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China's 'Belt and Road' Strategy in Eurasia and Euro-Atlanticism

SERAFETTIN YILMAZ & LIU CHANGMING

Abstract

The focus of this article is two-pronged. First, it highlights China's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative as a Eurasia-centred project that, distinct from the twentieth-century Eurasianism, aims to introduce a new comprehensive integrationist agenda to the Eurasian strategic landscape. Second, it compares the US-led Euro-Atlanticism and the emerging Eurasianism, holding that while the former has historically stressed security over development (development is seen as contingent on the establishment of a hard security regime), the latter prioritises development over security (security is viewed as contingent on the establishment of an inclusive economic regime). Thus, this research argues that, if implemented successfully, OBOR could challenge Euro-Atlanticism as the long-held normative paradigm of interstate relations by offering a systemic alternative.

EURASIANISM IS A CENTURY-OLD IDEA. EMERGING IN THE early 1920s and largely nurtured by the Russian immigrants settled in Europe, the concept, despite its various interpretations along different political and ideological lines, laid claim 'to represent some unique synthesis of European and Asian principles' (Bassin 2008, p. 281), defining Russia 'not as a European and not as an Asian country; ... as a third, special continent of Slav–Turkic cohabitation that bears the imprint of the great empires that have ruled over its expanses—from the Mongolian to the Russian' (Laruelle 2009, p. 94).¹ Although the Eurasian doctrine did not assume itself as a unified ideology but rather evolved into a multitude of different forms (Laruelle 2015), early Eurasianism in general argued a particular geographic, linguistic, ethno-cultural, and philosophical identity for Russia distinct from both Europe and Asia (Shlapentokh 1997, pp. 130–31; Senderov 2009, p. 25; Mileski 2015, pp. 177–79). However, despite the fact that early Eurasianist thought envisioned a unique political and philosophical space for Russia, it also 'developed a positive but general discourse about the Orient', holding that 'Russia should be closer to Asia than to Europe' (Laruelle 2004, p. 116). During the Cold War, under the weight of deep ideological confrontation with the West, the Eurasianist thought took a further Orientalist inclination, emphasising cultural and ideological differences from Europe (Von Hagen 2004, p. 450). Especially with the emergence of NATO and the expansion of US- and Soviet-led camps 'beyond the original arenas of Europe and Asia', the militarised

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¹See also Kerr (1995, pp. 978–79).

characteristics of the Cold War rivalry became obvious (Von Hagen 2004, p. 452).² Thus, the two distinct blocs created their own spheres of political and economic influence that rested heavily on military. However, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the late twentieth century, Eurasianism was no longer strategically relevant and lost its ideological vigour and relevance (Smith 1999), becoming nothing more than a historico-romantic ideal. Ever since, Russia has largely been unable to revive the idea so that it would be attractive to the post-Soviet periphery even though there have been efforts to construct a new Eurasian ideology for Russia (O'Loughlin *et al.* 2005, p. 332).³ Euro-Atlanticism, on the other hand, has maintained political relevance albeit suffering a number of setbacks as its proponents in the United States and Europe sought a new rationale for the NATO in the early post-Cold War era.

In recent years, a new Eurasia-centred economic and political paradigm has emerged on the global stage. Promoted by China under the framework of One Belt, One Road (OBOR), this development-oriented global governance model highlights diplomatic omnidirectionality in place of an over-emphasis on military means in interstate relations.⁴ First unveiled during Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visits in Central Asia and Southeast Asia in September and October 2013 as an inclusive platform for multilateral interaction, the OBOR envisions an ecosystem of cooperation and collaboration, involving infrastructure, integrated multimodal transportation and communication, energy, finance, and education. The exclusive focus on connectivity and integration across Eurasia distinguishes the OBOR from historical Eurasianism, which failed to offer an alternative to Euro-Atlanticism in large part because of its lack of inclusive economic viability and, in the absence of a strong economic basis, feasibility. Although still at its early stage, the OBOR, on the other hand, rests on sound economic foundations, well-articulated and evolving ideas, and a solid institutional framework, which together might enable a new discourse of integrationism and developmentalism in Eurasia to emerge incrementally.

The focus of this article is two-pronged. First, it highlights China's OBOR initiative as a Eurasia-centred project that, distinct from twentieth-century Eurasianism, aims to introduce a new comprehensive communication agenda to the Eurasian strategic landscape. Second, it investigates comparatively the US-led Euro-Atlanticism and the emerging Eurasianism, holding that while the former has historically stressed security over development (development is seen as contingent on the establishment of a hard security regime), the latter prioritises development over security (security is viewed as contingent on the establishment of an inclusive economic regime). Thus, this research argues that, if implemented successfully, the OBOR could challenge Euro-Atlanticism as the long-held normative paradigm of interstate relations by offering a systemic alternative. However, it also recognises that the material and ideational fundamentals of the Atlantic alliance remain strong and that a new Eurasianism led by China will likely encounter numerous internal and external challenges as the OBOR continues to expand, involving a more diverse set of actors on a wider geographic plane.

²See also Wolff (2015).

³The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) stand out as two exceptions, although they are confined to the post-Soviet geopolitical sphere. While the idea of an economic union in the post-Cold War era dates back to the early 1990s, the realisation of the EEU, after a number of earlier stages under different institutional titles, took place in 2014. The CSTO is a non-aggression treaty amongst six post-Soviet states (Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) as well as two observers (Afghanistan and Serbia).

⁴'One Belt, One Road' is also referred to in its shorter form, 'Belt and Road'. In this article both versions are used interchangeably. In the same manner, the terms 'Atlanticism' and 'Euro-Atlanticism' are used interchangeably throughout the text.

The Eurasian orientation of the Belt and Road initiative

The OBOR initiative is a connectivity and integration project, comprising a broad area of economic, political, and social interaction amongst state and non-state actors. Currently the world's most comprehensive cooperation scheme, the plan reflects, as argued by the Chinese government, the country's vision of creating a new development-oriented global discourse with the aim of ensuring common prosperity and peace through infrastructure development, trade connectivity, financial networking, and grassroots interaction (Zhang 2015). In this vein, since 2013, China has embarked on an intensive diplomacy drive, exploring potential areas of cooperation and convergence of shared interests to create an integrated economic sphere (Leung 2016). A vision and actions plan was released by the National Development and Reform Commission at the Boao Forum held in March 2015 in Macao, denoting the official launch of the initiative.⁵ While the project spans several major sub-regions (Southeast, South, and Central Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa), the political and economic focus of the OBOR is the Eurasian 'supercontinent' (Brzezinski 1997) that extends from China to Northern Europe *via* Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

A strategy consisting of five routes and six economic corridors, the OBOR envisions both land and maritime connectivity.⁶ The first leg, the Silk Road Economic Belt, is the modern version of the historical land network, stretching westward from coastal China through Russia, Central Asia, and on to Europe. The southernmost section of the OBOR extends to the South Pacific and Europe *via* the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The second leg, the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road, is an economic passageway running from the Pacific and Indian Oceans into the Arabian and Mediterranean Seas, ending up in northern Europe. Since the organic development and expansion of the two roads depend on ever-evolving economic, political, and social variables on the ground, with multiple actors involved, a final official map of the OBOR has not been made available, despite the many representations available on the internet. Nevertheless, as it has become apparent so far by the connectivity-focused expansion of the initiative through various transportation and communication networks, the strategic direction of the project is westward into the European heartland *via* numerous land and maritime routes.

⁵'Silk Road strategy attracts overseas countries', *Xinhua*, 24 January 2015, available at: http://www.china.org.cn/china/2015-01/24/content_34648046.htm, accessed 14 November 2017. According to the outline, the project stands on four major principles: openness and cooperation, harmony and inclusiveness, market operation, and mutual benefits. The five principles for cooperation were listed as 'Policy coordination, connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds'. For the full text see: 'Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-century Maritime Silk Road', National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, March 2015, available at: http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html, accessed 14 November 2017.

