

**THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND THE COHESION OF THE
EUROPEAN UNION**

**LA INICIATIVA DE LA FRANJA Y RUTA. LA COHESIÓN DE LA UNIÓN
EUROPEA**

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Resumen: Ambos extremos geográficos de Eurasia continental (la Unión Europea y China) prolongan sus mutuas influencias, así como sobre todo el territorio existente entre ambos. Sin embargo, los resultados obtenidos aumentan las asimetrías preexistentes entre ambas partes. Así, la iniciativa europea TRACECA asume un reto considerable, pero solo trece países se han sumado al proyecto. Por su parte, el proyecto auspiciado por China, la iniciativa llamada Franja y Ruta (nueva ruta de la seda), comprende ciento treinta y un países y treinta organizaciones internacionales. China desarrolla pues una estrategia de interconectividad más amplia, tanto desde el punto de vista político como financiero, con el establecimiento del Banco Asiático de Inversión e Infraestructuras. El resultado no es solo que China esté reforzando sus lazos con aquellos países situados a lo largo de la ruta hacia la UE, sino que además está aumentando su influencia sobre la Unión Europea, especialmente sobre los Estados de la Europa central, oriental (PECOS) y del sur. La razón de esta asimetría no es solo la pujanza de China, sino también la falta de cohesión de la UE. En este artículo analizamos la BRI y sus efectos sobre la cohesión de la UE.

Palabras clave: Nueva Ruta de la Seda, Iniciativa de la Franja y Ruta, BRI, OBOR, cohesión, Unión Europea, Iniciativa 16+1, Iniciativa Sur de Europa.

Abstract: Both geographical ends of continental Eurasia, i.e. the European Union and China, are trying to spread their respective influence toward each other, as well as the rest of the Eurasian countries. However, the results differ, and therefore the asymmetries between both sides increase. Hence, the EU's TRACECA is undertaking a great task, but only thirteen countries have joined the project, whereas China's New Silk Road, officially named the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) holds one hundred and thirty one countries and thirty international organizations. China is developing a more comprehensive interconnectivity strategy, both politically, with the support of the 16+1 and the Southern Europe Initiatives, as well as financially, with the rise of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The result is that China is not only tightening its links with the countries along the routes toward the EU, but is also strengthening its influence over the European Union, especially Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) as well as Southern Europe. The reason for these asymmetries is not only China's strength, but also the lack of cohesion of the EU. In this article we analyze the relationships between BRI and the cohesion of the EU.

Keywords: New Silk Road, Belt and Road Initiative, BRI, OBOR, inner cohesion, European Union, 16+1 Initiative, Southern Europe Initiative.

Summary: 1. INTRODUCTION. 2. EU AND TRACECA V. CHINA AND BRI. 3. THE CEE 16+1 AND CHINA AND SOUTHERN EUROPE INITIATIVES. 4. JOINT ANALYSIS OF BRI, 16+1 AND



EU SOUTHERN COUNTRIES INITIATIVES. 5. THE BEIJING (MAY 2017) BELT AND ROAD FORUM. 6. THE REACTION OF THE EU. 7. CONCLUSION. 8. REFERENCE LIST.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are several innovative cooperation types between the EU and China. Among them, TRACECA and BRI are noteworthy. These projects will be explored in this article not only because the issue is highly topical, but also for their particular significance as they exemplify the cohesion developed by both parties involved and all the countries along the route.

In this article we analyze the said projects and how BRI might affect the cohesion of the EU.

2. EU AND TRACECA V. CHINA AND BRI

The EU is diversifying its transport modalities using new land corridors to help its exports to Eurasia: TRACECA¹. TRACECA is a land corridor connecting East and Central Asia with Central and Western Europe. TRACECA was created at the Conference in Brussels, in May 1993, initially involving eight non-EU member states, which lately increased. To date thirteen member states have joined TRACECA². It is financed by the European Commission.

The agenda of TRACECA is considerable:

“To present more than 70 projects were financed by the European Commission within the framework of TRACECA. The realized projects helped to attract investments to the region. According to experts’ information, the IFI’s [International Financial Institutions] investments to transport infrastructure of the TRACECA corridor have exceeded 1 billion Euros”³.

According to the above mentioned data, TRACECA is at first sight a successful project. However, such a case needs to be compared with another project, such as BRI⁴. Only by comparing both modalities of cooperation will it be possible to assess their respective achievements.

¹ MLA TRACECA, “Basic Multilateral Agreement on International Transport for Development of the Europe-the Caucasus-Asia Corridor”.

² Traceca member countries, TRACECA, available at <http://www.traceca-org.org/en/countries/> (Last visited on 26/07/2019).

Welcome to TRACECA, TRACECA, available at <http://www.traceca-org.org/en/traceca/> (Last visited on 28/02/2017).

³ History of TRACECA, How TRACECA started, TRACECA Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia, available at <http://www.traceca-org.org/en/traceca/history-of-traceca/> (Last visited on 28/02/2017).

⁴ Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路), previously named One Belt One Road (OBOR).

China is currently developing suitable strategies about the EU and is showing a key capability in our ever changing world, i.e. adaptability. This is what allows China to face new scenarios with a chance of success. Nonetheless Europe is also a key element for the development of key Chinese projects, as e.g. the BRI⁵ plan, as well as for the design of major international institutions like the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) or the construction of a multipolar world⁶. BRI is "a comprehensive domestic and foreign policy concept"⁷. As mentioned above, the agenda of TRACECA entails a considerable commitment but, compared to the one of BRI, it is dwarfed:

"Currently, 131 countries and 30 international organizations have joined the initiative, through which China has made investments of more than \$90 billion to these countries and regions"⁸.

Furthermore, regarding AIIB bank, which gives financial support to BRI, John Torpey submits that:

"[w]ith an initial capitalization at its 2014 launch of \$100 billion, about half the size of the World Bank at the time, the AIIB represents a major shift in world capital markets and is widely thought to be a substantial win for the Chinese in its global competition with the West"⁹.

According to the above mentioned statements, TRACECA and BRI are two models of cooperation completely different in size and scope. The asymmetry is evident.

⁵ 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, with State Council authorization, March 2015, First Edition 2015,

http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html

(Last visited on 10/06/2017).

⁶ Huotari, M., Otero-Iglesias, M., Seaman, J. and Ekman, A. (2015): "Mapping Europe-China Relations A Bottom-Up Approach", *Merics – Look and Feel*, A Report by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC), 5-6.

Available at https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/etnc_web_final_1-1.pdf, (Last visited on 05/03/2017).

⁷ Misiągiewicz, J. and Misiągiewicz, M. (2016): "China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative – the Perspective of the European Union", *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska* 23 (1), 33-42, 1,

Available at <https://journals.umcs.pl/k/article/download/3494/3628> (Last visited on 31/05/2017).

⁸ BRI economies contributing 13.4% of global trade volume, Belt and Road portal,

Available at https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/info/iList.jsp?tm_id=139&cat_id=10058&info_id=89501

(Last visited on 03/07/2019).

⁹ Torpey, J. (2019): "Who lost Europe to China?", *Forbes*, available at

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/johntorpey/2019/06/25/who-lost-europe-to-china/#634cc0183819> (Last visited on 28/07/2019).



In our view, TRACECA is the project of a bridge between the EU, the Caucasus and Central Asia, whereas BRI is a thorough project spreading across Eurasia, from one end to the other. In this regard, Halford Mackinder noted in 1904 that:

“trans-continental railways are now transmuting the conditions of land-power, and nowhere can they have such an effect as in the closed heartland of Euro-Asia [...]. Railways work the greater wonders in the steppe [...] the century will not be old before all Asia is covered with railways”¹⁰.

The said predictions have come to pass. Railways are one of the key elements of the new silk roads. BRI is a project entirely designed by China. The difference between the EU and China is reflected in the outcome of TRACECA and BRI, which, in turn, is expressed in the trade imbalance between the EU and China.

Tamara Chin, quoted by Ruth Alexander, states that in 1877 Germany sent the geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen to China. The purpose of his journey was to determine how much coal there was in China, and whether its transportation to Europe was feasible. His vision was that of a transcontinental railway from China to Europe. He wrote a series of articles about this idea, in which he coined the term “Die Seidenstrasse”. But his Swedish pupil Sven Hedin who really developed his idea in the 1920s, projected an air route to China as well as a motor route, and he named both of them “The Silk Road”.

