum diplomacy in the developing world”.

further enhanced by the consensual and non-binding character of the decision-making process that represents a feature of different Chinese multilateral frameworks.³⁸

Both organizations proved to be useful platforms that allowed China to promote a multidimensional agenda based on shared interests framed as “common prosperity”. China aimed to decrease its vulnerability on crucial resources for its economy in exchange for necessary support for the SCO and FOCAC member-states. As most of the Central Asian and African countries wanted to enlarge their market for export of natural resources and to attract foreign investment in infrastructure and transport, Chinese proposals were perceived as “win-win cooperation”. By initiating multilateral cooperation with developing economies lacking financial resources, China addressed their specific needs for economic development, better infrastructure, and enhanced connectivity. Besides economic development, the agenda includes cooperation on social, political, security issues, as well as people to people cooperation.

4.2 Operationalizing the concepts³⁹

Chinese engagement in the SCO and FOCAC reveals similar patterns of cooperation. China has provided financial support through a combination of low-cost loans, investments, and rarely grants. In terms of loans China has combined preferential credit lines which target the so-called priority sectors (mainly related to energy and transport corridors), commodity-loans, and concessional loans which are linked with particular conditions. For example, in Africa, Chinese Exim Bank which is the biggest lender offered almost 60 USD billion in concessional loans from 2000 to 2014. However, these loans implied that between 50% of the materials are coming from China, while a significant proportion of the workers are also Chinese.⁴⁰ A similar situation was observed within the SCO.⁴¹ At the China-FOCAC summit in 2006, Hu Jintao announced the provision of 3 billion USD in preferential loans, 2 billion USD in preferential buyers credit and the establishment of a 5 billion USD investment fund. In regard to the SCO, China decided to provide 900 million USD of preferential buyer’s credit loans in 2004 at Tashkent Conference and three years later, in 2009, at Yekaterinburg proposed a 10 billions USD as credit for economic cooperation.

Following years of cooperation, China became one of the key investors and main trade partners in both regions, but trade relations were characterized by significant asymmetries. China-Africa trade increased from 10 billion USD in 2000 to almost 40 USD billion at the end of 2006, but despite this increase, the balance of trade was negative for most of African countries. As a result, at the China-FOCAC meeting in 2003, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao advanced the proposal of an intensive trade program aiming to increase total trade to 100 USD billion by 2010 by establishing new trade and economic zones in Africa.⁴² In 2009, China surpassed the US in becoming the largest trade partner of Africa,

³⁹If not mentioned otherwise, data related to the SCO was collected from the official websites of the SCO, Chinese Ministry of Commerce, Russian Ministry of Industry and Trade

⁴⁰Yeh and Wharton, “Going West and Going Out: discourses, migrants, and models in Chinese development”; Bräutigam et.al, “Looking Back and Moving Forward: An Analysis of China-Africa Economic Trends and the Outcomes of the 2015 Forum on China Africa Cooperation”.

⁴¹Kassenova, “China as an Emerging Donor in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan”.

⁴²China.org.cn, “China-Africa Trade Expected to Top US\$100 Bln by 2010”.

⁴³Data collected from China-Africa Research Initiative, <http://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-trade>.

but the deficit for African countries remained significant.⁴³ Within the SCO the value of trade has continuously increased from 12.21 billion USD in 2001 to more than 100 billion USD in 2011. Although this showed an almost nine-fold growth, in reality 79.2 billion represents the trade between China and Russia and 24 billion between China and Kazakhstan showing that the Chinese trade with the SCO members is heavily disproportionate. However, by the end of 2011, China became the largest trade partner of Russia, the second for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and the third for Uzbekistan.

In return for its financial assistance, China has sought to secure its access to oil, natural gas, and other resources (e.g., cobalt, uranium, platinum, manganese, coltan, iron ore, cotton, lead, etc.). All of the SCO and FOCAC member-states benefited from Chinese investments, although to a different degree. In Africa, China increased its control over oil and raw mineral supplies by directing its flows of investments in oil and gas fields in Nigeria, Sudan, Angola and by signing contracts for equity participation in 15 countries by 2005. Only in 2006, China and Nigeria concluded an 800 USD-million oil deal, CNOOC bought a stake in oil and gas

fields in Nigeria and signed deals with offshore exploration with Kenya for six oil blocks,

while Sinopec concluded an agreement for 40% of one of the Angola's offshore blocks. In addition, Africa became the second largest market for Chinese construction projects. Among many other projects, China has been involved in expansion of Nouakchott port in 2009, in constructing dams and power plants in 9 countries by 2007, building 1300-km highway from Tunisia to Morocco

in 2006, rehabilitation of more than 1 350 km of railway and construction of 1 600 km of new railroad until 2008 with the largest deals taking place in Mauritania, Gabon, Nigeria and in railways construction in Sudan, Nigeria, Kenya, Djibouti, Chad, Angola, Algeria since 2009.⁴⁴