⁶The five routes are: (Silk Road Economic Belt) China–Central Asia–Russia–Europe; China–Central Asia–Persian Gulf–West Asia, Mediterranean Sea; China–Southeast Asia–Indian Ocean; (twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road) China's coast–South China Sea–Indian Ocean–Europe; and coastal China–South China Sea–South Pacific. The six economic corridors are: The New Eurasian Land Bridge; China–Mongolia–Russia; China–Central Asia–West Asia; China–Indochina Peninsula; China–Pakistan; and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar. See, 'The Belt and Road initiative', Hong Kong, Hong Kong Trade Development Council, 13 September 2017, available at: <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A36B7.htm>, accessed 24 January 2018.

The integrated strategy of land and maritime connectivity represents a major shift in China's foreign diplomacy under the 'New Normal' doctrine.⁷ This doctrine is best exemplified by Beijing's rejection of a G2 proposal to co-lead global affairs with the United States. It has been argued that the reluctance towards the idea rested on the understanding that being a G2 member as part of the US-led world system would both bear—mostly military—responsibilities for China, and also be viewed by the international community as hegemonic (Zeng & Breslin 2016, pp. 782–85). Thus, over the past decade, numerous high-ranking Chinese officials (as well as many in the US strategic circles) characterised the idea of a Group of 2 as impractical and unrealistic (Gang 2013; Carafano 2014). The 'New Normal', on the other hand, is promoted as a new vision of international governance based on 'multipolarization and multilateralism'.⁸ The Eurasia-focused OBOR strategy, accordingly, is viewed by Beijing as a constituent element of this doctrine since it helps streamline the material, ideational, and institutional aspects of China's global discourse-making strategy.

The Silk Road Economic Belt

The Silk Road Economic Belt aims 'to build a community of common interests, common responsibilities and a shared future, featuring political mutual trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness'.⁹ As envisioned by the Chinese government, spanning Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, the Silk Road Economic Belt 'will be promoting connectivity, building overland economic corridors and pillars of maritime cooperation' and will help 'enhance policy communication with other countries, expand the convergence of the shared interests and explore possible areas of win–win cooperation'.¹⁰ The primary objective of the initiative is to connect China with the outside world and explore cooperation opportunities. Through initiatives under the Silk Road, China seeks to open new areas for investment and cooperation in infrastructure such as railways, highways, air routes, telecommunications, oil and natural gas pipelines, and ports with the aim of facilitating interaction and trade amongst the Belt and Road countries across Eurasia. Accordingly, at the 10th Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in 2015, China's premier Li Keqiang underscored the need to reinforce interconnectivity between China and Europe through improved trade and investment in order to 'accelerate the establishment of a single Eurasian market' and 'to build an interconnected Eurasian infrastructure network'.¹¹

Amongst the routes that compose the proposed overland network, the most emphasised has been the New Eurasian Land Bridge (the Northern Eurasian Corridor). This is due to,

⁷Xi's "new normal" theory', *Xinhua*, 9 November 2014, available at: http://news.cnr.cn/special/apec/guoji/201411/t20141109_516754084.shtml, accessed 16 September 2016.

⁸Chinese premier rejects allegation of China, U.S. monopolizing world affairs in future', Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 20 May 2009, available at: <http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/gyzg/t563620.htm>, accessed 23 September 2016.

⁹China sketches out priorities of "Belt and Road" initiatives', The State Council of People's Republic of China, 2 February 2015, available at: http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html, accessed 23 January 2018.

¹⁰China's 2015 diplomacy focuses on Belt and Road', *China Daily*, 3 August 2015, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015twosession/2015-03/08/content_19750295.htm, accessed 15 October 2016.

¹¹'Premier Li's proposals at ASEM Summit', *Beijing Review*, 23 October 2014, available at: http://www.bjreview.com.cn/Cover_Stories_Series_2014/2014-10/20/content_645888.htm, accessed 15 October 2016.

first, China's greater focus on integration with European markets; second, the favourable geopolitical conditions along the corridor (Russia and Central Asia) thanks, in large part, to deepening China–Russia strategic cooperation and collaboration; third, the 'positive attitude' towards the OBOR amongst Central Asian states (Zhao 2016); and, fourth, the existence of several regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the 16+1 (China–Central and Eastern European Countries—CEEC) Initiative, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which together help implement institutionalised dialogue and long-term planning.¹² Thus, the Eurasian corridor stands out as an alternative *vis-à-vis* the other land routes traversing the Middle East and North Africa.

The New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor runs from China's eastern regions and passes through Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe before reaching its final destinations in Western Europe, covering a distance of over 13,000 km. A number of rail links complement the corridor such as 'an international freight rail route connecting Chongqing to Duisburg (Germany); a direct freight train running between Wuhan and Mělník and Pardubice (Czech Republic); a freight rail route from Chengdu to Łódź (Poland); and a freight rail route from Zhengzhou to Hamburg (Germany)' and from Yiwu to London.¹³ With growing trade, these rail routes are being utilised more extensively and additional routes are being added.¹⁴ By May 2017, China had launched over 20 rail links with Europe and there are currently more than 50 freight train routes operational between 27 cities in China and 28 cities in Europe.¹⁵

The China–Moscow partnership is the central axis of OBOR's Eurasian expansion. Thus, Beijing has actively sought cooperation with Russia to link it firmly to the initiative¹⁶ and alleviate the long-held concern shared by some in the Russian strategy circles that China's economic and political rise might hurt Russia's influence in Central Asia and Eastern Europe (Shlapentokh 1995; Ferdinand 2007; Gabuev 2016). As an indication of growing China–Russia engagement, at the Putin–Xi summit held in Moscow in 2015, the two countries signed a joint declaration, voicing consensus on 'coordinating development of the EEU and the Silk

¹²For example, the Joint Communiqué on the 14th Meeting of the Council of Heads of Governments of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Member States indicates that the SCO supports 'China's Silk Road Economic Belt initiative and its aims to promote gradual sustainable economic growth in the interest of keeping and supporting peace and stability in the region'. See, 'Joint Communiqué: the thirteenth meeting of the Council of Heads of Government (Prime Ministers) of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization', Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 14 December 2014, available at: <http://eng.sectsc.org/documents/>, accessed 20 January 2018.

¹³'The Belt and Road initiative', Hong Kong, Hong Kong Trade Development Council, 13 September 2017, available at: <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A36B7.htm>, accessed 24 January 2018.

¹⁴'China–Europe fast rail brings mutual benefit', *Xinhua*, 2 January 2016, available at: http://china.org.cn/business/2016-01/02/content_37443571.htm, accessed 19 October 2016.

¹⁵'The trains and sea ports of One Belt, One Road, China's new Silk Road', *The Straits Times*, 14 May 2017, available at: <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/the-trains-and-sea-ports-of-one-belt-one-road-chinas-new-silk-road>, accessed 20 January 2018.

¹⁶Steps taken so far include agreement on the coordinated development of Russia's Far East region; the integration of Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway with China's rail network; the construction of new routes for faster movement of passengers and goods; the institutional alignment of Russia's traditional sphere of influence in Central Asia and Eastern Europe with China's new Eurasian strategy; and, finally, broader cooperation on energy. See, for example, Zhang and Belgibayev (2014), Li and Wang (2015), and 'Beijing, Moscow agree to integrate China's Belt initiative with Russia's Eurasian vision', *Xinhua*, 8 May 2015, available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/08/c_134222767.htm, accessed 3 October 2016.

Road Economic Belt' to establish a 'common economic space' across the entire Eurasian continent (Gabuev 2015). This alignment between Beijing and Moscow has cleared a potential obstacle in the way of OBOR's Eurasian expansion (Chufrin 2015, p. 5).

The twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road

The second leg of the Belt and Road Project, the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road, aims to utilise China's coastal ports to link the country with Europe through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, and with the South Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea. One of the primary objectives of the route is the promotion of cooperation between regions and cities not only across economic lines, but also social and non-traditional security lines (van der Putten & Meijnders 2015, p. 33). Under the project, new ports and shipping lanes will be established to facilitate the flow of goods, technologies, and people, creating development opportunities along these routes (De Giuli 2014). As a multifaceted plan, the project envisions a step-by-step progress, seeking consensus and active participation by the interested parties (Liu 2014).