Chin considers that this is a European idea. It was in the 1950s and 1960s when the Chinese found a purpose for this term; they started conversations with their neighbors. Via anti-colonialism, China started its way to become an alternative to Western powers. China considered that, in Antiquity, it held friendly relations with, e.g. Afghanistan and Somalia, which were disrupted in the XIX century by European colonialism. In the 1950s and 1960s the Chinese wanted to revive that historical friendship. This very spirit is flourishing nowadays again. The Silk Road is, according to China, a proof of its openness; and it is also the mainstay of its foreign policy¹¹.

¹⁰ Mackinder, H. (1904): “The Geographical Pivot of History”, *The Geographical Journal*, 170 (4) 2004, 298 – 321, 311, available at https://www.desmoglob.com/sites/beta.desmoglob.com/files/20131016_MackinderTheGeographicalJournal.pdf (Last visited on 31/07/2019).

Quoted by Chin, T. (2013): “The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877”, *Critical Inquiry* 40 (1) 194-219, Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/673232> <http://tamaratchin.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Chin-Critical-Inquiry.pdf> (Last visited on 31/05/2017).

¹¹ Alexander, R., Why does China want to revive the Silk Road?, *The Inquiry*, BBC World Service, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p055y581> (Last visited on 31/05/2017).

Jane Golley, quoted by Ruth Alexander, describes the New Silk Road as a "grand transnational development strategy"¹². This statement expresses the ambition of BRI, designed to be a project boosting Chinese projection worldwide.

Adrián Vidales García submits that the international community is becoming a uni-multipolar order, in which the US is not the hegemonic power any longer. Furthermore, China is becoming an order-shaper, with actions such as the New Silk Road, a key element of the XXI century¹³.

We concur with the above mentioned statement by Adrian Vidales García. However, how is China shaping geopolitics worldwide? Indeed, the effects of projects like BRI are the results of China's economic strength. However, Yan Xuetong submits that "during a period of globalization, the sphere of competition is no longer about land, resources or markets but rule-making, setting regulations, norms or customs"¹⁴.

The above mentioned opinion reflects the multiplying value of politics, expressed in the said "rule-making" factor. Moreover, according to Manuel Montobbio, China, among other rising powers, might eventually make contributions to the "acquis" of international relations¹⁵. In fact, such developments could increase the asymmetry between the EU and China.

In our opinion BRI is in fact the Chinese version of globalization. Obviously, for decades China has been taking part of globalization, but BRI marks a difference, as it is entirely tailored in China. In fact, an initiative such as BRI is based on the idea of globalization, although it does not cover the whole of the world, because America and Oceania had no direct contact with the original Silk Road. However, BRI comprises a larger territory than the original Silk Road.

Which areas does BRI cover? According to Misiągiewicz, there is no official BRI map, but what is certain is that it covers several regions in three continents: Asia, Europe and Africa¹⁶. The backbone of BRI is formed by:

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Vidales García, A. (2016): "La nueva ruta de la seda y el resurgimiento geopolítico de China", *Opinión* 2016 (78), 1,

http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2016/DIEEEO78-2016_RutaSeda_geopoliticaChina_AdrianVidales.pdf

(Last visited on 21/05/2017).

¹⁴ Quoted by D'Hooghe, I. (2010): "The Limits of China's Soft Power in Europe-Beijing's Public Diplomacy Puzzle",

Clingendael Diplomacy Papers, 25, 4,

Available

https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20100100_cdsp_paper_dhooghe_china.pdf

Last visited on 20/03/2017.

Yan Xuetong quoted by Leonard, M. (2008): *What does China Think?* PublicAffairs. New York. p. 94.

¹⁵ Montobbio, op. cit., 244.

¹⁶ Misiągiewicz, J. and Misiągiewicz, M., op. cit., 38.

"The SR outside China spans three continents, Asia, Europe and Africa. The 'Economic Belt' contains Central Asia, South-East Asia, Russia, Europe (including the Baltic Sea), the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea, and the '21st-Century Maritime Silk Road' embraces harbors along China's coasts, the South China Sea, the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean and Europe. The 'Maritime Silk Road', as



“Six international economic cooperation corridors, namely the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, link the Asian economic circle with the European one, which plays a significant role in establishing and strengthening the partnership of connectivity among various countries, and in setting up an efficient and smooth Asia-Europe market.”¹⁷

Hence, BRI will considerably enhance connectivity along a large part of Eurasia.

During the last decades, China has attached great importance to the creation of a non-adverse “neighborhood” and to the consolidation of its import-export maritime lines. Nowadays, China can be regarded as a world power¹⁸. This is one of the most relevant elements of the initiative: it should enhance globalization and go a step beyond. Chen Zhimin and Zhang Ji argue that:

“[‘one belt, one road’] this excellent interactive mechanism has already taken the first steps, and now pushes forward one step beyond towards the enhancement of the linkup and cooperation contacts between China and the EU, and initiate a new stage of the China-EU relations to have an even stronger wish for globalising strategy”¹⁹.

From the above, we can draw a preliminary conclusion: BRI is only a part of the Chinese globalising long-term strategy. Thus, BRI also comprises part of Africa and this is also the reason for the 16+1 and the South European Countries initiatives.

envisioned by China, will greatly improve connections between the western Pacific, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, between South Asia and East Africa, and between East Asia and Europe. China’s initiative for the so-called ‘21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’ is aimed at port development in South-East Asia, around the Indian Ocean and in the eastern Mediterranean region. China’s involvement in ports and other maritime infrastructure should be seen in the context of its broader infrastructure activities under the ‘One Belt, One Road’ programme. Sea lanes and railways complement each other, and jointly open up new trade links between regions.”

¹⁷ An Overview of Six Economic Corridors and Six Connectivity Networks, Belt and Road Portal, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/rdxw/88408.htm> Last visited on 28/07/2019.

¹⁸ Vidales García, A., op. cit., 5.

¹⁹ Unofficial translation.

Original text:

“这种良性的互动机制已经初步形成，并正在推动中欧进一步接近和合作关系的提升，使新阶段的~~中欧~~关系再次具有了全球性的战略意义。”

Unofficial translation of the paper: Chen, Zhimin and Zhang, Ji, (2014): “‘One belt, one road’ proposed China-EU contact: double-layered European vision”, *International Political Economy*, School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, 1,

Original title of the paper:

“一带一路倡议的中欧对接：双赢欧盟的视角”，陈，志敏&张，骥
<http://www.sirpa.fudan.edu.cn/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/g.pdf>

Apparently the above-mentioned scenario will still be the trend for the oncoming years.

According to China's government, BRI initiative focuses on "connecting the vibrant East Asia economic circle at one end and the developed European economic circle at the other end"²⁰.

The said statement leads to the ideal vision of a win-win relation, since one end of BRI is "vibrant", while the other is "developed". This idea is linked to the concept of cooperation, which leads to interconnectivity, a term already appearing in joint statements by the EU and China²¹. The main aim of BRI is to revitalize the old Eurasian "Silk Roads"²². This Chinese initiative is multimodal, fully-comprehensive and planned for long-term goals.

On the European side, there is a good example of coordination in the European think-tank "Network on China" (ETNC). This Network could be a good model for the EU as a coordinated body²³. Think-tanks from many EU member states have joined this network, and hopefully in the near future every EU member state will be represented. Only through this kind of initiatives will the EU be able to reduce the asymmetry in the EU-China relations.

China complements BRI through two different schemes: one is the CEE (Central and Eastern Europe) 16+1²⁴, and the other one is about six European Mediterranean countries²⁵.

²⁰ Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, op. cit.

²¹ EU-China Summit Joint statement Brussels, 9 April 2019, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39020/euchina-joint-statement-9april2019.pdf> (Last visited on 02/07/2019).

In fact, interconnectivity is, on the one hand, the way to globalise the world, and also the means by which China is exporting its huge industrial capacity. But on the other hand, it is also a way to exert influence. Furthermore, interconnectivity is not only the means, but also the goal itself, as by doing so, China is also exporting its railway industry. Moreover, China's far-reaching trains also polish its image of a world power.