Within the SCO framework, only in 2003, Chinese companies invested 1.6 billions USD. The first direct oil pipeline between China and Kazakhstan built by China became operational in 2006. In 2007, China signed an agreement for the extension of the pipeline to the Caspian Sea, as well as for the construction of a gas pipeline with two lines, from Turkmenistan (not an SCO member) through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan until China. In 2006 and 2012, China signed deals for oil and gas exploration and for gas supply with Uzbekistan. In 2012, China proposed to build a branch-off that arrived at its territory from the existing gas pipeline that passes through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan. As for energy cooperation with Russia, in 2006, CNPC officials signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Russia's Gazprom for two pipelines, one from Russia's western Kovykta gas field to northwestern China and the second from Russia's Far East and Sakhalin Island to northeastern China. In 2008, a decision was made to build a new pipeline between Eastern Siberia to the Pacific Ocean (ESPO), while in 2009, a deal concerning the supply of oil to China for 20 years was signed.⁴⁵ China loans and investments have been also directed to transport corridors between Central Asia and

⁴⁴Executive Research Associates Pty Ltd, "China in Africa. A Strategic Overview".

⁴⁵Blagov, "Russia and China: United by Foreign Policy, Divided by Energy Prices".

⁴⁶Jia, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: China's Experiment in Multilateral Leadership".

China. China built five hard-surfaced roads between Xinjiang and Kazakhstan and upgraded highways that linked border trading area, renovated the highway that linked Kyrgyzstan and China (Osh-Sarytash-Irkeshtam) and financed the development of Norak Tunnel (Shar-Shar pass) in Tajikistan among many other projects.⁴⁶

While the contribution to regional development cannot be denied, China has shown preference for specific modalities in which it used its FDI. First, it applied the so-called “resources for infrastructure deals” known also as “Angola Model” targeting those countries rich in natural resources and in need for infrastructure. Seen as an expression of Chinese pragmatism and win-win cooperation, this pattern is not free of risk as the case of Angola shows. Angola secured in early 2000, 2 billion USD for building its infrastructure, but during the financial crises when the price of oil dropped, it found itself in the situation to sell more oil in order to repay the debt.⁴⁷ Second, significant amount of the FDI flows was directed to domains in which China was interested, showing its aim of increasing control over oil and raw material such by purchasing oil fields, acquisition of shares and resource exploitation, or by building pipelines or transport corridors for its resource supplies. Third, by buying equity shares and establishing contracts with oil producers, China has sought to increase its direct access to natural resources by controlling significant segments of the supply chains.⁴⁸ Lastly, China’s economic strategy is mainly resource-driven. At the first glance, it looks like win-win cooperation, in which China gets access to natural resources, while its partners gain preferential loans, technical expertise, and investments. But in the long run, this kind of policy not only increased the dependency on China of some countries, but also led an unequal development of their economies by putting emphasis only on energy and resources while neglecting other sectors. Nevertheless, excessive reliance of some countries on Chinese financial support can be dangerous in the long term as the case of Tajikistan has shown. With the foreign debt that reached 2.1 billion USD in the first quarter of 2013, of which 862 million were owed to China (biggest lender for Tajikistan), Tajikistan gave, according to some reports, almost 1000 square km from its territory as an “unofficial writing-off agreement”.⁴⁹

Since the establishment of the SCO and FOCAC, China has attached great importance to both organizations. Their success was very important for at least four reasons: 1) as Chinese diplomatic initiatives they could prove the capacity of China to establish viable multilateral organizations, thus to play a constructive role on the international stage; 2) given that China was acting in “new” areas considered under Russian, and respectively Western influence, it was a test for Chinese foreign, economic, and security policy; 3) they contributed to create a positive image of China as a credible partner and responsible power needed to reduce its negative image as a challenger of the international system. 4) they allowed China to increase its strategic autonomy by enhancing its access to resources, expanding its influence over transportations corridors, engaging in asymmetric partnerships, and securing its land and sea routes.

Since the announcement of the BRI, discursive practices and patterns of cooperation of the SCO and FOCAC are future strengthened and expanded. In the BRI context,

⁴⁷Data is collected from the China Africa Project and The Africa Report, <https://www.theafricareport.com/21072/chinas-resources-for-infrastructure-deals-are-evolving/>; <https://chinaafricaproject.com/tag/angola-model/>.

⁴⁸Lind, and Press. “Markets or Mercantilism? How China Secures Its Energy Supplies”.

⁴⁹Sattori, “China as Tajikistan’s ‘Lender of Last Resort’”.

building a “common prosperity” has transformed into a “community of common destiny”, while the new diplomacy has evolved into “major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” indicating a readjustment consistent with the current status of China in world affairs. In addition, the BRI comes with its own “Silk Road Spirit” building on notions of peace, cooperation, openness, inclusiveness, mutual benefit, and win-win results.⁵⁰ China has also attempted to obtain international support for the BRI by promoting a similar discourse that emphasizes common interests in addressing long-term goals, such as economic development, mutual cooperation, and regional needs that can be easily accepted by most of the countries regardless of their political system. While Africa plays an increasing role for the Maritime Silk Road, three of the six land corridors of the BRI cross the territories of some of the SCO member states, respectively: (1) New Eurasia Land Bridge rail to Europe via Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, and Poland; (2) China, Mongolia, Russia Economic Corridor including railways and roads linked with the land bridge; and (3) China, Central Asia, West Asia Economic Corridor: linking to the Central Asian Republic, Iran, and Turkey.