An integral part of the Maritime Silk Road Plan is the construction of the Asia–Europe maritime route. Comprising the European end of the Maritime Silk Road network, work on the development of the port of Piraeus in Greece as a major trade hub is an important step in this regard (Eurostat 2015).¹⁷ Other than Piraeus, a number of maritime connectivity projects are underway in Belgium, Netherlands, Malta, and Poland as well as in countries situated along the Asia–Europe maritime corridor such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Egypt (van der Putten & Meijnders 2015, pp. 15–6). It should be noted that the port projects provide further impetus to land connectivity since maritime development facilitates construction of new rail and road links from the ports to inland areas (van der Putten & Meijnders 2015, p. 28). Hence, the land and maritime branches of the Belt and Road initiative are mutually complementary.

The AIIB/SRF and the EBRD

OBOR's focus on institutionalisation reflects Beijing's strategy of creating a marketplace of global institutions around the following core principles: consultation, consensus-based decision-making, and effective dispute resolution (Kong 2015; Callahan 2016, p. 22). Accordingly, in addition to the existing cooperation mechanisms, new institutions are being established as the OBOR programme evolves. Recently, China has launched two significant mechanisms in 2014 under the titles of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB),¹⁸ and the Silk Road Fund (SRF).¹⁹ These institutions are linked to the Belt and Road initiative and accompanied by a number of platforms initiated by Beijing such as the Energy Development

¹⁷Also see, 'Piraeus becomes China's gateway to Europe', *Railway Pro*, 22 February 2016, available at: <http://www.railwaypro.com/wp/piraeus-becomes-chinas-gateway-to-europe/>, accessed 28 October 2016.

¹⁸Launched in October 2014, the AIIB is a multinational organisation designed to provide funds for the infrastructure needs of the member states. The philosophy at the core of the AIIB is the basic rule of international political economy—that intra-regional trade and investment flows and designation of formal institutions foster cooperation and help settle disputes.

¹⁹The \$40 billion Silk Road Fund aims to provide investment and financing support for the projects in countries along the OBOR routes.

Fund,²⁰ the China–ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund,²¹ and the China–Central and Eastern Europe Investment Cooperation Fund.²²

Extensive analysis of the AIIB highlighted the institution from various positive and negative perspectives (Arduino 2016; Ferdinand 2016; Lin *et al.* 2016; Sarmiza 2017). In spite of China's assurances²³ that the bank is not a competitor but a complement to established global financial institutions (World Bank, the IMF), there have been lingering suspicions (Bremmer 2015; Chin 2016); some analysts argued that the early negative reaction by Washington to the AIIB, including its vocal opposition to the participation of its European partners, reflects a deep concern towards China's emergence as an institutionalised normative power (Roach *et al.* 2015). Nonetheless, the AIIB has continued to expand, with its potential membership reaching 90 states, and has begun to provide funding to a number of infrastructure projects.²⁴

Europe is the largest participant region in the AIIB. There is no doubt that European participation has helped elevate the bank into a global institution. Of the 57 founding members of the AIIB, 14 are EU states, along with Norway, Switzerland, and Iceland (ECFR 2016). European interest in the Bank can be viewed as an indication of a desire for a more comprehensive multilateralisation which is structurally different from the US security multilateralism in Europe or security bilateralism in the Asia-Pacific. The AIIB represents an attempt by China to multilateralise Asia's political economy by emphasising developmentalism over securitisation and to expand this multilateral model through a framework that 'treats Asia and Europe as a single space'.²⁵ The dialogue that is being established between the AIIB and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) is an important sign of the growing developmentalist synergy between China and Europe (EBRD 2015; Pyrkalo 2016a).

The OBOR project envisions cross-continental connectivity and integration between China and Europe. Thus, since the announcement of the land and maritime legs of the plan in 2013, China's investment has been increasingly channelled to the Belt and Road countries.²⁶ As of June 2015, 'the majority of 67 overseas loan commitments made by Beijing's largest policy lenders, the China Development Bank and the China Ex-Im Bank, have been in areas

²⁰Launched in 2015 in Beijing, the initiative is led by the Hong Kong based China Energy Fund Committee (CEFC). The priority of the \$20 billion fund is to support energy infrastructure construction in Belt and Road countries.

²¹The China–ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund was set up by the Chinese government in 2010 with the targeted fundraising size of \$10 billion.

²²Announced in 2014, the \$3 billion China–CEE investment fund aims to provide financial support in CEE countries and promote further cooperation.

²³See, policy statement by the Chinese Finance Minister: 'AIIB to complement existing institutions: China', *Bangkok Post*, 22 March 2015, available at: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/archive/aiib-to-complement-existing-institutions-china/504153>, accessed 22 January 2018.

²⁴'AIIB to increase to 90 member states', *People's Daily Online*, 27 August 2016, available at: http://www.china.org.cn/business/2016-08/27/content_39176921.htm, accessed 1 October 2016.

²⁵'Our bulldozers, our rules', *The Economist*, 2 July 2016.

²⁶In the first half of 2016, Chinese enterprises signed 3,080 contracting projects with 61 countries along the Belt and Road, with a newly contractual value of \$51.5 billion, up 37% year on year, which accounted for 51.6% of the newly signed contractual value of China's foreign projects in the same period.' See, 'Key connectivity improvements along the Belt and Road in telecommunications & aviation sectors', *Ernst & Young, China Go Abroad*, 4 September 2016, p. 10.

defined by the One Belt, One Road strategy'.²⁷ Between 2004 and 2014, direct investment by China in Belt and Road countries rose from nearly \$400 million to over \$13 billion.²⁸ In 2017, cumulative investment in Belt and Road countries reached \$30 billion.²⁹ A significant proportion of the investment went to countries in Eurasia (Hutson 2017).³⁰

The transportation and communication network launched between China and Europe *via* Russia and Central Asia has begun to transform the geo-economic conditions in the region as trade and other forms of cooperation and interaction grow. Along with the increase in economic activity in Belt and Road countries, viable financial and industrial links (such as the AIIB and EBRD investment cooperation and joint projects in third countries) have been established between China and Europe.³¹ In 2015, the two sides agreed to incorporate the EU's Investment Plan for Europe and OBOR as part of the EU–China strategic agenda. It has even been argued that, in the long run, OBOR would have a greater impact on the European economic and political landscape than the Marshall Plan (Curran 2016).

By taking part in the Belt and Road scheme, European states anticipate positive economic and political outcomes, such as having greater access to one of the world's most dynamic economies and creating new investment opportunities, in particular, in energy, trade, and infrastructure (Arduino 2016, p. 14; Cui 2016). The OBOR framework could potentially enable Europe to work with China in a more structured fashion, especially considering that Central Asia, which has become a frontier of the European Union (EU) after its three phases of expansion in 2004, 2007 and 2013, is the natural geographic conduit between the two ends of the Belt and Road initiative.³² Central Asian security and stability is now of greater importance for Europe. Thus, OBOR can provide the required cooperative platform to ensure development in the region, thereby contributing to the overall security of Europe (van der Putten *et al.* 2016; Suetyi 2017).

The new Eurasianism and Atlanticism

Through OBOR, China aims to introduce a discourse that differs from that promoted by historical Atlanticism. The Atlanticist model represents the post-war security regime Washington established in Europe as the foundation of its strategy in Eurasia. The centrality of NATO to US–European relations in the post-Cold War period suggests that it is very difficult for European countries to think of 'a Europe without an American military presence'

²⁷'China's overseas lending dominated by its One Belt, One Road initiative', *Today Online*, 22 June 2015, available at: <http://www.todayonline.com/world/chinas-overseas-lending-dominated-its-one-belt-one-road-initiative>, accessed 1 November 2016.

²⁸'China's "going out" initiative: service demand of western China to tap Belt and Road opportunities', Hong Kong, Hong Kong Trade Development Council, 29 July 2016, available at: <http://hkmb.hktdc.com/sc/node/30166337>, accessed 24 January 2018.