²² Li, Y, Bolton, K. and Westphal, T. (2016) "The Effect of the New Silk Road Railways on Aggregate Trade Volumes between China and Europe", *Working Papers on East Asian Studies* 109, 1-18, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/142779/1/861804694.pdf> (Last visited on 28/07/2019).

²³ Van der Putten, F-P, Seaman, J., Huotari, M., Ekman, A. and Otero-Iglesias, M. (2016): "Europe and China's New Silk Roads", *ETNC Report*, p. 4,

Available at https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Europe_and_Chinas_New_Silk_Roads_0.pdf (Last visited on 31/07/2019).

²⁴ The Member States being part of the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries are: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia.

And within those 16, the five countries "currently outside of the EU" (on January 16th 2017) are: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia,

Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 中国—中东欧国家合作, http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zdogjxy_1/

(Last visited on 5/03/2017).

²⁵ Greece, Malta, Cyprus, Italy, Spain and Portugal.



Van der Putten et al. state that BRI projects do not only develop within the EU, but they also affect EU member states and have an impact on the EU-China relations²⁶. Sometimes, initiatives in the orbit of BRI are more far-reaching than BRI, as for example the buildup of a Cross-Docking Center for Hewlett-Packard in Piraeus, which actually involves a project with further repercussions on HP factories in China²⁷. Parag Khanna and Kishor Mahubani, submit that

“[i]nvestment from China’s Cosco Shipping rescued Greece’s Piraeus port three years ago, turning it into one of Europe’s fastest growing. According to Germany newspaper Die Zeit, Piraeus will displace Hamburg as Europe’s third-busiest port this year”²⁸.

Hence, as it can be seen above, China economic strength is already operating inside the EU. Piraeus port is in the EU, but managed by China. In addition, it is not an exception: for instance, China has also entered into Spain’s port business, since “Spain’s leading port operator Noatum Ports confirms the conclusion of a partnership agreement with the Chinese COSCO Shipping Ports Limited (COSCO) for the transfer of 51% of Noatum Ports”²⁹.

Moreover, this China-Greece relationship seems to be succeeding, as apparently, the 16+1 initiative will be enlarged, with Greece, becoming 17+1³⁰.

BRI is most probably the paramount example showing the increasing asymmetry between the EU and China. BRI will have a multiplying effect, which

Van der Putten, F-P, Seaman, J., Huotari, M., Ekman, A. and Otero-Iglesias, M., op. cit., p. 6.

²⁶ Id, p. 5.

This phenomenon is due to what Keohane & Nye name “Globalism”, i.e. what they define as “a state of the world involving networks of interdependence at multicontinental distances”.

Keohane, R. and Nye, J. Jr., Globalization: What’s new? What not? (And so what?), Note taken from the website: “This article is drawn from the forthcoming third edition of their book Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition (New York: Longman, 2000)”.

<http://www.asu.edu/courses/pos445/Keohane%20and%20Nye--Globalization%20What's%20New%3F%20%20What's%20Not%3F.pdf>

(Last visited on 5/03/2017).

²⁷ Quoted by van der Putten, F-P. (2014): “Chinese Investment in the Port of Piraeus, Greece: The Relevance for the EU and the Netherlands”, *Clingendael Report*, available at

<https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2014%20-%20Chinese%20investment%20in%20Piraeus%20-%20Clingendael%20Report.pdf>

(Last visited on 5/03/2017).

²⁸ Khanna, P. and Mahubani, K. (2019): “Italy joining China’s Belt and Road Initiative highlights different approaches of Europe and the US on Asia policy”, *South China Morning Post*, Published: 10:00pm, 1 Apr, 2019. Updated: 1:28am, 2 Apr, 2019, Available at

<https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/3004114/italy-joining-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-highlights> (Last visited on 01/08/2019).

²⁹ Chinese expansion into Spanish ports market, port.today,

Available at <https://port.today/chinese-expansion-spanish-ports-market/>

(Last visited on 03/08/2019).

³⁰ Kavalski, E. (2019): “China’s ‘16+1’ Is Dead? Long Live the ‘17+1.’”, *The Diplomat*, 29/03/2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/chinas-161-is-dead-long-live-the-171/> Last visited on 28/07/2019.

will lead to an even greater asymmetry between the EU and China. As we have stated before, there are two complimentary policies in respect of BRI, which require a thorough examination: the 16+1 and the Southern Europe Initiatives.

3. THE CEE 16+1 AND CHINA AND SOUTHERN EUROPE INITIATIVES

According to the European Parliament, the 16+1 format was established under the following circumstances:

"In 2012, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the low-growth environment in the EU, China set up a cooperation format with 16 CEECs [Central and Eastern European Countries] which share a communist past but are otherwise fairly heterogeneous in terms of their economic development and legal status as EU Member States and (potential) candidates for EU membership. China values their geostrategic position as a bridgehead to the EU market and a crucial transit corridor for its Belt and Road initiative (BRI)"³¹.

Thus, the conditions were optimal for the kick off of such an initiative. Furthermore, the project eased the development of BRI. In fact, their poor economic conditions as well as their common XX century's history create the suitable environment for the success of this Chinese project and also improve the chances for a probable win-win outcome: on one side, China gives financial support to CEECs and on the other side, CEECs allow China develop China's infrastructures on their territories. All in all, the whole project contributes to the continental expansion of China. China seems to have an appeal for those countries, whereas the EU is not reacting in a similar way.

The 16+1 Initiative is a cooperation framework between China and sixteen Central and Eastern European States. Out of the said sixteen States, eleven are EU member States. The system is already used by China in other regions:

"The 16+1 format follows a China-defined experimental and innovative approach to regional cooperation, which shares common features with the other multilateral cooperation platforms China has created with African, east Asian, Latin American and Middle East countries to introduce a new type of non-Western 'South-South' multilateralism"³².

³¹ China, the 16+1 format and the EU, European Parliament – Briefing, 2, Available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625173/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)625173_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625173/EPRS_BRI(2018)625173_EN.pdf) (Last visited on 28/07/2019).

³² Id.

Therefore, the 16+1 complies with one of the key factors of China's theory of international relations: multilateralism³³. This way, China offers its own alternative to the previous status quo and hence creates its own constellation. In other words, instead of the American way, China supports the Chinese way. Harmony is one of the cornerstones of China's Weltanschauung. Harmony is a goal, which can be obtained via multilateralism. Furthermore, the special nuance that China is successfully developing is the regional multilateralism. This way, it is eroding the foundations of the previous hegemon.

Premier Li Keqiang, in 2014, during an international promotion campaign in favor of BRI "announced the creation of a \$3 billion investment fund for Central and Eastern European countries meant to further enhance cooperation, which includes plans to construct 'a new corridor of interconnectivity'"³⁴.

It is obvious that the above mentioned investment fund supports BRI, as it allows it to reach out across Europe. Moreover, it is complemented with one of the totems of modern policies: interconnectivity. As previously mentioned, this is a factor of common interest between the EU and China. The said statement openly shows the Chinese give-and-take policy, resulting in the win-win cooperation, i.e., the suitable framework for Chinese business.

According to Mikko Huotari et al. "[...] the relationship has become increasingly symmetric, and for some critics of the EU's foreign policy, it has even tilted to [sic] China's favor in a number of areas"³⁵. However, the said authors submit that the asymmetry in favor of China is evident:

"In the east of Europe, China has shown a keen interest in bolstering relations with countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) through the creation of a 16+1 dialogue that seeks to create a platform for developing China's relations with the region. While the 16+1 forum is becoming an increasingly regular feature of China's relations with CEE countries, and despite competition for leadership among the CEE countries, it is China that really plays the leading role within this new framework. At the same time, in Western Europe the forum has been seen as a matter of potential concern about China's strategy to divide or even challenge the EU, as five out of the

³³ Multilateralism, an essential element of China's external policies, does not dovetail with the EU's view, based on multilateral international organizations.

However, a terminological distinction is due: there is some confusion, as shown in the transcription of a conference by Benita Ferrero-Waldner. She distinguishes between multipolarism, promoted by China (as a way out of the previous US-URSS bipolarism) and the EU, which is in favour of "effective" multilateralism (as in international organizations, e.g. UN).