5 Securing the BRI

Although the BRI does not imply security cooperation, it has a crucial strategic dimension as it is designed around main land routes and Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) used by China for its energy and resources imports. Securing these routes to prevent any country from stopping Chinese import flows is significant not only for continued economic development, but also for increasing its strategic autonomy in international relations. Chinese engagements within the SCO and FOCAC, in which security cooperation complemented economic one, allowed the PLA to operate beyond Chinese borders without raising concerns, compared with the South and East China Sea.

The SCO provided China a useful framework to diversify and reduce its dependency on energy imports coming from Middle East and its reliance on Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOC) for imports coming from Africa and South-East Asia, areas where the US had a disproportionate influence at a moment when Chinese military was not strong enough. It represents a source of energy supply that does not need naval protection, compared to other energy routes passing through several chokepoints, such as Malacca Straits, Hormuz, Luzon, or Taiwan which in case of a conflict are vulnerable to interference and expose China to potential pressure.⁵¹ In addition, the construction of transport corridors, be they railways, roads, highways aimed to secure land connections with Europe and Middle East markets through its Central Asian partners, as well as to get access to Caspian resources, can have a dual use. In the economic realm, they reduce the transaction costs, and the necessary time for goods to reach the destination, making China more attractive to Europe, while in the security realm, they can facilitate the power projection capacity of the PLA for the transport of its troops and equipment. In this regard, the military exercise conducted by the PLA in June 2015 to transport troops and

⁵⁰MOFA of P.R.China, “Carry Forward Silk Road Spirit and Write a New Chapter for Cooperation”.

⁵¹Marketos, China’s energy geopolitics: *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia*.

⁵²*The Economic Times*, “China conducts first military mobility test on bullet train for rushing troops to Xinjiang,” June 9 2015..

equipment by high-speed train to the Xinjiang, can be seen as crucial mobility test for future deployments to Central Asia.⁵²

From a security perspective, the SCO is relevant for at least four reasons. First, as one of the few structures related to security without the participation of the United States, it facilitated Chinese military presence in a region considered under Russian influence. Second, the SCO was an instrument that allowed China to settle its territorial issues with Russia and Central Asian countries; without such stabilization, China could not keep under control its own northwest regions and could not focus on SLOC-related issues in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. Third, it provides a good framework to enhance its interoperability and coordination with the Russian military. And, fourth, the SCO was the first and main multilateral framework used by the PLA for external military training.⁵³ Between 2002 and 2016, China was engaged in almost 40 joint military exercises in the region. Some of the SCO anti-terrorist military drills have been focused on the protection of energy infrastructure, such as the defense of nuclear reactors, refineries, ports, chemical factories, etc.⁵⁴

In its turn, FOCAC offered China the opportunity to increase its image of a global contributor to regional stability and peace. China became actively involved in engaging in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden⁵⁵ and in providing security assistance by supporting the development of the regional security capacity of African States. One year before the announcement of the BRI, during the Fifth Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2012, President Hu Jintao made public the establishment of a comprehensive framework, the “Initiative on China–Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security” through which China engaged to provide assistance in order to support peacekeeping operations organized by the African Union and contribute to the development of the African Standby Force. The policy line initiated by Hu Jintao was continued by President Xi who announced at the UN General Assembly in 2015 that China would provide in the next five years 100 million USD of free military assistance to the African Union in order to support the development of the Rapid Deployment Capability of the African Standby Force.⁵⁶ These engagements complemented the participation of Chinese troops in peacekeeping missions within the UN framework in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Darfur, Sudan, South Sudan, Liberia, and Mali. While undoubtedly, the PLA’s participation is contributing to regional peace and stability, it has been often linked with the pursuit and protection of Chinese economic interests and assets in the region, especially when infrastructure or mineral extraction projects were located near places of ongoing tensions, such as South Sudan, Liberia, or The Democratic Republic of Congo. For example, the military personnel deployed to South Sudan since 2014 for the UN Mission was mandated to use “all necessary means” to protect “civilians at oil installations,” “oil fields and Chinese workers”.⁵⁷

In this context, the construction of the first overseas base of the PLA in Djibouti in 2016 has a strategic significance as Djibouti, together with Egypt, a key point for the

⁵³Gill and Oresman: *China's New Journey to the West: China's Emergence in Central Asia and Implications for U.S. Interests*.

⁵⁴Boland, “Ten years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A lost decade? A partner for the U.S.?”.

⁵⁵Erickson: “Chinese Sea Power in Action: The Counter Piracy Mission in the Gulf of Aden and Beyond”.

⁵⁶Sina News “Xi Jinping: China will provide US\$100 million in military assistance to the African Union within 5 years”.

⁵⁷Reuters, “China Deploys Troops to U.N. Force to Protect South Sudan Oilfields – WSJ”.