²⁹'China's investments in countries along its "Belt and Road" project are soaring', *Fortune*, 16 August 2017, available at: <http://fortune.com/2017/08/15/china-one-belt-one-road-obor-investments/>, accessed 22 January 2018.

³⁰'China–Europe railway line offers more than economic benefits', *China Daily*, 27 June 2016, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-06/27/content_25862628.htm, accessed 2 November 2016.

³¹It must be noted here that several OBOR-related cooperation initiatives have been launched with other regional bodies such as the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and the Forum on China–African Cooperation (FOCAC).

³²'China's Belt–Road initiative to establish Asia–Europe economic zone, strengthen integration: expert', *China Daily*, 21 March 2016, available at: http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-03/21/content_23992549.htm, accessed 22 January 2018.

(Art 1996, p. 6). Militarised interaction is the central characteristic of the Atlantic alliance, although the scale of socioeconomic interconnection between the two sides is also considerable. However, in the final analysis, those socioeconomic connections remain secondary, often serving as supplements and reinforcements to the military aspect of the alliance. Thus, the Atlantic system is essentially a security-driven regime and the economic arrangements may be seen as mere extensions of the broader security framework (Heisbourg 1992, p. 669).

The disintegration of the Soviet bloc in 1989 led to the emergence of a new form of Atlanticism. Whereas the end of the Cold War did not alter the historically securitised essence of the Atlantic alliance, certain adjustments were made to find a new *raison d'être* for NATO under changed geo-strategic and geopolitical conditions (Sjursen 2004, p. 691). Governments on both sides of the Atlantic faced the momentous task of redefining the alliance, both politically and militarily (Heisbourg 1992, p. 665). Politically, greater emphasis was put on reaching out to the former Warsaw Pact countries. Militarily, NATO underwent a major overhaul in its structure and strategy. Intensive transatlantic debate highlighted new areas of cooperation, redefining certain terminologies and replacing defunct concepts with their more representative counterparts; for example, the notion of 'threat' was replaced with 'risk' and 'instability'. The new NATO was now charged with tackling broadly defined traditional and non-traditional security challenges, a development that resulted in Europe being drawn more firmly into the transatlantic fold (Cornish 1996, p. 768).

In contrast to the Atlantic experience, during the Cold War years, Eurasianist ideas in Russia contracted further and greater faith was placed upon the 'superiority of the communist ideology' (Mileski 2015, p. 180); thus, 'the idea of Eurasia then slowly faded, corresponding, historically, to the birth of the bipolar world of the post-1945' (Laruelle n.d.). For the most part, it drew on nationalism and failed to offer a more inclusive agenda of economic and political integration (Trenin 2002, pp. 283–87). At the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Eurasianist thought had lost its ideational and material relevancy and was incapable of offering an alternative to a remodelled Atlanticism—only to be reviewed in the 2000s under the Putin leadership in the form of a realist-oriented Eurasianism (as well as several other interpretations of new Eurasianism)³³ even though it is now 'strip[ped] ... of its ideational "topping" and revealing the traditional geopolitical "operational core" of Eurasianism' (Morozova 2009, p. 671).³⁴ A sense of triumphalism—albeit not always positive—on the US side produced theories such as 'the end of history' (Fukuyama 1989) and 'the clash of civilisations' (Huntington 1993).

The current situation, however, contradicts this early post-Cold War triumphalist logic. The emerging Eurasian interconnectivity discourse as proposed in this study suggests that history remains fluid and that its direction is determined dialectically, first and foremost, by economic circumstances, rather than exclusively by cultural or ideological conflicts (Hutson 2017; Rolland 2017). Thus, the OBOR framework is distinct from classical Eurasianism and Atlanticism in that, drawing on China's traditional practice of omnidirectional diplomacy, extensive economic capacity, and infrastructure capability, it promotes connectivity, integration, and common development while downplaying security arrangements

³³Smith (1999, p. 483) distinguishes three forms of new Eurasian discourse in post-Soviet Russia promoted by three political forces, namely, 'New Right, Eurasian Communists and Democratic Statists'. For interpretations on post-Soviet era Eurasianism in Russia, see also, Laruelle (2004, 2009), Morozova (2009), Senderov (2009), Papava (2013).

³⁴See also Shlapentokh (1997, p. 148), Gleason (2010, p. 29), Mileski (2015, pp. 180–83).

(Hsiung 1995; Kojima 2010). In its new sense, the idea of Eurasianism denotes an inclination towards a Eurasia-centred global order that involves intensive territorial and maritime connectivity and communication.

Economic development is the particular realm in which the new Eurasian politics presents itself as a meaningful alternative to the heavily securitised and ideologically rigid Atlanticism (Kerr 1995, p. 980). Eurasian developmentalism is both a natural extension of China's economic progress over the past several decades and a response to numerous geopolitical and geo-economic developments. In a sense, it is viewed by China as a necessity and opportunity at once (Gleason 2010, p. 32). It is a necessity because international conditions appear to be ready for the emergence of a new discourse of political economy. It is an opportunity because expansion across Eurasia offers China the much needed economic and political space to formulate and mobilise new strategies congruent with its emerging power status. A holistic maritime and land strategy centred on Eurasia allows China to consolidate its international position as an indispensable country in global affairs.

China's growing economic and political clout enables it to take tangible steps to bring about a Eurasia-wide multilevel integration. Politically, China is working to construct deep bilateral and multilateral relations with countries along the Belt and Road (Karrar 2010; Zhang 2016b). Extensive economic and political outreach equip Beijing with the required leverage to launch institutions such as the AIIB, the SRF, and the New Development Bank (NDB). Economically, over the past decades, China has acquired not only significant technical and logistical capabilities to undertake major infrastructure projects, but also the financial strength and flexibility to fund those long-term initiatives. In short, China is pursuing a comprehensive Eurasian integration strategy because it is now materially and ideationally able to do that. The relative capability can be contrasted with the apparently diminishing capability of the United States to generate new ideas around new institutions as exemplified by the demise of the New Silk Road Initiative proposed by the former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (Shepard 2016). Unveiled in 2011, the strategy envisioned connecting Central and South Asia through highways by 'linking India and Pakistan *via* Afghanistan to the formerly Soviet republics of Central Asia' and creating a free trade zone (Kima & Indeob 2013, p. 278). However, aside from the unrealistic geopolitical presumptions inherent in the plan that envisioned to 'link the infrastructure—roads, railways, power lines—of the 'Stans of post-Soviet Central Asia southward through Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India' (Kucera 2014b) and lack of inclusiveness (Gao & Li 2014, p. 149), the inability of the actors involved, including the United States, to construct, support, and sustain such a multi-nation project meant that it was bound to fail (Zhang & Belgibayev 2014).³⁵ Thus, the failure of the United States to create a mid-size regional institution lends comparative evidence on the relative rise in China's aggregate national power which enables the country to launch institutions with regional and global appeal and functionality (Solana 2015).

The Eurasia-centred OBOR strategy offers China a number of potential advantages. First and foremost, it may allow China to further defuse the renewed military pressure the United States has put on the Asia-Pacific region through 'the Pivot' or 'Rebalance towards Asia'

³⁵See also, 'Real New Silk Road to turn Afghanistan into major regional transit hub', *Khaama Press*, 10 September 2016, available at: <https://www.khaama.com/real-new-silk-road-to-turn-afghanistan-into-major-regional-transit-hub-01865>, accessed 23 January 2018.

policy.³⁶ Although the Trump administration signalled to carry out an overhaul of the US alliance system in the Asia-Pacific (as well as in Europe) to ensure more market access to US corporations in return for provision of security by the US military, the fundamentals of the Pivot still remain in the form of a greater concentration and increased activity of the US Navy and Air Force around China's strategic periphery in the East and South China Seas (Tomlinson 2018). This is of critical significance given that Washington's full-spectrum dominance strategy³⁷ in the Asia-Pacific is, as widely accepted, designed to prevent China from enlarging its sphere of influence *via* secure access to high seas (Trenin 2015, p. 7).³⁸ Obviously, just as the Asia-Pacific, Europe is also firmly consolidated under the post-war US-led security framework. Therefore, the established security arrangements between the United States and Europe render difficult China's economic and political outreach and expansion into the region. In fact, Europe might prove to be strategically less accessible for China than the Asia-Pacific due to the strong US presence in the region as well as the existence of a certain level of resistance and distrust towards China-led initiatives by several regional countries that are wary of becoming a ground for great power competition between China and the United States (Shi & Trigas 2013).