Ferrero-Waldner, B. (2005): "The EU, China and the Quest for a Multilateral World", European Commission, Press Release Database, Available at https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-05-414_en.htm (Last visited on 10/08/2019).

³⁴ Rolland, N. (2015): "China's New Silk Road", *The National Bureau of Asian Research*, Published: February 12, 2015, available at <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-new-silk-road/> (Last visited on 31/07/2019).

³⁵ Huotari, M., Otero-Iglesias, M., Seaman, J. and Ekman, A., op .cit, 8.

sixteen European countries involved in the discussions are currently outside of the Union”³⁶.

This is an outstanding effect of the asymmetrical UE-China relationship, and it is obvious that the said asymmetry is rather in favor of China nowadays. Moreover, this asymmetry is increasing and does not show any signals for a decrease. Furthermore, it could be guessed whether Western Europe is approaching a similar system to the 16+1, with China offering financial support to Western Europe. Cases as those of Italy and Greece could bother Western European countries and authorities in Brussels. Such possibility cannot be dismissed, given the strength of China’s economy as well as the faint Western European finance.

Regarding Southern European countries, China has improved its performance in Europe via investments, given the financial predicament caused by the harsh debt crisis in Europe. China has bought a large part of European countries’ sovereign bonds, and it is apparently the second country holding most of Spain’s, although the exact amount is unknown³⁷.

In this respect, one of China’s most significant moves was the previously mentioned acquisition by the Chinese state-owned company Cosco of a controlling stake in the port of Piraeus³⁸. Piraeus can be considered as a bridgehead into Central and Western Europe. Logically, with the aid of such a stronghold, further movements will be more feasible.

The latest development in this regard is Italy, which has borrowed loans from China-led AIIB. Before such operation was completed, Su Hao expressed that

“China has been cooperating mainly with developing countries in Asia and Africa under the Belt and Road Initiative framework. But if China and Italy were to sign a memorandum of cooperation, China would also be working with a developed economy in Southern Europe, as well as a G7 member and an important link in the ancient Silk Road, to promote the Belt and Road Initiative. Hit by several crises including the debt and refugee crises, European countries are seeking new growth points. Confronted with development bottlenecks and a rising unemployment rate,

³⁶ Ibid., 11.

European Union – Member countries of the EU,
https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries_en
(Last visited on 5/03/2017).

³⁷ Otero-Iglesias, M. (2014): “How much Spanish sovereign debt does China hold?”, *Real Instituto Elcano*, 17/12/2014,
Available at <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/much-spanish-sovereign-debt-china-hold/> (Last visited on 10/08/2019).

³⁸ Why is China investing heavily in south-east Europe? BBC News, 17 October 2017,
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41654346>
(Last visited on 26/07/2019).



Italy hopes to expedite its economic recovery and achieve growth by collaborating with China in the Belt and Road Initiative.”³⁹

In the light of the above mentioned statement, it might be deduced that the collaboration between Italy and China should be a win-win case. But it is also bizarre, as the borrower is a G7 member which has been “hit by several crises”, and is suffering “development bottlenecks and a rising unemployment rate”, whereas the lender is a developing country which has, at least in theory, barely suffered the said crises and become a world player. This is the factual situation nowadays, which should not be ignored by the EU. No wonder Italy has joined BRI, against the stance of other member States and the EU itself; however, this move will have clear consequences at the EU level⁴⁰.

4. JOINT ANALYSIS OF BRI, 16+1 AND EU SOUTHERN COUNTRIES INITIATIVES

As a matter of fact, China has established a full strategy covering goals and means, both in the two-sided structure (one belt, one road) as well as in the complementary policies (16+1 and the Southern European countries initiatives). BRI seems to be an adequate system to help China’s production to reach faraway markets.

BRI has more influence on cohesion than TRACECA in three aspects: in China, where it runs along more than 4.000 km across its territory; in Central Asia; and in the EU, assisted by the said two further policies (the 16+1 and the Southern Europe initiatives). Therefore, BRI not only enhances inner cohesion in China, expands China-central Asia cooperation and improves China-Central Asia-EU connections, but it also tests EU’s cohesion.

According to Parag Khanna and Kishore Mahbubani

“Southern European countries such as Greece and Portugal, as well as those in the Balkans, were hit hard by the knock-on effects of the 2008 financial crisis and the significant contraction of European intra-bank lending that followed. With diminished structural adjustment funds and private capital coming from their post-cold war patrons in Brussels and other Western capitals, the door was left open for China to make financial and logistical inroads into the Mediterranean.”⁴¹

As the above mentioned authors submit, there was a clear window of opportunity for BRI, not only due to the ailing economic situation of certain

³⁹ Su, H. (2019): “New cooperation model needs to be established”, *BRI a new source of growth for EU*, Belt and Road Portal, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/ghsl/wksl/83336.htm>, (last visited on 28/07/2019).

⁴⁰ Borràs i Arrumí, J. (2019): “Italia, Europa y el dilema chino”. *Esglobal* 19/03/2019. Available at <https://www.esglobal.org/italia-europa-y-el-dilema-chino/> (Last visited on 10/08/2019).

⁴¹ Khanna, P. and Mahbubani, K., op. cit.

European countries, but also to the unsuitable and outdated EU's financial structures.

South-South multilateralism and 16+1 format have some aspects in common. Notwithstanding, it shouldn't be forgotten that South-South multilateralism is generally held between non-Western countries.

We find that the 16+1 and the Southern European countries initiatives are another case of asymmetrical relationship between the EU and China, again clearly in favor of the latter. However, it can be considered as a "freely accepted" asymmetry, since Italy, Greece and Spain have received investments from China in times of crisis, and they have afterwards so done in better times.

In this regard, the European Union, in the "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council-Elements for a new EU strategy on China" has claimed that such an interest shown by China should not affect the EU's regional security:

"One of China's foreign policy priorities is to develop its links with Europe, and it is allocating significant financial and diplomatic resources to achieving this goal. It is in the EU's interest to work with China to ensure that any Chinese involvement in the EU's Eastern and Southern neighborhoods helps reinforce rules-based governance and regional security"⁴².

Nonetheless, perhaps a China-designed strategy intended to affect the EU's interests it is not necessary. It might be due to the EU's own poor cohesion. In this regard, according to Parag Khanna and Kishore Mahbubani:

"While Europeans have valid concerns about the cost and utility of certain Chinese-backed infrastructure projects in Balkan countries such as Serbia, they have only themselves to blame for [...] internal divisions over investment from China"⁴³.

Guy de Jonquières expressly submits just the opposite, claiming that China uses divide-and-rule tactics⁴⁴. Even in case De Jonquières was right, the EU's lack

⁴² High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, European Commission, Brussels, 22.6.2016, JOIN(2016) 30 final; "Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council-Elements for a new EU strategy on China".

<http://www.ipex.eu/IPEXL-WEB/dossier/document/JOIN20160030.do>

(Last visited on 5/03/2017).

⁴³ Khanna, P. and Mahbubani, K., op. cit.

⁴⁴ De Jonquières, G. (2015): "The European Union's China Policy: Priorities and Strategies for the New Commission", *Policy Brief*, 3, available at

<https://ecipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/The-European-Union%E2%80%99s-China-Policy.pdf>

(Last visited on 08/06/2017).

"...it has been an open invitation to Beijing pursue divide-and-rule tactics and get its way by bypassing the EU's institutions and dealing with its members bilaterally, like so many tributary states".



of cohesion is a matter of fact. In this regard, Esteban and Otero-Iglesias⁴⁵ submit that the EU member States are opting for three different stances regarding their relations with China: in the first group, the most assertive countries, which incidentally are also the most powerful, e.g. Germany or France. They advocate the implementation of a mechanism for the supervision of foreign investments. Furthermore, they are concerned about the geostrategic issues and the effects of this situation on the competitiveness of their companies.

The second stance is represented by the Netherlands, the UK and the Scandinavian countries, who also feel uneasy about the said circumstances, but are not for the implementation of controlling measures. The Brexit is important in this respect, as the UK is the champion of this group.