Maritime Silk Road given that the Gulf of Aden and Suez Canal are the main areas susceptible to interference. The enhanced military cooperation – which allows the PLA to maintain a presence of up to 10,000 soldiers until 2026 at the military base located near a new port Doraleh – complements economic cooperation represented by several investments in infrastructure, such as the new ports, two airports, a railway Ethiopia-Djibouti, Tadjourah bulk terminal, several gas and oil pipelines, and a liquefaction plant. The military base not only grants China a long-term presence by increasing its regional influence, but it also facilitates the mobility of Chinese troops, by allowing a rapid deployment in Africa, as well as in the Mediterranean area. In this sense, the development of Djibouti can be seen as a significant step in safeguarding the Maritime Silk Road. The Mediterranean area represents the western end of the BRI and is another strategic region in which China has sought to cultivate long-term relationships through economic and security cooperation. Since 2015, growing involvement in military joint naval exercises with Russia, port visits, and joint air-force exercises with Turkey can be observed. The Mediterranean Sea, especially the Port of Piraeus, bought in 2016 by COSCO, provides China with direct access to Asia, Eastern Europe, and North Africa. The significant point is that it facilitates Chinese access to the Middle East and the Gulf where important energy suppliers are located. It also allows access to North Africa, especially Libya and Algeria, where several Chinese companies are operating.

In parallel with the increasing activities of the Chinese military along sea and land routes of the BRI, a new phenomenon emerged since 2014 that is an increasing presence of Private Security Companies (PSCs). Involved in the protection of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), they become more visible in 2014 during the evacuation of Chinese workers in Iraq following ISIS offensive and in 2016 following the evacuation of Chinese workers in South Sudan due to conflict between local armed groups. Until 2016, over 20 PSCs were operating abroad, mainly in Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East.⁵⁸ Initially, China has been showing a propensity to work with local authorities in order to guarantee and protect its companies, assets, and citizens. In countries where the situation was not very stable China reached different agreements to make sure that state-owned companies were protected by the local police and military forces. However, the increasing number of SOEs and private companies operating abroad in the BRI framework and rising cases of economic and social protests against Chinese companies have led to an increasing presence of PSCs.

6 Expansion toward Europe

The expansion of Chinese multilateral cooperation frameworks in Europe in the years following the fall of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was relatively slow for two reasons. First, most of the former communist partners of China were preoccupied with joining and harmonizing their policies with the European Union (EU) and NATO. Second, China was more interested in pursuing its cooperation with developed economies that allow for access to advanced industries and technology transfers. As a result, most of the cooperation with Europe took place at bilateral level,

⁵⁸Zhong, "Overseas security"; Arduino, *China's Private Army*.

⁵⁹Hanemann and Huotari, "Record flows and growing imbalances. Chinese Investment in Europe in 2016"

with the most advanced economies, especially France, Germany, and UK, representing significant trade partners, but also the core of Chinese flows of capital.⁵⁹

Coincidentally or not, in 2012, just one year before the official launch of the BRI, China attempted to diversify and expand its multilateral cooperation model by initiating the so-called sub-regional platforms (*ciquyu hezuo*). It was built on a previous call for enhanced cooperation launched at the Budapest Business Forum in 2011 by the former premier Wen Jiabao. Interestingly enough, in its speech, the Chinese premier mentioned the “traditional” relations between China and CEE by referring to the Silk Road and not to the previous cooperation during communist period.⁶⁰

One year later, at the Warsaw Summit, China reunited most of its former socialist “comrades” and the Baltic States in the Europe 16 + 1 platform (currently 17 + 1) and adopted the “Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries” as a main document that guides the activity of the newly established organization. In the next year, at Bucharest Summit, “The Medium-Term Agenda for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries” was adopted to clarify the fields of cooperation and classify them in eight big areas.

The framework generated mixed reactions due to its proximity to well-established organizations such as the EU and NATO and due to its composition including 11 EU members and 5 non-EU countries. The initiative was seen as an intention to wedge an already divided EU and even to undermine the EU’s reformist agenda.⁶¹ The potential concerns related to Chinese intention to erode the European unity have been brushed away through the official documents released after different summits emphasizing that the 16 + 1 cooperation is in concordance with the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; the projects will be implemented according to the EU legislation and rules in the case of the EU members; and the organization will support the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation.⁶²

China has approached the CEE with a discourse that emphasizes the significance of “The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”, the importance of a multilateral world order, mutual interests, and need for cooperation regardless of the type of political system. China could build its discourse by focusing on aspects that can be attractive and of actuality for almost all CEE countries. In this regard, some scholars point that since the increasing competition between China and the US, China not only expects the European countries to reject the perceived US anti-Chinese stance, but also promotes the adoption of a “two wheels” approach in which the USA is seen as the security guarantor, while China as an economic cooperation, a division existing actually in Asia-Pacific.⁶³

An array of mechanisms was created in order to promote free flows of trade and investment among which are several sectoral cooperation mechanisms, supervised and located in one of the member-states. Such approach represents a novelty compared with the FOCAC and the SCO where sectoral cooperation is directed by different Chinese agencies. One of the reasons for this kind of arrangement is represented by the fact that

⁶⁰Wen, “Strengthen Traditional Friendship and Promote Common Development”.

⁶¹Pepe, “China’s Inroads into Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe: Implications for Germany and the EU”.

⁶²Data is collected from Bucharest Guidelines 2013, Belgrade Guidelines 2014 and Budapest Guidelines 2017. All guidelines can be found at: <http://www.china-ceec.org>.