Nevertheless, Central Asia, which functions as a land corridor to Europe, and, therefore, is considered the 'starting point of the Eurasian pivot' (Zhang & Belgibayev 2014), appears to be less vulnerable to US military influence because of, amongst other factors, Russia's historical presence in the region and comprehensive energy ties with China. Beijing may be able to push westwards relatively easily, responding to what it perceives as the US incursion on its eastern maritime fronts in the East and South China Seas, and force Washington to dedicate more resources to maintain its strategic hold over Europe (Zhang & Belgibayev 2014). Thus, aside from directly engaging the United States in the Asia-Pacific, the Eurasian strategy may enable China to expand and multiply the economic and political fronts of strategic engagement with the United States. Consequently, westward expansion through investment and trade linkages with Europe may provide China with greater room for manoeuvre in East Asia as the westward move puts pressure on the United States, potentially forcing it to dedicate more military and economic resources in Europe (Grossman 2017).

Second, its Eurasian strategy within the OBOR framework provides China with a platform to demonstrate in practice the characteristics of its foreign policy, such as Beijing's approach to development finance, infrastructure connectivity, and institutional collaboration. Over the course of four decades, China's foreign policy conceptualisation has shifted radically from ideological rigidity to a pragmatic and inclusive developmentalism (Cheng & Zhang 2002; Hao

³⁶The US 'rebalance' strategy was debated in detail in 'The US "Pivot" to Asia: is it just about containing China?', *Global Asia*, 7, 4, Winter 2012, available at: https://globalasia.org/issue.php?bo_table=issues&wr_id=287, accessed 24 January 2018.

³⁷For the US full-spectrum dominance strategy, see 'Joint vision 2020 emphasizes full-spectrum dominance', US Department of Defence, 2 June 2000, available at: <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=45289>, accessed 23 January 2018.

³⁸The expansion of China's power in the East, towards the Pacific, is hampered by the US-led system of alliances. The road to the West, however, is free of US interference and promises to enhance Beijing's access to resources and markets and also to boost its influence in continental Asia' (Trenin 2015, p. 7).

& Hou 2009, p. 141; Nathan & Scobell 2012).³⁹ Like any other state, in its diplomacy China thinks pragmatically and seeks to maximise its interests. However, what Beijing promotes is a new form of diplomatic mercantilism in the sense that it is ‘much more constrained, thanks to national and international legal frameworks, reluctance to engage in armed conflicts, as well as a greater widespread appreciation of human rights’ (Zhang 2016a). With the ongoing shift in China’s conceptualisation of foreign diplomacy from being ideology-based to one that stresses pragmatic collaboration, punitive instruments of foreign diplomacy are sidelined and a greater emphasis is placed on non-interventionism and non-militarism in interstate relations. Thus, although China remains a militarily advanced country with the world’s second largest defence budget, it has so far adopted a distinct foreign policy formulation with a particular focus on consensus-making and collaboration. The Eurasian outlook advanced by China exemplifies in the most practical way the country’s vision of regional and global governance.

China’s economic size and capacity support the notion of collaborative developmentalism. To give an example, the country’s relevance and weight in international trade and investment has grown considerably over the past decade. In 2013, China surpassed the United States for the first time as the world’s largest trading nation. In 2014, it was the biggest trading partner in the world, ‘with 124 countries considering China their largest trading partner and only 76 having that relationship with the US’, which ‘was a major shift since 2006, when the US was the larger trading partner for 127 countries, while China dominated among 70’.⁴⁰ Other than China’s ever-growing relevance as a major trading nation, the quality and sustainability of its infrastructure projects have reinforced its image, serving as a testament to the country’s capabilities in sustainable infrastructure and advanced logistics. The high-speed railway, now the longest network in the world, for example, has become a viable diplomatic tool in promoting China’s capacity to promote inclusive developmentalism (Rogers 2016).⁴¹ Thus, material advantages have had a positive impact on the advancement of China’s Eurasia policy in terms of generating and realising ideas.

Third, greater connectivity, investment, and trade across Eurasia bolsters China’s aggregate power as a positive and normative state. As envisioned by the policymakers in Beijing, the OBOR strategy allows China to mobilise its excess production and construction capacity, boost trade by facilitating faster and cheaper transportation of goods and commodities, and deepen economic ties with the countries along the various routes (Ji 2015). Furthermore, China’s position as the largest trading partner for most of the economies in Eurasia allows it to encourage trade in *renminbi* (RMB), sign currency swap deals, and open up RMB offshore clearing centres, assisting the country’s efforts to internationalise the RMB (Zhong & Mao 2016). Overall, a further reinforced and streamlined connectivity assists China considerably

³⁹In their comprehensive analysis, Nathan and Scobell argue that realism is the best paradigm to explain China’s foreign policy behaviour and de-emphasise its norm-making capability (Nathan & Scobell 2012). In another detailed treatment of China’s foreign policy by Hao and Hou (2009), the authors argue that although China will follow other major countries in constructing its foreign policy as its national power grows, factors such as ‘its peculiar culture, historical experience, and national characteristics will make Chinese development as well as foreign policy making unique with “Chinese characteristics”’ (Hao & Hou 2009, p. 141).

⁴⁰‘China overtakes US as world’s largest trading country’, *RT News*, 11 February 2013, available at: <https://www.rt.com/business/china-us-largest-trading-country-908/>, accessed 12 October 2016.

⁴¹See also, ‘Premier road show: Li takes CEE leaders on high-speed train ride’, *China Daily*, 25 November 2015, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/201511attendsASEAN/2015-11/25/content_22517637_4.htm, accessed 30 January 2018.

as its national economy goes through a major transformation, thereby playing a primary role in the country's economic prospects for the foreseeable future.

The new Eurasian strategy, as practised in increasingly institutionalised multilateral settings, enables China to emphasise the deep structural (material and ideational) differences between Washington's securitised Atlanticism and Beijing's economised Eurasianism. The message put across is that the old paradigm, which prioritises security to ensure a certain level of economic growth, is neither inclusive nor sustainable, hence an alternative paradigm that prioritises inclusive development to ensure common security needs to be introduced. Indeed, other than the visible changes on the ground in the form of new trade routes and infrastructure, this paradigmatic contrast appears to be leading to a gradual change in perceptions in regard to the ideal mode of governance, as has been recently seen in the Philippines' radical decoupling from the US Asia-Pacific security system by withdrawing from several bilateral security arrangements with the United States and attempting to diversify its diplomatic front by engaging countries such as China and Russia.⁴² Enthusiasm for the AIIB, too, can be viewed as an indicator of the ideational shift that has been taking place across Eurasia in a wider context. Western Europe, as a major participant region in the AIIB, is an essential component of this shift.

OBOR is being set up as a non-securitised platform, resting on consensual rules and norms. The relative ease of taking part in the initiative is in part due to its de-emphasis on coercive policy instruments in favour of an exclusive focus on cooperative development. The paradigmatic differences between developmentalism and the prioritisation of security give Europe greater room for manoeuvre without facing the risk of entrapment or abandonment by its security commitments with the United States. Consequently, joining the OBOR-related frameworks entails smaller strategic cost and offers potential benefits. China, by reiterating the essential complementary nature of its initiatives with those of the existing global regimes, attempts to reinforce this perception. Therefore, even when Washington voices its concerns regarding Europe's tilt towards China-led institutionalisation, rationalising those concerns remain problematic (Argitis 2016).⁴³ This may explain why, so far, Washington's invocations have largely been ignored by its European counterparts (Nussey 2016).

