

Chapter 7

The Belt and Road Initiative and Comprehensive Regionalism in Central Asia

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The Belt and Road (BR) initiative, launched in 2013, aims at “establishing a community of common interest, common responsibility and common destiny with 4,4 billion people in 65 countries in Europe, Asia and Africa along the route”.¹ Official and academic texts mostly highlight regional characteristics of BR, while theoretical and conceptual studies are very rare. Only few studies have an explicit focus on its implications for comparative regionalism. Several reasons may account for this situation. As recently as in 2015, Francois Godement was pointing to scarcity of information concerning BR initiative.² Lack of clear information and understanding about BR both within and outside China has led, according to Jia Qingguo, to multiplication of different interpretations about the nature of BR.³ This makes BR appear as an ambiguous project, which in turn prevents further efforts of clear conceptualization.⁴ Moreover, it is a common practice that any Chinese project is immediately scrutinized for its geopolitical consequences and security implications for its immediate neighborhood as well as the entire international system. This practice has already resulted in a vast literature based on zero-sum game assumptions of Chinese rise in international politics. The BR is seen as another project initiated by China in its quest for global leadership and there is a risk that the lack of conceptual frameworks may perpetuate geopolitical analyses of the BR.

Geopolitics should not become the main perspective to bring answers about nature and consequences of the Belt and Road initiative. While this is not in the interest of Central Asian countries, China is also openly trying to avoid portrayals of the BR as a geopolitical tool. Chinese officials and scholars are aware that continuing ambiguousness about the nature of BR and its depiction as a geopolitical instrument may inhibit the advancement of BR.⁵ In March 8, 2015, Wang Yi, Chinese Foreign Minister, refused to compare BR to US Marshal Plan by affirming that the Belt and Road initiative “is the product of inclusive cooperation, not a tool of geopolitics, and must not be viewed with an outdated Cold War mentality”.⁶

Consequently, they aim developing alternative conceptual frameworks focusing on win-win aspects of the initiative.

The need for greater transparency and clear language to explain BR is affirmed by countries targeted by the initiative. Although many South East Asian states view the BR as an opportunity, it is no secret that there is a ‘deficit of trust’ between China and its southern neighbors. Therefore, China’s neighbors expect a substantial explanations from China concerning the initiative. In a recent op-ed, Tommy Koh from Singapore proposed three suggestions to the Chinese in order to increase chances of success of the BR:

First, China should work harder to explain its proposal and to gain the understanding and trust of China's neighbours. [...] Second, China should adopt an open and inclusive approach. All countries should be welcome to participate and no country should be excluded. Third, China should listen to the region. It should sincerely solicit the views of the countries of the region and be prepared to take them into account in future iterations of the proposal. The best outcome is for the proposal to evolve from being seen as a Chinese project to being the region's project. It is desirable for China to obtain the region's ownership of the proposal.⁷

Securing other regions’ ownership is important for the success of the BR in its conceptualization stage. It has yet to realize its take-off. Ernst Haas described *take-off* as a moment when a given idea about regionalism is adopted by ‘politically crucial elite as its own and [the process of regionalism] has acquired a momentum of its own’.⁸ For BR to realize its *take-off*, there is a need for conceptual frameworks that help to nurture a new discourse on BR, understandable and adoptable by all interested parties.

One direction of such conceptualization effort of the BR in academic literature is comparative regionalism. Throughout official speeches and documents on the BR, there are a number of references to regional frameworks and structures. Wang Yiwei, who produced the most comprehensive account of BR from a Chinese perspective, states that BR aims to create a new model of regional cooperation.⁹ Zeng Lingliang argues that the initiative will be realized through two main instruments: regional integration and interstate partnership. For him, regional integration and strategic partnerships will help pave way for a more substantial phenomenon that of regional community based on shared interests, shared destiny and shared responsibilities.¹⁰ Moreover, the BR evolves in the context of ongoing regional integration projects, which it inevitably has to engage.