The third and last faction comprises Eastern and Southern EU member States, who are entirely in favor of China's investments, despite its economic practices not coinciding with the EU's. Such countries are Hungary, Greece or Italy.

Moreover, this EU's weakness has its consequences. Mikko Huotari et al. state that "[i]n fact, the contours of European relations with China are increasingly designed in Beijing"⁴⁶.

In other words, China keeps the initiative regarding the EU-China relations, but this does not only affect the said relations, but also the action capability of the EU itself. As an example of this, according to Justyna Misiągiewicz and Marcin Misiągiewicz, the EU has not shown reaction capability regarding BRI: "[...] the European Union has to date been slow and reluctant in responding to the 'One Belt, One Road' idea"⁴⁷.

Obviously, this lack of reaction will not only affect the EU in respect of its relation to China, but also, since a leadership space has been taken by China, the EU will have less room for maneuver not only concerning the Asian countries within the domain of BRI, but also regarding its Central, Eastern and Southern EU member States, affected by the abovementioned two complementary plans (the 16+1 project and the Southern Europe project) and, obviously, the AIIB.

Moreover, what is even more stunning is that both the EU and China are each other's major (or second major) trade partners. This fact should make the EU react, but at least, it does not in the scale and promptness that it should⁴⁸.

Apparently, the EU, with a view to revive the Silk Road, took the initiative in the 1990's, but it should do more to materialize its TRACECA project, "[y]et

⁴⁵ Esteban, M. and Otero Iglesias, M. (2019): "EU policy in the face of the Chinese challenge" *Expert Comment* 18/2019, Available at http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/commentary-esteban-oteroiglesias-eu-policy-face-of-chinese-challenge (Last visited on 10/07/2019).

⁴⁶ Huotari, M., Otero-Iglesias, M., Seaman, J. and Ekman, A., op .cit, 8.

⁴⁷ Misiągiewicz, J. and Misiągiewicz, M., op. cit., 40.

⁴⁸ Id.

Europe, which launched the visionary TRACECA program in the early 1990s, is largely absent from the scene today"⁴⁹.

The US launched the New Silk Road (NSR) initiative in 2010, but did not implement it either. The EU did not finished its pioneering project. In addition, the Chinese BRI is bringing down the curtain on TRACECA.

Furthermore, in the case of the 16+1 project, it is not only a fully Chinese-promoted initiative, but also it is China who has the upper hand in conducting the 16+1 policies:

"While the 16+1 forum is becoming an increasingly regular feature of China's relations with CEE countries, and despite competition for leadership among the CEE countries, it is China that really plays the leading role within this new framework"⁵⁰.

As we have already analyzed, in the 16+1 initiative, out of the sixteen European countries, 11 are EU member states; and within the South European countries initiative, all of the 6 European countries are members of the EU. Therefore, if we add the EU member states taking part in both initiatives, the result is that there are 17 EU countries participating in these initiatives complementary to BRI. Alternatively, instead of 16+1 and six South European countries, the initiatives might have had the following structures: 1+5+1 (the EU+5 non EU states + China); and the EU (representing all the Southern European Union states) + China. The current 16+1 and six South European countries initiatives are not necessarily designed by China in order to affect the EU, but keeping in mind the lack of consistency from which the EU's single voice suffers, for China it is perhaps easier to deal with the EU member states one at a time. Logically, the said EU member states would not benefit from a united position. As Mikko Huotari et al. maintain:

"[...] there is no strong evidence to suggest that China has a deliberate strategy to divide Europe. To <the contrary, it is intra-European competition and lack of coordination over China that makes Europe vulnerable. In other words, China does not need to divide Europe because Europe is already divided"⁵¹.

Anyhow, both the lack of cohesion of the EU and the proactive China's policies are somehow two sides of the same coin, as stated by the newly appointed High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, who three months before his designation stated that no EU member state could ever

⁴⁹ Starr, S. F. and Cornell, S. E., "The EU and Central Asia: Developing Transport and Trade", *Analytical Articles*, December 10th, 2015, The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13313-the-eu-and-central-asia-developing-transport-and-trade.html> (Last visited on 08/06/2017).

⁵⁰ Huotari, M., Otero-Iglesias, M., Seaman, J. and Ekman, A., op. cit., 8.

⁵¹ Id.



hope to maintain balanced relations with China. Only within EU –he submits- will it be possible to keep symmetrical relations (perhaps this is also questionable, but the EU is in a much better position than the EU member States acting on their own). He claims that the EU is not an option but a necessity, if we want to sustain our model of society⁵².

This poor cohesion within the EU does not only affect Chinese investments that target the EU, but also EU companies or individuals aiming to invest in China. The “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - Elements for a new EU strategy on China” repeatedly claims that, regarding this matter, there is no “level playing field”, i.e. there is no reciprocity in this domain. It claims that Chinese investments in Europe have full possibilities and opportunities, whereas EU investors in China, according to the said Joint Communication, find plenty of difficulties⁵³. However, recently China has adopted a new stance in this respect, trying to rebalance the relationship, towards a level playing field⁵⁴.

The European Parliament (EP) has criticized the 16+1 and considers that it is losing strength:

“While in 2012 the CEECs had enthusiastically embraced this form of cooperation as a chance to diversify their EU-focused economic relations in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, by 2018 some of them had voiced dissatisfaction with the economic results it had yielded for them. The 2018 Sofia summit guidelines for the first time stressed the need for a more balanced trade, reciprocity of market access and open tenders in infrastructure construction, thus echoing concerns the EU had repeatedly raised with China. Empirical evidence shows that China-CEEC trade had actually jumped prior to 2012, whereas afterwards it increased at a much slower pace, with Chinese exports to CEECs expanding much quicker than CEEC exports to China, thus generating an unbalanced trade that is heavily tilted in favour of China”⁵⁵.

Hence, despite China’s efforts to stress the character of the win-win cooperation, the EP states that the benefit is not at all reciprocal. Furthermore, the EP maintains that projects are unequally distributed:

“Foreign direct investment (FDI) data reveal that while Chinese FDI is highly concentrated on the biggest CEECs, it accounts for an extremely low share of total FDI stock. Some smaller CEECs have started to attract Chinese FDI as well, although at comparatively low levels. Some of China’s infrastructure construction

⁵² Borrell, J. (2019): “Europa, entre China y EEUU”, La Vanguardia, available at <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20190325/461208061029/europa-china-eeuu.html> (Last visited on 10/08/2019).

⁵³ “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council-Elements for a new EU strategy on China”, op. cit.

⁵⁴ China ofrece a UE igualdad trato a empresas y abordar subsidios industriales. EFE Bruselas 9/04/2019. Available at <https://www.efe.com/efe/espana/economia/china-ofrece-a-ue-igualdad-trato-empresas-y-abordar-subsidios-industriales/10003-3948129> (Last visited on 10/08/2019).

⁵⁵ China, the 16+1 format and the EU, European Parliament – Briefing, op. cit., 1.

projects in the CEECs have suffered setbacks in a regional environment governed by EU norms and regulations”⁵⁶.

Nonetheless, China, with its ample range of initiatives, seems to be in a better position to compete. Parag Khanna and Kishore Mahbubani submit that

“[...] Italy has become the 14th European Union member to sign a memorandum with China’s Belt and Road Initiative. European neglect is to blame for Chinese opportunism. Far too often, Europe allows itself to be divided by outside powers, blaming them rather than itself”⁵⁷.

In any case, the EP has complained about the trade and investment barriers:

“Unsatisfactory economic outcomes for the CEECs may not merely be due to the obvious asymmetry in market size, but also to trade and investment barriers: according to the European Commission’s market barriers database, China has 25 of these, in second place only to Russia (34). Such results have given rise to disappointment and scepticism even among major CEECs such as Poland, which runs the highest trade deficit with China”⁵⁸.

The above mentioned statement measures the EU’s and China’s respective market barriers. But in this regard there is another vision, comparing the access of EU’s and American companies to China’s markets: Parag Khanna and Kishore Mahbubani submit that “[a]s China slowly opens up its markets, in the name of the reciprocity the West demands, corporate Europe appears most likely to reap the benefits [compared to corporate US]”⁵⁹.