China's Eurasian paradigm stands in contrast to that of the United States in many respects, therefore standing as an alternative model or a potential substitute. In the alternative model scenario, the Chinese and US frameworks coexist, since their primary focus is non-identical: the former is development-oriented while the latter is security-oriented. In the substitute model scenario, on the other hand, the US-led paradigm would eventually have to be replaced with that of China since the two cannot coexist, which suggests that a potential confrontation

⁴²In his interview to *Xinhua*, Duterte remarked that 'if we can have the things you have given to other countries by the way of assistance, we'd also like to be a part of it and to be a part of the greater plans of China about the whole of Asia, particularly Southeast Asia'. See, "'Only China can help Philippines" Duterte turns to Beijing as rift with US widens', *Russia Today*, 18 October 2016, available at: <https://www.rt.com/news/363103-duterte-china-visit-help/>, accessed 23 January 2018. See also, Lacorte (2015); 'Philippines: Rodrigo Duterte asks US "Are you with us?" on South China Sea dispute', *Asian Correspondent*, 22 June 2016, available at: <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2016/06/philippines-duterte-south-china-sea/>, accessed 23 January 2018.

⁴³See also, 'US should write laws of global economy, not China—Obama', *RTNews*, 17 April 2015, available at: <https://www.rt.com/business/250497-obama-economy-china-trade/>, accessed 14 November 2017.

would be inevitable. In any case, for either of these scenarios to materialise, aside from China's sustained and systematic push for deeper economic integration through advanced connectivity, what would also be needed is a deeper change of perceptions regarding the ideal mode of regional and global governance amongst decision-makers and the general public so that a shift from security-centred thinking to one focused on development and eventually an institutionalised 'Eurasian anti-unilateralism' would be feasible (Xiang 2001, p. 22). Hence, European participation in OBOR at both material and ideational level is crucial for the emergence of a new Eurasian paradigm. Only then would it be possible to speak with greater confidence of China-led Eurasianism as a co-existing paradigm and, by implication, an alternative.

Albeit incrementally, such paradigmatic change appears to be taking place. The reception of China-initiated projects in Central Asia and Europe indicate that developmentalist politics is gaining traction. Such positively received projects include the alignment of the OBOR with the Russia-led EEU and Kazakhstan's *Nurly Zhol* programme, the talks between China and Europe to streamline the functions of the EBRD and the AIIB/SRF, the initiation of a slew of transportation projects in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the proposed high-speed rail between China and Russia and, potentially, Central Asia and beyond, and the launch of numerous rail and maritime lines connecting China and Western Europe (Casarini 2015; Bond 2017).⁴⁴ This emerging paradigm can be liberating and empowering for Europe, not least because 'the Chinese Silk Road initiative can become a way out for the EU, which is suffering from a protracted economic slowdown, and may strengthen Eurasian continental powers both politically and economically'.⁴⁵

Challenges ahead

On this basis, a shift in the Eurasian strategic landscape would not suddenly translate into the weakening of the US presence in Europe. As the post-Cold War NATO expansion shows, the United States enjoys extensive political leverage to make sure that Europe favours a continued emphasis on securitisation. Several historical factors played a role in the persistence of the US-led security discourse in Europe. First, the dissolution of the Soviet Union has not changed in a meaningful or sustained way the prevailing contentious Cold War perceptions. After a rapprochement and thawing of the frozen relations between the United States and Russia in the immediate post-dissolution period, the geo-strategic mistrust returned to the centre of Russia–NATO interaction, which was reflected in European behaviour in general as NATO continued, and in recent years, sped up, the expansion into Russia's immediate European periphery (Lasas 2010). The persisting concerns in Europe arising from its dependence on Russian energy resources and the developments in Ukraine and Syria have reinforced the idea that European security is still precarious and needs US leadership.

China continuously stresses that it intends to keep its relationship in Europe within well-defined economic lines by positioning itself as a major trade partner while laying greater stress

⁴⁴See also, Pyrkalo (2016b); 'Kazakhstan: interfacing of the "Nurly Zhol" program and the "Silk Road Economic Belt" initiative provides supply chain along the Eurasian transport corridor', *UIC*, 20 June 2017, available at: https://uic.org/com/uic-e-news/553/article/kazakhstan-interfacing-of-the-nurly-zhol-program-and-the-silk-road-economic?page=iframe_enews, accessed 23 January 2018.

⁴⁵'Silk Road to link Asia to Europe, strengthen continental powers', *Sputnik News*, 18 May 2015, available at: <http://sputniknews.com/business/20150518/1022284412.html>, accessed 30 October 2016.

on maintaining global free trade and communication against the rising tide of protectionism (Men 2013; Duchâtel 2017). In its new Eurasian discourse, Beijing places enormous emphasis on prioritising economic diplomacy in place of a strategy that prioritises security over economic development. Therefore, in the absence of any clear sign that China is seeking an alternative security institutionalisation similar to NATO, European geo-strategy remains an exclusively US-centred domain, leaving European countries with no options to develop alternative security frameworks.

Still, China's assurances that it will not securitise its foreign diplomacy and seek domination to replace the US-led global system in Europe and elsewhere as the country's aggregate power and influence grow fail to assuage Washington.⁴⁶ The United States faces two major challenges in this regard. First, as demonstrated explicitly in former President Barack Obama's 2015 appeal regarding maintaining the capability to exclusively dictate international trade rules,⁴⁷ US decision-makers realise that an over-militarised alliance without adequate economic incentives is fragile (Koring 2015). For example, the conflicts of interest the United States periodically has with its allies with respect to the 'host-nation fee' with regard to financial support of US troops stationed both in East Asia and Europe, reveal the importance of trade and investment linkages to rationalise military commitments. Washington's dual push for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) in Europe and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) in the Asia-Pacific—although the Trump administration pulled out of the TPP and the TTIP now appears to be put on hold indefinitely⁴⁸—clearly refers to such diversification strategy. Nevertheless, even if the TTIP eventually materialised, US diplomacy is inseparably enmeshed in its military supremacy, therefore securitisation is inevitably part of its international posture. As for economic instruments related to trade and infrastructure investment and financing such as renewable energy, maritime and land transportation, and telecommunications, however, China has begun to hold the upper hand and the United States seems to be unable to compete with China or slow down its growing clout.⁴⁹ Again, the paradigmatic difference in these two foreign policy constructs manifests itself, explaining the success of the OBOR project up to its current stage in terms of global participation in its financing arm, the AIIB, the growth of trade volume along various OBOR routes (most notably with Europe), and cooperative investment deals signed between the AIIB and other

⁴⁶See, for example, the remarks by China's Foreign Ministry: 'China has no intention of leading, replacing any country: FM', *People's Daily*, 4 January 2018, available at: <http://en.people.cn/n3/2018/0104/c90000-9311553.html>, accessed 23 January 2018; 'Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets the press', *FMPRC*, 8 March 2016, available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1346238.shtml, accessed 23 January 2018.

⁴⁷'Obama warns TPP failure would let China write trade rules', *The Japan Times*, 18 April 2015, available at: https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2015/04/18/business/economy-business/obama-warns-tpp-failure-would-let-china-write-trade-rules/#.WmU_tOqgfIU, accessed 23 January 2018; 'Statement by the President on the Bipartisan Congressional Trade Priorities and Accountability Act of 2015', The White House, 16 April 2015, available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/04/16/statement-president-bipartisan-congressional-trade-priorities-and-account>, accessed 23 January 2018.

⁴⁸'The United States officially withdraws from the Trans-Pacific Partnership', *USTR*, January 2017, available at: <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2017/january/US-Withdraws-From-TPP>, accessed 23 January 2018; 'German economy minister says EU-US trade talks have failed', *AP*, 28 August 2016, available at: <https://apnews.com/611ff828b5ed44d5ad56ab46e0781e52/german-economy-minister-says-eu-us-trade-talks-have-failed>, accessed 23 January 2018.