A “World of Regions” as Context of the Belt and Road

Region-related frameworks and theories are essential for understanding contemporary international relations.¹¹ The surge of regionalism after the Cold War and its increasing importance for understanding and explaining various processes in world politics is acknowledged by a publication of Oxford Handbook of Comparative Regionalism in 2016.¹² Scholars across different disciplines of social sciences agree on importance of regional frameworks in world politics. Some scholars argued that the post-Cold war era could signify a return to regional sovereignty where the architecture of world politics would be based on regional structures.¹³ This vision of world order based on regions was also defined as “a world of regions”. The term was proposed by Peter Katzenstein noted that we are living in a world which is sustained by regional orders.¹⁴ Barry Buzan and Ole Waever argue that the end of the Cold war when the world order was formed around bipolar structure left place for a new power constellation. In this power constellation, international system is composed of several regional orders defined as regional security complexes.¹⁵

If Katzenstein and Buzan & Waever focused on power-based implications of regionalism, other scholars engaged with comparative regionalism studies from value-based perspectives. For these scholars, regionalism is an alternative to competition-driven scenarios of great power rivalry or hegemonic environments. Regionalism enables construction of participative regional orders on the basis of common interests and values.¹⁶ Evaluating theory and practice of regionalism in contemporary world, Amitav Acharya speaks about “the emerging regional architecture of world politics”. For him, regional orders will be essential elements of emerging world order. For understanding this global order, it is vital to study the regional orders: how they are constructed and organized; what kind of political, economic, cultural and strategic interactions occur both within and between regions; and, what are the relationships between regional orders and the international system.¹⁷

States act as region-builders to pursue different objectives according to van Langenhove and Marchesi: 1) States initiate regionalism to create ‘single market’; 2) States use regionalism to govern regional public goods like security or common resources, This will help them to manage ‘problems that are internal to the regional area’; 3) States engage in regionalism to position their region as an independent player in international politics.

Participants of this kind of regionalism are motivated by ‘an ambition to operate as one actor on the international scene’.¹⁸

Comparative regionalism distinguishes between outside-in and inside-out approaches to region-building. For Iver Neuman, inside-out perspective highlight endogenous dynamics leading to formation of regions around a center, while outside-in approach ‘privileges the interests and interaction of great powers relevant to the region’.¹⁹ On the other hand, works of Peter Katzenstein and Barry Buzan & Ole Waever focus on outside-in perspective and explain how great powers shape regional orders by acting as external initiators and promoters of regionalism projects in Asia, Europe and others parts of the World.²⁰ Amitav Acharya invites more nuanced approach to complement the latter top-down power-constructed approaches by shifting focus to how local actors responses to external power involvement determine outcomes of regionalism projects.²¹

Another feature of contemporary regionalism is focus on comprehensive regionalism. Even if not a distinct concept, comprehensive regionalism is used to refer to certain characteristics of regionalism projects in particular regional contexts. Sergiu Celac and Panagiota Manoli described regionalism projects focused on Black Sea area as an example of comprehensive regionalism to refer to their multidimensional and inclusive nature. For them, regionalism within the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) framework represents a multidimensional scheme of cooperation covering a broad spectrum of activities’.²² They also underline the fact that BSEC could neither be classified as trade bloc or security community as it pursues different objectives at the same time. Sergio Caballero Santos used comprehensive regionalism to widen analysis of Mercosur to include ideational factors in order to understand evolution of this regional bloc in the aftermath of 1999-2002 crisis.²³ Björn Hettne and Frederick Söderbaum also emphasize the comprehensiveness of regional projects by distinguishing between old and new regionalism. The latter, according to this view, is “a comprehensive, multifaceted and multidimensional process, implying a change of a particular region from relative heterogeneity to increased homogeneity with regard to a number of dimensions, the most important being culture, security, economic policies and political regimes’.²⁴ To capture this complex process they propose the New Regionalism Approach (NRA) that is different from the Washington Consensus approach to new regionalism. Whereas “Washington conceives the new regionalism as a trade promotion policy, building on regional arrangements rather than a multilateral framework, for NRA

regionalism is a comprehensive multidimensional package, including economic, security, environmental and many other issues".²⁵

From this angle, BR is situated in a world where regionalism is a constant feature. Drawing on initial BR documents' references to different regions, various regional organizations and regional multilateral institutions, the objectives pursued by China appear to correspond to the three objectives of regionalism identified by Van Langenhove and Marchesi. Moreover, prior to the BR, both China and targeted countries across Eurasia were already engaged in substantial region-building efforts. Hence, comparative regionalism studies not only explain BR dynamics in a novel way, but also indicate the crucial problems and opportunities. In particular, the BR carries potential for realization of comprehensive regionalism project in Central Asia that would respond better to local expectations of the region.