This perspective sets aside the EU’s vision of the level playing field. However, regarding the access to China’s markets, this still grants some advantages to EU’s companies, compared to the US’s.

Chen Zhi Min and Zhang Ji maintain that, according to the “double-layered” special support of the European foreign policy for the “one belt one road” strategy, China, in different strategic domains, should adopt differing styles concerning goals, points of contact, and through four developing ways, give shape to the reciprocal “double-layered” positive China-EU reciprocal system: first, in a horizontal direction, aiding member States in order to find innovative ways of cooperation; second, in an upward way, receiving the aid of member states in order to model the EU policies regarding China with a view to enhance the China-EU cooperation; third, in a downward way, creating at the EU level, cooperation in the fields of policies, laws and public opinion; and fourth, overflow abroad, promoting through

⁵⁶ Id.

⁵⁷ Khanna, P. and Mahbubani, K., op. cit.

⁵⁸ China, the 16+1 format and the EU, European Parliament – Briefing, op. cit. 4.

⁵⁹ Khanna, P. and Mahbubani, K., op. cit.

the China-EU double-layered linkup the rest of areas comprised along BRI as well as the China-EU cooperation worldwide⁶⁰.

At first glance, we see a primary point of asymmetry compared with the EU, i.e. the meticulous analysis China does of the EU's policy and strategy. China develops its own strategy through its idiosyncratic examination of the EU. Such a methodical way of thinking helps promote cooperation, and the EU might appreciate the advantages of this attitude. However, the EU finds itself just in the opposite situation. Mikko Huotari et al. claim that “[m]ost of the interactions with China happen at the national level, and overlooking them would be a mistake”⁶¹.

Guy de Jonquières states that “[Europe] needs to be able to speak with one voice and not give China the opportunity to play the game of divide and rule with Europe”⁶².

The said wishes, expressed by De Jonquières, do not seem so far to be feasible in the short term. But they should be considered by the EU.

A critical point regarding BRI is expressed by Nicholas Rosellini. He doubts whether the BRI initiative will only bring economic development or will also enhance the human development of the peoples along BRI. Another key element will be the sustainability of the initiative. Following Rosellini, the UN and its programmes will play a decisive role for the success of BRI, always keeping in mind the achievement of the SDGs⁶³. SDGs, i.e. the Sustainable Development Goals, are aims established by the UN, in order to improve the living standards of humankind as well as enable the survival of the planet⁶⁴.

According to Mikko Huotari et al., in Western Europe the 16+1 initiative has been considered as a matter of potential concern about China's strategy to divide or even challenge the EU, as five out of the sixteen European countries involved in the discussions are currently outside of the Union⁶⁵.

In this regard, we analyze this view complemented with that submitted by Guy de Jonquières, according to which China is practicing a divide-and-rule

⁶⁰ Chen, Zhimin and Zhang, Ji, op. cit., 1.

⁶¹ Huotari, M., Otero-Iglesias, M., Seaman, J. and Ekman, A., op. cit., 12.

⁶² De Jonquières, op. cit., 1.

⁶³ Rosellini, N. (2016): “A Shared Vision for Belt and Road Initiative”, *UNDP China* 10 Nov 2016, <http://www.cn.undp.org/content/china/en/home/blog/2016/a-shared-vision-for-belt-and-road-initiative.html> (Last visited on 31/07/2019).

“The question is how these investments can bring not only economic development, but also human development benefits along the way. The Belt and Road Initiative will contribute to improved infrastructure and industrialization, but it should not stop there, and must also transform local communities and help reduce poverty and protect the environment, and facilitate inclusive social development, contributing to the achievement of UN Agenda 2030.”

⁶⁴ United Nations, Sustainable Development – Knowledge Platform. Sustainable Development Goals, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabledevelopmentgoals> (Last visited on 24/12/2017).

⁶⁵ Huotari, M., Otero-Iglesias, M., Seaman, J. and Ekman, A., op. cit., 11.

Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries, op. cit.

strategy⁶⁶. Perhaps, China does not need to use the said tactics. Chinese culture is very practical. Chen Zhi Min and Zhang Ji believe that

“since OBOR was first launched, it has always pointed to Europe as its far end, but neither the EU as a whole nor its 28 member states never have had the clear concretion of a country along the OBOR”⁶⁷.

Given that there is no unity within the EU, China deals directly with the EU member states. China has not created this advantage for itself (the lack of cohesion of the EU), but since it already exists, China does its best to attain its goals.

Regarding the impact of the BRI initiative in the EU, Alicia Garcia-Herrero and Xu Jianwei (徐建炜) maintain that one of the most important projects in the EU today is the so-called “Juncker Plan”, which basically promotes the investment in infrastructures. They state that this is nowadays one of the “bottlenecks” of the EU economy. They believe that “OBOR attaches special importance to the infrastructures in Eurasia” and there is a possible linkup between BRI and the Juncker Plan. They claim that cooperation should also enhance the electric power resources as well as the digital economy. The said authors add that this teamwork should not be just restricted to commerce and investment, but might also enhance the financial channels⁶⁸. Both the EU and China are undertaking plans, but they have not linked yet to each other. The economic development is important, but it should also benefit the local communities throughout BRI.

In respect of BRI investments, Jane Golley submits that

⁶⁶ De Jonquières, op. cit., 3.

“...it has been an open invitation to Beijing pursue divide-and-rule tactics and get its way by bypassing the EU’s institutions and dealing with its members bilaterally, like so many tributary states.”

⁶⁷ Chen, Zhimin and Zhang, Ji, op. Cit., 1.

Unofficial translation.

Original text: “在倡议提出之初, 尽管‘一带一路’的起源指向欧洲, 但欧盟作为一个整体以及它的28个成员国并没有被明确界定为‘一带一路’的沿线国家”

⁶⁸ Garcia-Herrero, A., and Xu, J. (徐建炜), Title of the paper: “‘一带一路’战略如何促进中欧贸易?” (How does the 'One belt, one road' promote the China-EU trade?), p.3,

<http://bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/%E4%B8%80%E5%B8%A6%E4%B8%80%E8%B7%AF.pdf>

(Last visited on 24/12/2017).

Paragraphs from which we have obtained the abovementioned ideas:

“我们的研究对于中国的‘一带一路’战略具有重要的政策启示。中国自2013年以来提出‘一带一路’倡议, 但是这一战略在欧洲并没有引起足够的重视。事实上, 欧洲目前正在推行的容克投资计划, 很重要的一个部分也是基础设施投资, 这恰恰目前是欧洲经济发展的瓶颈之一。中国的‘一带一路’战略侧重于亚欧大陆的建设, 目前中国已经提出‘一带一路’战略与欧洲容克计划的对接, 共享基础设施投资方面的投资和综合合作, 增强亚欧大陆的基础设施、电力能源以及数字经济的基础投资与连接, 值得进一步加以实质性推动。在‘一带一路’框架下, 中欧可以开展的合作可以不仅仅局限于贸易与投资, 金融渠道(如外商直接投资和证券投资流动)也具有很大的相关潜力, 尤其是人民币离岸市场的建立也可以助力加以推动。除此以外, 通过推动‘一带一路’战略的中欧合作, 还可以进一步增强中欧双方的互信程度, 有助于解决诸如是否承认市场经济地位等争议性问题。”



“[...] these are investments that are happening in high risk countries [...] where there is lots of corruption, there is a possibility that all this could go horribly wrong if unprofitable investments are made and money gets lost along the way”⁶⁹.

However, China is determined to go ahead with the project, being self-confident that this plan will raise the Asian giant to new heights. The RMB (Chinese currency) might even compete with the US dollar as the world’s reference currency⁷⁰.

Furthermore, there is a key legal factor, which is common to many megaregional integration projects: the impact of such projects in the governance of the worldwide trade system, due to its influence in the international trade normativity and, especially, the one established by the WTO⁷¹. Barack Obama was in favor of this idea, showed in his “Statement by the President on the Trans-Pacific Partnership”:

“When more than 95 percent of our potential customers live outside our borders, we can’t let countries like China write the rules of the global economy. We should write those rules, opening new markets to American products while setting high standards for protecting workers and preserving our environment”⁷².

However, after the US quitted the TPP, according to the said opinion, China might influence the normativity in global trade. The EU, in turn, could take advantage of the opportunity⁷³.