⁶³Przychodniak, “China and the Visegrad Group. Transformation and future of the cooperation”.

CEE countries possess valuable knowledge in specific domains in which China might be interested to get involved. Another reason is represented by each country's interest in developing a specific domain in its relations within 17 + 1. Nevertheless, the biggest difference between FOCAC and the SCO is that 17 + 1 do not include political and security cooperation dimensions.

The framework has generated enthusiasm, especially given its goals of increasing the trade between CEE and China to 100 billion USD by 2015 and creating a development fund of 500 million USD. While the first goal was not yet achieved, the China-CEEC Investment Cooperation Fund was created and lately increased. In 2016 in Riga it was announced that the Fund will increase to 1 billion USD by 2017, but it reached only 800 million USD by 2018.⁶⁴

Since the launching of the BRI, which raised high expectations regarding investment and mutual trade, all the CEE countries have joined the initiative, taking part in BRI Forums and becoming involved in BRI-related projects. The 17 + 1 became the main platform used by China to promote its initiative in Europe. At the Suzhou Summit, Premier Li Keqiang made clear the fact that China considered 17 + 1 as a mechanism linked with the BRI.

Chinese interest in the region is motivated by its strategic value for the land and sea routes of the BRI. In 2015, Chinese premier Li Keqiang proposed the so-called "Three Seas Port Cooperation", which implies access and linkage between Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seaports. This proposal comes to complement the China-Europe Land-Sea Express Corridor linking Piraeus Port in Greece with Western Europe through Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary. As a result, most of Chinese investment or financing focused on infrastructure construction. China provided loans for motorways in Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia & Herzegovina and, for railways in Serbia and Hungary. On one hand, the new projects seek to facilitate access within Europe and on the other hand, to multiply the connections toward Central Asia and China via European part of Russia, by providing cost-saving and time-saving alternatives.

However, after few years, the enthusiasm of the CEE countries have cooled down, due to several reasons, such as the increasing US-China competition, the EU new regulatory framework on FDI, the EU recent declaration of China as a "systemic competitor" in 2016⁶⁵, aspects which increase the pressure on the CEE countries, be they EU members or just aspirants to membership. Another significant reason was represented by the gap between expectations and concrete outcomes, lack of balanced trade, reciprocity of market access, and transparent tenders for infrastructure investment, all expressed in the Sofia Guidelines from 2018. In reality, the problem of asymmetric trade relations and power imbalances that resulted from the discrimination of European companies in the process of public procurements, requirements to enter into joint ventures with local partners and transfer their technology, market access restrictions, and industrial barriers imposed by China represented for a long time significant concerns among all European countries, not only of CEE countries.⁶⁶

⁶⁴All data related to the Fund are available on the official website: <http://china-ceefund.com/>.

⁶⁵European Commission, "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Elements for a new EU strategy on China"

⁶⁶BDI Policy Paper on China, "Partner and Systemic Competitor – How Do We Deal with China's State-Controlled Economy?"

More recently, China has attempted to use its cooperation with the Visegrad Group in the V4+ China format as a spearhead for the advancement of its projects related to the BRI. The mutual interest for cooperation can be observed by the high level of exchanges, concretized by Xi Jinping visits in Poland and the Czech Republic in 2016, the vice-premier Liu Yandong visit in Hungary in 2017, the high-level participation of V4 at the BRI forums (e.g., at the 2017 BRI Forum, Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary representation was at the highest level from CEE countries), etc. Apart from Serbia, within the 17 + 1, China has strategic partnership only with the three V4 members, specifically Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. While the overall Chinese investments in CEE and the trade volume between China and 16 + 1 have grown significantly after the establishment of the 16 + 1, reaching 57.3 billion Euro in 2017, the V4 countries are among the main trade partners of China. Nevertheless, all of them registered high deficits in their balance trade with China. In terms of Chinese FDI, between 2013 and 2019, the V4 countries were among the top-five destinations. Until 2015, Hungary was the main recipient, followed by Poland, but since 2015, the Czech Republic has become the main recipient followed by Hungary, Poland, Estonia, and Slovakia.⁶⁷ The cooperation with the V4 was facilitated also by their openness toward cooperation with China compared with some other CEE partners, Poland and the Czech Republic seeking to become gates to Europe or transport hubs, while Hungary attempts to assess itself as first in different aspects of cooperation with China.⁶⁸ Chinese preference for cooperation with V4 was clearly expressed in 2018 when in a meeting with V4 deputy-ministers of foreign affairs, the Chinese MOFA minister at that time, Wang Yi, identified the group as the most dynamic force that actively contributes to the 16 + 1 cooperation and BRI promotion.⁶⁹ Coincidentally or not, the group that the Chinese minister considered a leading force of the 17 + 1 enjoys the reputation of the EU's trouble-maker.⁷⁰

More recently, China has proposed the establishment of two new sub-regional platforms 5 + 1 with five Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) and 6 + 1 with six southern European countries (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, and Malta) aiming for better coordination in areas of common interest.⁷¹ If the Nordic Council of Ministers decided in 2016 to explore the possibilities for a common dialogue with China, although there are no yet any concrete results, the second initiative have remained at the proposal stage. Nevertheless, these proposals indicate Chinese evolving preference to promote multilateral frameworks at regional and sub-regional level with China at core.