China and Overlapping Regionalisms in Central Asia

Central Asia holds symbolic value for the BR initiative. During his visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013, President Xi Jinping officially unveiled China's plan for Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) for the first time. It was also during the SCO summit in Astana in December 2014, when he elaborated on major contents of the SREB, a component of BR.²⁶ All Central Asian countries are targeted by the BR initiative and region may attract significant investment. The BR thus seems to be a framework that could bring together China and Central Asia under a single regional framework. Although China and Central Asian countries have long and rich history of mutual relations, they are mostly viewed as parts of different regions. Buzan and Waever identify China as part of East Asian Regional Security Complex (RSC) and Central Asia as belonging to post-Soviet RSC.²⁷ In regionalism studies these regions are analyzed separately with exception of research on Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In this section we review literature on Central Asia as a region and its relations with China, particularly in the framework of the BR.

Central Asia is often presented as a region in the heart of strategic rivalry involving several external players. It is identified as a strategic backyard both for Russia and China. At the same time, it is located in the proximity of Iran and Afghanistan, main spots of strategic instability and uncertainty in Eurasia. This element creates interest for Central Asia in

countries involved in military operations in Afghanistan and in negotiations dealing with Iran. The US and other NATO countries are among the most interested. Moreover, Central Asia owing to its vast oil and gas resources is to become a defining factor in global energy policy.²⁸

Due to these features, the Central Asian region attracts major powers of Eurasian politics, with Russia, China and the US being the most prominent. According to realist and geopolitical approaches, these external actors are involved in a complex web of relationships defined by the logic of rivalry and designed to shape the evolution of the Central Asian regional space and to control its strategic and energy resources. The prevalence of perceptions of rivalry is pushing Central Asian states to adopt a traditional balance of power strategy as their main foreign policy tool. According to Farkhod Tolipov, Central Asian countries have adopted the balance of power policy as their major foreign policy instrument vis-à-vis foreign great powers and among themselves.²⁹ On the other hand, external powers “fight for the identity of the region, for integrating it to this or that part of Eurasia”.³⁰ As put bluntly by Ulughbek Khasanov, “Central Asia is situated in Mackinder’s Heartland, the arena of international confrontation, and should act accordingly”.³¹

This state of affairs leaves very little room for the independent foreign policy by Central Asian states and such initiatives as the BR are usually viewed as an attempt of one external power, China in this case, to gain more influence in the region. From this perspective, some experts compared BR initiative to Marshall Plan or a competitive strategy of China to gain more influence over its neighborhood. Simon Shen discusses such motives as “countering the rival”, which is US, and “fostering strategic divisions” in other non-China led regional projects.³² Xi Jinping’s initiative is presented as rival to Putin’s Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) project and plan to interconnect the EEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt is “last-gasp effort” of Moscow to keep the EEU relevant in the face of Chinese massive investment in Central Asia.³³

Viewing Central Asia as a chessboard for great power rivalry, where Russia has greater influence among other important players, most notably China and United States, promotes certain images of the BR as yet another geopolitical or geo-economic scheme. This strand of literature draws a picture of Central Asia as balancing between great power interests and ambitions. While a geopolitical approach can explain some of the ongoing processes in the region, it provides too simplistic picture, particularly in case of explaining support and resistance of Central Asian states to such initiatives as thr BR. At the same time, this view

reduces the BR initiative to a geopolitical project and, as a political discourse, may even tend to undermine the willingness of Central Asian countries to engage with it. Yet, there are different possible explanations.

No More Chessboard but Strategic Links in Central Asia

The emergence of the BR initiative and readiness of Central Asian states to undertake it is not merely about a geopolitical rivalry or economic benefit. It has long roots in history of both China and Central Asia. The Silk Road was one of the first examples of globalization that became the first largest free-trade zone during the Mongol Empire.³⁴ The greatness of Central Asian cities and Chinese dynasties is often associated with times when Silk Road was a primary link to connect vast lands of Eurasian continent.