Nadège Rolland maintains that the repercussion of BRI to the world is its greater cooperation between nations. Nonetheless, she states that “[...] what China

⁶⁹ Quoted by Alexander, R., op. cit.

⁷⁰ Alexander, R., op. cit.

⁷¹ Rocha Pino, M. de J. (2017): “Los proyectos de integración megarregional de China: el caso de la iniciativa Cinturón y Ruta (CYR)”, *Anuario Mexicano de Derecho Internacional*, vol. XVII, 547-589, p. 557, available at <http://www.redalyc.org/pdf/4027/402750094016.pdf> (Last visited on 05/07/2017).

⁷² Statement by the President on the Trans-Pacific Partnership, The White House – President Barack, Obama, The White House – Office of the Press Secretary, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/05/statement-president-trans-pacific-partnership> (Last visited on 27/07/2017).

Quoted by Rocha Pino, M. de J. op. cit., 557.

⁷³ Charlemagne, “As the world sours on trade, the EU sweetens on it”, *The Economist, Print Edition – Europe*, March 30th 2017, <https://www.economist.com/news/europe/21719801-top-agenda-deal-japan-world-sours-trade-eu-sweetens-it> (Last visited on 28/7/2017).

“One of the American president’s first acts was to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade deal covering a dozen countries around the Pacific Rim. Mr Trump complains about Germany’s trade surplus, and his administration hints that it will ignore rulings from the World Trade Organisation. The leader of the free world is pulling up the drawbridge, and the EU (which negotiates trade deals on behalf of its member governments) has spotted an opportunity.”

is offering us is a window into discovering what kind of great power it wants to be"⁷⁴.

Naturally, China establishes BRI as a plan in its own interest, but the countries covered by it might also benefit from the said project.

According to Emilián Kavalski:

"China's cooperation with CEE countries has attracted a growing barrage of criticism from the European Union (EU). In the past three years, EU officials have lambasted China for allegedly undermining the European integration process by turning the CEE countries into "Trojan horses" and sowing division in the continent. Some have even demanded that China adopt a "One Europe" policy just as the EU supports the "One China" policy."⁷⁵

Hence, the cohesion of the EU is affected by the said initiatives. However, the EU is suffering from its own lack of common ground. Otherwise, it would not have been affected by China's initiatives.

Furthermore, according to Lilei Song and Dragan Pavličević, the CEE 16+1 Initiative is increasing the asymmetries between China and the CEEs:

"Reflective of the asymmetry in economic power between China and participating countries, most of the proceedings, institutions and programs initiated within these frameworks are bankrolled by China. Beijing has furthermore used these mechanisms to extend loans, and facilitate China's outward investment toward these regions, which further illustrates and amplifies the asymmetry in economic power between China and the countries participating in these multilateral frameworks"⁷⁶.

Apparently, the 16+1 initiative is not failing: Emilián Kavalski claims that it is growing, due to Greece's probable accession; therefore, the initiative would soon change its name to 17+1:

"So what can we expect this year? First, the ninth summit of the China-CEE cooperation is indeed likely to be the last one for the 16+1. The reason, however, is not what one (especially the EU) might expect. Instead, Greece is almost certainly going to be invited to become part of the initiative. This will effectively turn the "16+1" into the "17+1." Such a move seems to corroborate the claims that the significance of CEE countries for China is closely intertwined with the acquisition by COSCO of the controlling share of the Greek port of Piraeus. Some have even claimed that Beijing is at least partially responsible for the resolution of the name dispute between Greece and Macedonia as China is keen to connect the port of

⁷⁴ Rolland, N., op. cit.

⁷⁵ Kavalski, E. op. cit.

⁷⁶ Song, L. and Pavličević, D. (2019): "China's Multilayered Multilateralism: A Case Study of China and Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation Framework". *Chinese Political Science Review* 4, 277–302, 278. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-019-00127-z> (Last visited on 05/08/2019).



Piraeus via Macedonia to its proposed high-speed rail link between Belgrade and Budapest and then onwards to the western part of the continent”⁷⁷.

According to the above statement, a key element of BRI is interconnectivity, however, not only regarding infrastructures, but also from the point of view of the development of policies, as the creation of a network will enhance the chances of success.

According to Andrés Ortega, BRI is a strategy concerning Eurasia; China, he maintains, is interested in the European ports, from Piraeus (Greece) to Sines (Portugal). Andrés Ortega quotes Bruno Maçães, who considers that China’s aim is to reduce its freight costs, competing with the north European routes. Andrés Ortega submits that the EU’s Connecting Europe & Asia strategies are much more modest⁷⁸.

5. THE BEIJING (MAY 2017) BELT AND ROAD FORUM

On 14.05.2017 the Belt and Road Forum was held in Beijing. 28 Heads of State and Government, together with 1.200 delegates from countries from across the world⁷⁹, as well as the heads of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the United Nations attended the said Forum. The Forum was a conference aimed at promoting BRI.

As Linda Yueh has noted:

“Essentially, China is taking a leadership role where the United States has begun to pull back. So, for China this is a strategy that actually makes sense both economically and geopolitically [...] the scale of One Belt One Road is absolutely massive; it’s nearly a trillion dollars of planned investments [...]”⁸⁰.

As we can see, the asymmetry is not just about the comparison between the EU and China, but is also affecting the relations between China and the United States, resulting in favor of China. Obviously, China’s GDP is still lower than the US’s, but such a project as BRI has been undertaken by China, which shows that China is keen on leadership. The US promoted the Marshall Plan, which was an

⁷⁷ Kavalski, E. (2019): “China’s ‘16+1’ Is Dead? Long Live the ‘17+1.’”, *The Diplomat*, 29/03/2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/chinas-161-is-dead-long-live-the-171/> Last visited on 28/07/2019.

⁷⁸ Ortega, A. (2019): “Europa se quita el velo chino”. *El Espectador Global*, por Andrés Ortega, Real Instituto Elcano 02/04/2019. Available at <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/europa-se-quita-el-velo-chino/> (Last visited on 10/08/2019).

⁷⁹ Moody, A., “Belt and Road forum: China to forge global connections”, *The Telegraph News – World News*, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world/china-watch/politics/belt-and-road-forum-beijing/> (Last visited on 23/05/2017).

⁸⁰ Yueh, L., One Belt One Road, Business Daily BBC, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0527zz7> (Last visited on 23/05/2017).

enormous task, but it took place 70 years ago. In other words, the fact of promoting BRI shows China's capability to take the initiative and assume the role of a world player.

Both China and the US have something in common: they are launching their respective policies in order to compete with the EU, obviously including the economy. Of late, China's surge and the US's corresponding resistance have caused commercial and technological conflicts between both countries, thus causing anxiety throughout the world. The most recent skirmish between both sides has been the pressure on their respective currencies, in August 2019.

Justyna Misiągiewicz and Marcin Misiągiewicz consider that "[t]he idea of 'One Belt, One Road' will promote China as a soft power and attractive player in the global market"⁸¹. In fact, this BRI vision as a means of soft power will be a key element for the future development of the EU-China relations, but, as we have already analyzed, it will also deepen the asymmetry between both sides.

BRI could work as a test bench for China's international relations, especially regarding the EU. China, as a world player, is keen on the idea of responsibility concerning worldwide development (负责任大国 *fuzeren daguo*) and it might take advantage of BRI as a unique opportunity to put into practice its skills in the field of soft power⁸². This shift to soft power is also based on its terminological preference, for example, the use of the terms "proposal, idea or framework", instead of "strategy". Hence, China highlights that BRI has no political intent⁸³.

The EU has reacted to the 16+1 Initiative (or, as the European Parliament names it, the 16+1 format): on the one hand, it promotes a pre-accession investment agenda, mostly in the Western Balkans; on the other hand, it stresses the key issue:

"A June 2018 own-initiative report on EU-China relations by the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee (Rapporteur: Bas Belder, ECR, the Netherlands), due to be debated in plenary in September 2018, stresses among other things that Member States' participation in the 16+1 format must enable the EU to speak with one voice in its relationship with China"⁸⁴.