⁴⁹'China "overtakes" US as world's largest goods trader', *BBC*, 10 January 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-25678415>, accessed 23 January 2018; Voskeritchian (2015), Slezak (2017).

development-financing institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the EBRD.⁵⁰

The second, related challenge is the character of China's foreign policy, which is conceptually different from that of the United States' former existential rival, the Soviet Union, which put strong emphasis on militarised diplomacy during the Cold War. Although the United States still enjoys the advantage of the dollar as the dominant reserve currency and greatly influences global economic and political decision-making processes thanks to its weight in major international institutions, China maintains healthier economic fundamentals, such as a stronger manufacturing basis, substantial currency reserves, growing ODI inflows and outflows,⁵¹ a positive net international investment position (NIIP),⁵² and extensive global trade penetration (Dollar 2016). Also, institutionalised frameworks such as the AIIB, NDB, and SRF help China put its own ideas of global governance such as non-interventionism, respect for sovereignty, and win-win cooperation into practice. Consequently, after four decades of rivalry with the USSR, with which it shared a common strategic logic, the United States finds in China a different kind of opponent and rival. This realisation may prompt the United States to begin to, first and foremost, seek ways (such as adopting a comprehensive containment policy under the Rebalance to Asia strategy in order to militarily pressure China on multiple theatres, including the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula) to force Beijing to devise a more contentious foreign policy. Second, the United States, especially during the Obama administration, came out with its own brand of economic incentive mechanisms under liberalised frameworks such as the TPP and the TTIP. However, it is also obvious that the renewed US commitment to a Washington-led institutionalisation on the Asian and European fronts has recently begun to evolve into a potentially more isolationist 'America First' economic policy under President Donald Trump, which creates unease in Europe.⁵³

As it moves deeper into the European landmass, China's OBOR project will face numerous difficulties. Some of these difficulties may be caused by the mere fact that OBOR involves multiple actors with economies at different stages of development, diverse political regimes and social structures, and often complex international circumstances. Thus, ever intensifying multilateralisation could make it harder for China to manage the multitude of national interests

⁵⁰See, for example, 'New China-Europe freight train route launched', *Xinhua*, 21 January 2018, available at: http://www.china.org.cn/business/2018-01/21/content_50261225.htm, accessed 22 January 2018; 'European Development Bank eager to further cooperate with AIIB', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 14 November 2017, available at: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/Economy/European-development-bank-eager-to-further-cooperate-with-AIIB>, accessed 23 January 2018.

⁵¹For a comparative analysis of China and US foreign direct investment outflows and inflows, see the World Bank data: 'Foreign direct investment, net outflows (BoP, current US\$)', *World Bank*, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BM.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?locations=CN-US>; 'Foreign direct investment, net inflows (BoP, current US\$)', *World Bank*, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.KLT.DINV.CD.WD?locations=CN-US>, accessed 23 January 2018.

⁵²For a comparative analysis of China and US Net International Investment Positions (NIIP), see, 'U.S. Net International Investment Position', *BEA*, 28 December 2017, available at: <https://www.bea.gov/newsreleases/international/intinv/intinvnewsrelease.htm>, accessed 23 January 2018; 'The time-series data of International Investment Position of China', *SAFE*, 28 December 2017, available at (downloadable Excel file): <http://www.safe.gov.cn/wps/portal/english/Data/Investment>, accessed 24 January 2018.

⁵³A report published by the Centre for European Reform reveals such discomfort, holding that 'Europe can no longer be certain that the US will protect the multilateral order, or that the Trump administration will see America's interests in Europe and Asia as similar to those of the EU and its member-states. There are shared economic and security interests in Europe and Eurasia that the parties could pursue, albeit with no guarantee of finding common approaches' (Bond 2017, p. 2). See also, Crowley (2017).

and priorities that are at odds or even in conflict with each other. In this respect, just as the bilateral relationship of China with each of these state actors and groups involved in the OBOR are important, the nature of interaction of the individual states and groups with each other is also crucial. For instance, the disagreement between Russia and the EU over the Ukrainian situation might encourage Moscow to urge the EEU member states to delay the construction of the transcontinental high-speed railway linking China and Europe proposed by China.⁵⁴ Domestically, certain public management issues (such as corruption and inefficiency) might get in the way of the successful execution of development programmes initiated under various Belt and Road platforms (Ji 2015, pp. 506–11).⁵⁵

Other than the challenges related to the nature of the OBOR, a number of risks pertaining to the greater geopolitical context are also likely to emerge (Ji 2015). Essentially, it would not be farfetched to anticipate a US-led containment strategy in Eurasia similar to the ‘Pivot to Asia’ the United States put in place to block China in the Asia-Pacific. To this end, the United States might seek to establish a hard security alliance regime along the OBOR routes that extend into Europe. In this regard, the integrated missile defence system that the United States is installing in various Eastern European countries (Nelson 2016) can be seen not only as a means to confront Russia across its western borders, but also a means to slow down and, when necessary, undermine China’s Belt and Road programme, especially given that Eastern Europe is a critical link between China and Western Europe. The United States may also attempt to increase its military footprint in Central Asia and Eastern Europe through bilateral security agreements. If the geopolitical conditions deteriorate in these regions due to actual or perceived threats, individual states may be more willing to engage in broad security commitments with the United States.

Executing such heavily militarised policy in Central Asia or Eastern Europe might prove to be harder than pursuing maritime-based containment of China in East Asia. First, the ‘Pivot’ policy in the Asia-Pacific relies in large part on the security arrangements Washington has with key capitals in Northeast and Southeast Asia, including Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Vietnam. To implement a similar strategy in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, the United States would face numerous difficulties in finding eager allies to accommodate a heavier US military presence explicitly designed as a barrier to China’s economic and political expansion. States in both Central Asia and Eastern Europe would be less eager to tolerate an aggressive policy along the lines of the US’s ‘rebalance towards Asia’, given the historical presence of Russia, an influential actor and a strategic partner of China, as well as China’s growing energy and investment-related presence. Second, a plan to militarily block China’s strategic expansion along OBOR’s Eurasian corridor would require the deployment of land forces. The latter constitutes a harder task: while the United States is able to mobilise naval assets under the rule of *res communis* through international waters and air zones without having to negotiate with a sovereign, in the Eurasian land territory, it would have to negotiate with each state individually over force deployment and movement (Kucera 2014a). Third, it needs to be

⁵⁴‘The New Railway Silk Road, a vision for China–Europe intercontinental high-speed rail’, *Think Railways*, 3 January 2016, available at: <http://www.think-railways.com/new-railway-silk-road-vision-china-europe-intercontinental-high-speed-rail/>, accessed 24 January 2018.

⁵⁵‘The challenges facing China’s Belt and Road initiative’, Danish Institute for International Studies, February 2016, available at: http://pure.diiis.dk/ws/files/409521/PB_Belt_and_Road_WEB.pdf, accessed 23 January 2018.

remembered that, the ‘Pivot’ strategy is defined as a ‘rebalance’, meaning that it designates a realignment of the US global military force distribution from the Middle East and Europe to the Asia-Pacific but not an overall increase in military spending. However, a similar containment strategy against China in Europe would require additional military spending, which does not seem feasible given current US economic/financial conditions (BEA 2016). Hence a rebalance towards Eurasia would likely be different from the one in the Asia-Pacific, in terms of military intensity and force projection.

If direct military containment beyond the existing NATO framework could not be utilised to effectively derail or stop China’s Eurasian drive, what other strategies could potentially be adopted by the US? Logically, Washington would try to challenge Beijing economically as trade and financial tools appear to be where the relative strength of Beijing’s foreign diplomacy lies. Other than advising against the participation of its European partners to China-led economic institutions, the United States may continue to seek to further reinforce its economic and trade position in Europe, taking advantage of sustained Western suspicion towards ideas and institutions generated by China. This indeed would be a major challenge for Beijing if a perception that China is seeking an unequal centre–periphery relationship with Europe rather than a relationship of equals becomes widespread amongst European capitals (Grieger 2016, p. 11). Certainly, economic ties between the United States and Europe are quite strong, with annual trade in goods amounting to \$700 billion. Beyond trade, the level of financial integration and investment between the two sides is also comprehensive.⁵⁶ If the now-stalled TTIP negotiations were eventually successful, the transatlantic economic relationship would further be strengthened even though, as noted above, the TTIP’s prospects are rather unclear at this time when the Trump administration has apparently been reconsidering trade deals with the traditional US partners (Europe and Japan) as well as rivals, including China (Schwartz 2016; Marks & von der Burchard 2016).