7 Seven years in

The economic expansion through the BRI provides an opportunity for the continued development of the Chinese economy, which according to the World Bank and IMF data, faces challenges in the recent years, such as overcapacity in heavy industries and

⁶⁷Data collected from Eurostat, see https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/China-EU_international_trade_in_goods_statistics#Trade_with_China_by_Member_State.

⁶⁸Gaviria-Ochoa, "The Visegrad Group as a Chinese Gateway to the European Union".

⁶⁹MOFA of P.R.China, "Wang Yi Meets with Deputy Foreign Ministers of V4 Countries".

⁷⁰Végh, "From Pro-European Alliance to Eurosceptic Protest Group? The case of the Visegrad Group".

⁷¹For a detailed explanation on Chinese sub-regional platforms see, see Bu, "Zhongou 'Ciquyu Hezuo'".

slowdown of economic growth which decelerate in 2015 to 7.1% and 6% in 2019. The necessity of an “expansion of the external market” was emphasized as one of the potential solutions to solve the problems of overcapacity by the State Council. In addition, it helps China to move up in the value-added chain by shifting from energy, construction, and heavy industry toward next-generation technologies in complementing the Made in China 2025 strategy. The strategy, outlining ten core technologies, attempts to make China 70% self-sufficient by the year 2025 by stimulating indigenous innovation. It seeks to eliminate Chinese reliance on foreign technology and to provide China the top global leading position in the technological field.

Since the BRI announcement, Chinese capital has continued to flow into the world further deepening the world’s economic interdependence. Total trade volume with countries along the BRI between 2014 – 2019 reached 44 trillion RMB of which 9.27 trillion RMB (about 1.34 trillion USD) only in 2019.⁷² The share of the BRI countries in China’s total trade increased by 2% from 2018 reaching 30% in 2019. China’s maintained its position as the world’s leading trade partner with 124 countries having China as their largest trade partner.⁷³ In 2017 and 2018 China was consecutively the world’s largest merchandise exporter holding 13% of total exports (US\$ 2.49 trillion) and 11% of total imports (US\$ 2.14 trillion).⁷⁴ However, seven among the top ten main trade partners of China, specifically the US, Japan, South Korea, Germany, Netherlands, UK, India, did not sign the Memorandum of Understanding to officially join the BRI.

China builds on its previous cooperation frameworks and uses its favorite pattern that blends aid, loans, and investments to attract more and more countries to its project. In 2014, China’s aid flows were estimated at 4 billion USD per year⁷⁵ with only a fifth of the total aid in form of grants and the rest as concessional loans with low interest rate and between 2014 and 2017, almost 120 billion USD in loans have been used to support different BRI-related projects. In Africa, President Xi committed to provide 20 billion USD financing between 2013 and 2015 double the amount offered in the form of concessional loans to Africa between 2009 and 2012, while in the framework Europe 16 + 1, Prime-Minister Li Keqiang proposed a 10 billion USD investment fund aimed to finance different projects. As a part of a broader process aiming to better coordinate the increasing volume of assistance, in 2018, China restructured its foreign aid management by replacing the Department of Foreign Aid at the Ministry of Commerce with a newly created agency, China International Development Cooperation Agency, under the direct subordination of the State Council having as one of its function the facilitation of BRI projects⁷⁶

Currently, China is the largest creditor in the world overpassing the World Bank and the IMF by lending around 1.5 trillion in direct loans and trade credits to almost 150 countries.⁷⁷ It is the second world largest holder of net foreign financial assets after Japan,

⁷²Xinhuanet, “China Trade with BRI countries booms in 2019.”

⁷³If not mentioned otherwise, economic indicators are based on the UNCTAD statistics: <https://unctad.org/en/Pages/Publications/Statistics-Trends-International-Trade.aspx>; <https://unctad.org/en/Pages/DIAE/FDI%20Statistics/FDI-Statistics.aspx>.

⁷⁴WTO, *World Trade Statistical Review 2019*..

⁷⁵State Council, “China’s Foreign Aid (2014).”

⁷⁶See the web site of China International Development Cooperation Agency, <http://www.cidca.gov.cn/>..

⁷⁷Horn et al., “How Much Money?”

⁷⁸China Banking News, “China’s Net Foreign Financial Assets.”

⁷⁹Gopalan, “China M&A Bankers Face Another Grim Year.”

exceeding USD\$ 2 trillion at the end of 2019.⁷⁸ China has also emerged as the world's investor in 2016 when its FDI outflows reached 196 billion USD and in the same year, became for the first time the world's largest acquirer of overseas assets after the U.S. based on the value of corporate takeovers.⁷⁹ Although, since 2017, at aggregate level Chinese FDI are slowing down, China still remains among top three world's foreign investors after the US and Japan.⁸⁰

Between 2014 and 2018, the top five destinations for Chinese investments in Africa, Latin America, and Asia were BRI-partners, while in Europe and North America the non-BRI countries outnumbered the BRI-partners. The BRI allows for a diversification of Chinese FDI destinations, especially in small and middle-level countries, such as Eastern and Central Europe or islands nations. While the value of these investments is not high, it facilitates increasing Chinese presence in strategic points within European Union, as well as in the Indo-Pacific.