Summing up, the EU will have fewer chances to survive, unless it keeps a united voice. BRI is an enormous challenge, but just by the mere fact of undertaking such a risky project, it is obvious that China is enhancing its position through a leader's vision. And, should China succeed, it would be a crucial test for the Asian giant, and, simultaneously, for the future of the EU.

⁸¹ Misiągiewicz, J. and Misiągiewicz, M., op. cit., 33.

⁸² Id.

⁸³ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁴ China, the 16+1 format and the EU, European Parliament – Briefing, op. cit., 8.



6. THE REACTION OF THE EU

EU's reaction is laid out in two essential documents: "Connecting Europe & Asia - The EU strategy" and "Towards a new EU policy approach to China 21st EU-China Summit – April 2019". Both documents have been authored by the EP.

The first said document follows the style of BRI, given that one of its cornerstones is connectivity. Moreover, it mentions terms as "people", "society" or "environment". The document has a social perspective⁸⁵.

The second document states the following:

"In a fairly unusual move ahead of the forthcoming EU-China summit, on 12 March 2019, shortly before the EU-China High-Level Strategic Dialogue of 18 March, the EU published a 'strategic outlook' for EU-China relations, to be debated at that week's European Council meeting. The paper refers to a shift in the balance of challenges and opportunities the EU faces in its ties with China; it moves away from portraying China as a strategic partner towards an issue-based, differentiated framing of China as a cooperation partner, a negotiating partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival. It spells out three goals: to 'deepen its engagement with China to promote common interests at global level', based on clearly defined interests and principles; to 'seek more balanced and reciprocal economic relations'; and to 'adapt to changing economic realities and strengthen its own domestic policies and industrial base'. It sets out 10 actions, and stresses that Member States need to apply a uniform approach to China to achieve these goals"⁸⁶.

There are two key factors in the above mentioned statement. Firstly, the EP demands from China "more balanced and reciprocal economic relations". The term "more balanced" concerns the trade imbalance, and the term "reciprocal" refers to the level playing field, two common terms in the EU's wording regarding China. Secondly, the EP requires from the EU a "uniform approach to China", i.e. unity. In the unlikely event that both aims were achieved in the short term, the EU would reach an ideal status in its relations with China.

The same document, stressing some of the key elements of the EU's policies regarding China, states the following:

"In its resolution on the state of EU-China relations, the EP called for enhanced EU engagement with China on global challenges and in support of multilateralism,

⁸⁵ "Connecting Europe&Asia – The EU strategy", European Parliament, Available at https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/europe_asia_connectivity_factsheet_1.pdf (Last visited on 02/07/2019).

In this document, the word *connectivity* is mentioned six times, which shows the importance attached to such concept.

⁸⁶ "Towards a new EU policy approach to China 21st EU-China Summit – April 2019", *At a glance*, April 2019, available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/637913/EPRS_ATA\(2019\)637913_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/637913/EPRS_ATA(2019)637913_EN.pdf) (Last visited on 02/07/2019).

building on successful cooperation on peacekeeping and anti-piracy. It stresses that China-led initiatives require a unified EU response and that the imbalance in EU-China economic ties needs to be tackled"⁸⁷.

Once again, the EU stresses the importance of unity within the EU.

Moreover, the EU-China Summit (Brussels, 9 April 2019) Joint statement submits what follows:

"The two sides will continue to forge synergies between the EU strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia as well as the EU Trans-European Transport Networks and China's Belt and Road Initiative, and welcome the agreement, in the framework of the EU-China Connectivity Platform, on the terms of reference for the Joint Study on sustainable Railway-based Corridors between Europe and China. The two sides will enhance communication within the framework of the EU-China Connectivity Platform"⁸⁸.

Thus, interconnectivity is becoming a key element of the EU agenda regarding China. The text above mentions the terms "forge synergies" and "joint study". This could be a humble and realistic approach to the situation. Cooperation could be a possibility. Time will speak.

BRI might well have unexpected effects on the EU, as stated by Parag Khanna and Kishore Mahbubani:

"Equally importantly, the surge in Chinese investment in Africa serves Europe's fundamental long-term interests. Only the economic development of Africa will prevent more migrants going into Europe"⁸⁹.

This is another outlook on the effects of BRI on the EU's cohesion. However, this remains to be seen, and it will be barely possible to assess the cause-effect relation.

7. CONCLUSION

In a globalized world, any minor move could have faraway resonances, let alone such huge enterprises as TRACECA and BRI. The basic comparison between both sides is: which side is coming closer to the other? So far, China is drawing much closer to the EU than vice versa. Hence, it is up to the EU to respond and adapt to the situation.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸⁸ EU-China Summit Joint statement Brussels, 9 April 2019, op. cit.

⁸⁹ Khanna, P. and Mahbubani, K., op. cit.



Some authors, e.g. Jane Golley⁹⁰ and Tom Holland⁹¹, consider that, regarding BRI, perhaps the Asian giant will fail. For the time being, it is difficult to ascertain. The fact is that China is one of the few world players undertaking such enormous enterprises. Meanwhile, the EU is not speaking with a single voice to face such huge challenges.

BRI is an enormous and risky task for China, but it could also boost its chances to become, once and for all, a world player. The EU has already lost the initiative, and perhaps should start studying the Chinese idiosyncrasy, and thus follow a better approach to its competitor. For instance, the Chinese think that in every crisis there is an opportunity. BRI might be a suitable test for the Europeans to show their resilience, and the EU deserves its place as a major world economy with a future. Given the asymmetry in favor of BRI, compared to TRACECA, a proper reaction could be to make joint efforts in order to enhance Eurasian connectivity. The EU is already starting to move in this direction, as shown in the 2019's EU-China Summit Joint statement.

There are evident asymmetries in magnitude and scope between TRACECA and BRI. In this respect, China's AIIB is a giant (half the size of the World Bank, and growing) compared to the EU financial resources concerning the EU-China interconnectivity.

BRI might be a boost for China's rule-making aspirations, i.e. BRI could raise China to the category of order-shaper. However, BRI is only part of China's long-term globalising strategy.

A key element in the whole issue is interconnectivity which is not only the means for China's production to reach all corners of the world, but also the tool for China to spread its influence. Furthermore, interconnectivity is both a method, and a goal in itself, as it helps China to sell its own railway industry and finally, to project a powerful image as a world champion. Moreover, interconnectivity is also intermodal, as China makes nearly no exceptions regarding its progress: it can promote railways, buy ports or acquire sovereign portfolios. All this network results in more influence.

Unity within the EU is not a choice, but a necessity, as no EU member State could hope to keep balanced relations with China. The EU should consider undertaking a deep renewal of its policies regarding BRI, including at least the following issues: attaining more cohesion, invigorating its decision-making proceedings and improving its long-term vision. In this new EU phase, started after the designation of the European institutions in May 2019 (new European

⁹⁰ Quoted by Alexander, R., op. cit.

⁹¹ Holland, T., "Why China's 'One Belt, One Road' plan is doomed to fail", *South China Morning Post*, Published: 3:00pm, 6 Aug, 2016,

Available at <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/1999544/why-chinas-one-belt-one-road-plan-doomed-fail>

Last visited on 30/08/2019.

Parliament, Commission, the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, etc.) the relationship with China is a critical issue.

The key question is to find the suitable instruments and formats. So far, the framework analyzed in this article (TRACECA, BRI, 16+1, Southern Europe) is, to say the least, controversial, because it does not create a suitable environment for a common policy. Cases such as Italy, Greece or the CEE show that the pace of China's progress has been much faster than expected.

The EU and China should make a coordinated effort to rebalance their relationship, as History has taught us that symmetrical relations are more stable, lasting and peaceful.

Obviously, the EU should learn from the previous naivety in its relationship with China, as Emmanuel Macron has admitted⁹². The EU and China need to become more cooperative, since they have common interests, and thus may enjoy a great measure of win-win cooperation.

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⁹² Cátedra China, Prensa, "Unión Europea y China frente a frente: rivalidad, competencia, o cooperación", 07/05/2019, Available at <https://www.catedrachina.com/single-post/2019/05/07/Uni%C3%B3n-Europea-y-China-frente-a-frente-rivalidad-competencia-o-cooperaci%C3%B3n> Last visited on 30/08/2019.



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