Aside from US misgivings, it is also not clear that Europe is entirely convinced by China’s argument for a Eurasia-wide economic cooperation and integration. As mentioned previously, the fact that the European response to OBOR has been viewed as largely incohesive and lacking ‘a collective approach’ raises concerns regarding a potential fragmenting effect of the initiative on the European integration process (ECFR 2016). European leaders are also wary of seeing their countries being reduced to an economic and political chessboard in the great power game between China and the United States (Montesano & Okano-Heijmans 2016, p. 4). Furthermore, even though Europe has so far approached the OBOR initiative positively to the degree of defying US appeals to not join the AIIB, there appears to be a certain level of suspicion and sustained concerns regarding the long-term immutability of China’s foreign policy principles of non-interventionism and non-militarism. The question is whether a powerful China would still be able to maintain the orthodox pacifist approach to foreign policy when its global interests have become more layered, comprehensive, and complex. What if a civil war erupted in an OBOR country that has received significant Chinese investment and hosts a significant Chinese work force? A greater military capability allows China to mobilise in remote theatres, ranging from operations to ensure sea-lane security in the Pacific and Indian Oceans to military cooperation agreements (such as the one with

⁵⁶For a wealth of data on the EU–US trade, see, ‘Countries and region: United States’, European Commission, 6 November 2017, available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/united-states/>, accessed 24 January 2018.

Djibouti to build China's first overseas naval base) and rescue missions of Chinese nationals in distressed regions.⁵⁷ However, it is not clear whether these capability-related developments and sudden changes in the global environment would translate into a profound recalibration of China's core foreign-policy formulations. At least so far, there has been no sign of deviation from the long-held foreign policy principles such as non-interventionism and non-militarism. China has, in fact, reinforced its institutional participation in various global economic and political regimes such as climate change and peacekeeping, increasing, for example, financial contribution to international peacekeeping efforts and assuming greater responsibility in global effort to tackle the challenges posed by climate change.⁵⁸ Beijing now appears more willing to contribute to global governance efforts and to seek peaceful solutions to the existing maritime territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas despite strategic pressure from the United States, which has grown considerably over the past few years.⁵⁹

Conclusion

This study defines the OBOR as essentially a Eurasian project and identifies Europe as its key component, standing at the westernmost end of the trade and communication linkages that China aims to establish under the overarching OBOR framework. Geo-economically, first, this framework ensures greater policy coordination, bringing together a number of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms that were established between China and Europe prior to the Belt and Road initiative.⁶⁰ Second, it encourages expansive facilities connectivity, involving all forms of transportation, energy, and communication. Third, drawing on the favourable political and physical environment in Europe, the Belt and Road framework facilitates trade, helping the two sides to reach the goal of \$1 trillion bilateral trade volume by 2020 (van der Putten *et al.* 2016, p. 8).⁶¹ Fourth, the OBOR promotes financial integration, which includes institutional cooperation to fund infrastructure projects, and currency swap and settlement agreements.⁶² Finally, the Belt and Road scheme encourages people-to-people socio-cultural

⁵⁷'China sends troops to open first overseas military base in Djibouti', *CBS News*, 12 July 2017, available at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/china-deploys-forces-in-djibouti-africa-opens-first-military-base-abroad/>, accessed 24 January 2018.

⁵⁸'China to become 2nd largest contributor to UN peacekeeping budget', *China Daily*, 30 May 2016, available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016-05/30/content_25536207.htm, accessed 24 January 2018; Nunez (2017).

⁵⁹For example, on 7 August 2017, China and the ASEAN signed a framework for a formalised process for dispute settlement in the South China Sea, which is expected to lead to an eventual agreement on a South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC) (Yan 2017).

⁶⁰Amongst those are China–UK Annual Prime Ministers' Meeting, China–Germany Inter-Government Consultations, China–France High Level Economic and Financial Dialogue, and the China–Central and Eastern Europe Summit (16+1).

⁶¹The goal was set at the 16th China–EU Summit in 2013.

⁶²Indeed, Europe can act as a catalyser to reinforce the OBOR both financially and in terms of institutional development. Indeed, considering the economic extent of the project, Europe's involvement is significant for the increased viability of the project. For example, the overall investment needed along the Belt and Road exceeds \$3 trillion while, as of July 2016, the value of projects China signed with OBOR counties was \$279 billion. See, Wang (2016); 'Developing infrastructure in Asia Pacific: outlook, challenges and solutions', PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2014, available at: <https://www.pwc.com.sg/en/capital-projects-infrastructure/assets/cpi-develop-infrastructure-in-ap-201405.pdf>, accessed 24 January 2018; 'Meeting Asia's infrastructure needs', Asian Development Bank, February 2017, available at: <https://www.adb.org/publications/asia-infrastructure-needs>, accessed 24 January 2018.

exchange, aiming to deepen mutual understanding and pave the way for more comprehensive cooperation (Jinchen 2016).

Clearly the focus of OBOR rests, first and foremost, on geo-economic considerations. However, in the Eurasian context, geo-economy invariably intersects with geopolitics since, in the long run, regional economic integration heralds the creation of a Eurasia-wide zone of prosperity and stability, leading to a more peaceful political existence. Such a development would negate the securitised politics of the Atlanticist model, highlighting new China-led Eurasianism as a viable alternative model. The geopolitical implications of such development would be profound. In the most important of all implications Europe, as an essential component of the emerging Eurasian paradigm, would eventually construct a more cohesive and balanced foreign policy approach, establishing new economic connectivity links across Eurasia while managing security arrangements with the United States.

In the final analysis, the OBOR is an institutionalised reflection of China's long-held diplomatic principles of non-interventionism and non-militarism, and thus represents 'a new stage in the growing salience of geopolitical considerations in Chinese foreign policy' (Ferdinand 2016, p. 956). Thus, although Eurasianism is not pursuing a contentiously anti-systemic agenda, it still represents a strategy and involves national interest calculations (Gilpin 1981, p. 42). The integration of Europe into this paradigm is significant because the established global order largely rests on the US-led Euro-Atlantic cooperation and collaboration model, even though the Belt and Road has other geographical fronts as well, such as the Asia-Pacific, Middle East, and Latin America. Any economic and political development that undermines the historically securitised Atlanticist model would by default weaken the viability of the international governance as we know it. Thus, the very nature of the Belt and Road suggests that it offers a new form of globalisation and global governance (Grieger 2016; Mackerras 2017).

It follows that the success or failure of the OBOR and the emergence of a new Eurasian paradigm rests on the interaction of countless centrifugal and centripetal factors. Fundamentally, the entire OBOR programme rests on the premise that 'development equals peace' (Verlare & van der Putten 2015, pp. 1–7). However, in order to turn this causal inference into reality, a greater number of economic and political outcomes related to connectivity and integration need to be visible on the ground. Indeed, the OBOR appears to have made significant progress so far in terms of generating interest in the newly launched institutions and, as mentioned in the preceding pages, pioneering a number of land and maritime connectivity projects that mostly end up in Europe. However, there are still numerous challenges to be addressed by Beijing such as engaging the United States in the Asia-Pacific and Europe, aligning and channelling a diverse set of national interests and conditions into a common theme of development, and establishing strong institutional linkages with a Europe that is firmly entrenched in the US-led trans-Atlantic system. Therefore, even though the Eurasian focus of the OBOR is obvious, the implications are yet to be seen at the level of ideas where a new developmentalist thinking eventually takes shape and garners widespread acceptance amongst the primary stakeholders of the OBOR (Godehardt 2016, p. 19). It follows that, only when positive ground developments generate a shared acceptance of the Belt and Road can the OBOR be considered a Eurasianist paradigm.

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