A significant share of Chinese investments was represented by M&A with a focus on countries outside the BRI framework, while the investments in BRI countries tend to focus more on infrastructure construction supporting the needs of Chinese industrial capacity. The structure of Chinese investment flows since 2014 have undergone significant changes compared with the previous period. Prior to 2014 the investments were concentrated in natural resources, energy, finance, and traditional industries, since 2014 there is a shift toward high technology farming, research and development, robotics, telecommunications, information systems, etc., indicating changing economic priorities.⁸¹ These priorities are linked with the development of Digital Silk Road which seeks to facilitate the expansion of Chinese technologies, such as digital instruments, 5 G telecommunication, cloud computing, smart cities, satellite systems, networks, and submarine cables, around the world.

Seven years in, there are at least three aspects that command attention concerning the cooperation within and along the Belt and Road.

First, China has increased its efforts to achieve control over a network of ports, airports, railways, and roads with strategic position. For example, the Port of Piraeus, bought in 2016 by the Chinese company COSCO, provides China with direct access to Asia, Eastern Europe, and North Africa. The significant point is that it facilitates Chinese access to the Middle East and the Gulf where important energy suppliers are located. It also allows access to North Africa, especially Libya and Algeria, where several Chinese companies are operating. Since 2013, the already vast infrastructural networks developed in Africa and Central Asia have been continuously expanded to include assets in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Currently, three Chinese state-owned companies, COSCO Shipping Ports (the world's largest shipping company), China Merchants Port Holdings (CMPort), and Qingdao Port International Development (QPI) control or have significant shares in 24 ports around the world from Egypt to Indonesia and from Belgium to Israel, of which 16 are located in Europe. China has also shown an interest in airport infrastructure, its companies controlling or holding shares in 16 airports from Egypt to Indonesia and from Belgium to Israel of which 7 are located in Europe. These

⁸⁰Data collected from UNCTAD and Statista: <https://www.statista.com/topics/5290/foreign-direct-investment-from-china/> and <https://unctad.org/en/Pages/DIAE/World%20Investment%20Report/Annex-Tables.aspx>.

⁸¹Information listed on China Global Investment Tracker: <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/?ncid=txtlnkusaolp00000618..>

investments provide China an enhanced access around the world which can be justified by its increasing economic needs, but “connecting the dots” reveals an immense infrastructure which in long-term can offer supremacy especially in the context of increasing economic competition. The vast infrastructural network that combines ports, railways, and airports grants China an enhanced access around the world, but the concentration of these assets in Europe is stunning and surpasses any other regions. In addition, some of these assets are a part of critical infrastructure of particular countries and they hold a significant role in regional security networks. It is the case of Tirana Airport (Albania) and Haifa Port (Israel).⁸²

The second aspect is related to strategic acquisition in critical sectors, understood as assets which can affect national security, national resilience in times of crises, and international competitiveness, especially in terms of technology, of a country. Chinese M&A within the BRI framework received considerable attention in the last few years not only due to their value, but especially due to their concentration in critical sectors. The Chinese preference for this type of investment has set the alarm bells ringing in different countries since 2006, but the concerns for potential security implications have been sometimes brushed away. The most salient concerns identified are usually related to telecommunication, nuclear technology, raw materials, and high-tech acquisitions. For example, in the nuclear sector, China has actively promoted investment in the nuclear energy and technology oversees through its three largest SOEs: China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC), China General Nuclear (CGN), and State Power Investment Cooperation (SPIC) among which CGN was charged with illegal attempt to obtain nuclear reactor building plans by the US government in 2016. Although China tries to promote its nuclear technology, the lack of its reputation compared to other competitors makes China accept the construction of nuclear reactors using foreign-design, but Chinese financing and construction expertise. Until 2030, Chinese companies aim to build around 30 power plants in countries along the BRI and CNNC has already signed agreements for cooperation with several countries, among which are Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, Romania, France, and Jordan.⁸³ CNNC and, respectively, CGN have also entered into negotiation to build Canadian designed reactors in Argentina and Romania⁸⁴ and hold 30% equities in a company building Hinkley Point C power station in the UK. Another example is related to telecommunication. While at the beginning of the “Going out strategy” China has penetrated African market by using aid-investment-loan packages in exchange for natural resources and energy, recently state-owned ZTE and private-owned Huawei have expanded their activities all over the world. Both companies are not allowed to bid and contract governmental entities in the US, Canada, and Australia, for security concerns linked to espionage, cyber-attacks, and blurry links with government and military. However, they dominate 70% of telecommunication markets and infrastructure in Africa and Central Asia, and almost 50% in Europe despite warnings coming from some intelligence agencies.⁸⁵

⁸²The data related to investment was collected from the China Global Investment Tracker, Investment Monitor and <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>.

⁸³World Nuclear Association, “Nuclear Power in China.”

⁸⁴After the participation of Chinese companies in Romanian nuclear sector came under intense scrutiny, the Romanian government decided to cancel the project.

⁸⁵Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, “International Security and Estonia 2019”; Kafkadesk, “Czech Republic warns against Huawei security threat”.

The third aspect that commands attention is represented by the growing ability of China to use its financial assistance, FDI, and asymmetric partnerships as tools of economic statecraft. Such aspect can be observed from the shifting attitude in favor of China in some countries benefiting from Chinese financing. From this perspective, China obtained favorable results in convincing between 2016 and 2018, 3 African states and 3 Latin American states to adhere to “One China” policy. This shift was linked with promises of economic assistance or a certain pressure on these countries to establish relations with China and was followed by significant economic deals and financial support.⁸⁶ In 2019, at the United Nations, in 50 countries supported Chinese policies in Xinjiang, while 22 condemned them. One year later, 54 countries have voiced support for China’s Hong Kong policy, while 39 have criticized it. Among Chinese supporters, most are African, Middle East and Asian states, some of them with authoritarian regimes, many of them with significant economic ties with China.⁸⁷ But much more worrying are recent behavior of some European countries, all of them beneficiary of significant Chinese investments. In 2016, Hungary and Greece objected to a common EU declaration on South-China Sea Dispute, in 2017, Greece prevented EU from releasing a joint statement criticizing China on human rights at the UN and Hungary objected to sign a joint letter denouncing the alleged torture of lawyers in China.⁸⁸

8 Conclusion

This article examined the BRI in a wider context of Chinese external activism aiming to assess the contribution of previous foreign policy initiatives to the BRI, and to evaluate potential implications for Chinese strategic autonomy. The findings show that the SCO and FOCAC have been instrumental in paving the way for the broad acceptance and advancement of the BRI. They contributed to create a positive image of China as a credible partner and responsible power that promotes cooperation, mutual development, pragmatic solutions, and alternatives to existing norms.

By expanding its multilateral frameworks toward Europe and by engaging in external activism at the global level, China aimed to achieve recognition as an important global power in world affairs. It seeks to display its strength and abilities in showing that it has developed its own vision of a new world order governed by norms and patterns of cooperation that can be accepted and shared by many countries regardless of their political system. Concerns of different countries in regard to China’s potential intentions of hegemony were eventually alleviated by the ability of the Chinese leaders to promote a discourse that emphasized long-term goals and shared interests, such as development and stability.

Nevertheless, Chinese-led initiatives revealed a specific model of cooperation in which China is acting as a hub and in which cooperation patterns make it less exposed to external pressure and democratic diffusion. This model has been replicated and expanded within

⁸⁶US China Economic Security Review Commission, “China’s Engagement with Africa: Foundations for an Alternative Governance”.

⁸⁷Yellinek and Chen, “The ‘22 vs. 50’ Diplomatic Split Between the West and China Over Xinjiang and Human Rights”; Putz, “Last week, two coalitions sent competing letters to the UN Human Rights Council criticizing or backing China’s Xinjiang policies”.

⁸⁸Lind, “The Rise of China and the Future of the Transatlantic Relationship”.

the BRI. Although the BRI can be a beneficial long-term strategy for all countries involved because it might facilitate the development of host-countries infrastructure and economies, one should not forget that it's primarily driven by China's own economic and security interest. The BRI allows China to position itself as a hub for trade and investment for 136 countries across different continents and as a security partner for some of them. While its presence has a high potential to contribute to common development, regional integration, and stability, it also presents some destabilizing risks for its partners.

First, most of Chinese M&A and loans for infrastructure have helped China to gain strategic positions in different parts of the world and to increase its strategic footprint in critical infrastructure and sectors and supply chains. This aspect facilitates an asymmetric character of partnerships along the BRI by increasing the dependency of some countries on China, and consequently enhancing Chinese strategic autonomy.

Second, the magnitude of Chinese economic power can increase the political leverage that China can exercise over different countries and can affect the well-functioning of specific networks or operations in times of increasing economic competition. While advanced-economies have enough means to counterbalance and protect themselves, small and medium-level economies might face significant problems.

Third, the BRI consolidated Chinese control over a network of railways, ports, and airports, as well as over land routes from Central Asia to Europe and the SLOC beyond the South China Sea. While such a development can seem to have, on first impression, a defensive character – because it can prevent any country or organization from stopping Chinese energy and resource flows –, it also creates potential risks for regional stability. They facilitate the mobility of the PLA across the world and even allow it to intervene by blocking freedom of navigation or by restricting certain land routes, whenever a country is in disagreement with Chinese views.

In the long term, the cooperation patterns promoted within the BRI enhance Chinese access to resources, its control over transportation corridors and key locations along networks of capital and infrastructure, foster asymmetric partnerships, and maximize Chinese influence by strengthening its strategic autonomy.

Nevertheless, by linking different frameworks that China has created in the last two decades or in which China has played a significant role, the BRI is rather reminiscent of a Sino-centric dominated world order because it creates a huge global network that has China as a center. As a result, in the long term, states along the BRI not only will tend to increase their cooperation with China rather than with other major countries, but also they might favor shifting their security cooperation from the US to China. From this perspective, the BRI offers China significant opportunities to shape the geo-economic and security landscape replacing the US as a dominant power.

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