Long before announcement of the BR, officials and scholars have discussed the Greater Eurasia project. Before the Crimea incident and conflict in East Ukraine, Putin was presenting Eurasian integration as an initiative for linking Europe and Asia. However, Russia has done little for this project to materialize, as it can be seen in Western Europe – Western China International Transit Corridor. This initiative attracted international and Chinese investors into road construction, but was almost ignored by Russia that promotes Trans-Siberian railways alternative. Scholars in the region have also discussed the idea of ‘Greater Eurasia’. According to Emerson, ‘Greater Eurasia’ is a concept that refers to the cooperation among all countries in Eurasian supercontinent with focus on land connections.³⁵ The necessity of web of links among Eurasian states despite their cultural and political differences is referred to as ‘pragmatic Eurasianism’ and presented as antipode of narrow and imperialistic interpretations of ‘Eurasianists’ such as Alexander Dugin in Russia. Pragmatic Eurasianism is mostly based on economic linkages with little attention to ideology and inclusive of Europe and Asia.³⁶

As it was mentioned previously, BR needs to secure the target region’s ownership of the initiative in order to succeed.³⁷ This argument is also valid for Central Asia, too. The region is known as a space where a comprehensive regionalism failed to take off so far. Since their independence in 1991, Central Asian states established several regional organizations. Central Asia Cooperation Organization and its predecessors, which represented exclusively intra-regional frameworks were terminated after the emergence of Eurasian integration

structures with Russian participation. The latter also failed so far to include all of Central Asian countries. The SCO is the most inclusive regional organization with China, Russia and four Central Asian countries involved. However, the SCO is still more associated with regional security club rather than a genuinely comprehensive regional integration structure. Opinions and expectations on the state of Central Asian regionalism are thus still ambiguous.³⁸

In this section, we argue that the BR for Central Asian states is not a mere opportunity to balance against Russia and other great powers, but a careful analysis of this initiative should consider issues of identity and peculiarities of regional politics. First, the BR can contribute to development of a new regional identity as of strategic link rather than a chessboard. Second, regional or global initiatives that involve Central Asia have to consider certain factors to attract support of domestic actors in the region. Three crucial factors can be identified for a success of initiatives such as the BR: (1) political independence; (2) economic opportunity; and (3) a stable security situation.

The development of outside-in identity for Central Asia as of unstable region subject to rivalry among Great Powers³⁹, so-called 'Eurasian Balkans'⁴⁰, potential source of religious extremism, and peripheral geography, be it true or questionable, puts additional pressures for economic and political developments in the region. Therefore, it is natural that there are attempts to develop more positive inside-out identity of the region as a whole or of a single state. The fate of regionalism in Central Asia always attracted a number of different external actors. Several great powers like China, Russia or US are directly involved in shaping different regional institutions and initiatives in Central Asia.

There are also different international organizations and actors like EU or ADB supporting regional projects focusing on Central Asia. Central Asian regionalism includes thus a combination of both outside-in and inside-out perspectives the former being more prevalent. This is because regional projects with involvement of external powers like Eurasian integration project or Shanghai space proved more viable than exclusively Central Asian regional integration initiative. However, the absence of formal Central Asian regional frameworks should not lead to neglect endogenous dynamics of the region. BR initiative may have more chances to succeed if it is able to address preferences and needs of local region-building actors.

For example, Kazakh leadership's promotion of Eurasian regionalism and presenting Kazakhstan as "Eurasian state" is a discursive tool to position Kazakhstan at the centre of the continent rather than accepting external positioning of a country as the part of the unstable region.⁴¹ This kind of identification of the region as the center of Eurasian continent is also used by other leaders of Central Asian states. Mainly infrastructural and connectivity developing initiatives, such as SREB, are usually welcome to boost this identity.⁴² The region's function as link in global trade associated with the period of greatness and prominent influence of the states that existed along the web of routes known as ancient Silk Road. Therefore, any initiative that aims to re-establish these routes and bring the Silk Road back to existence seems attractive for Central Asians as it helps to construct positive identity of the region.

Besides supporting inside-out identity construction of the region, the SREB initiative fits the criteria for successful regionalism project or three factors that we have presented previously. The first factor of political independence requires from any regionalism project or an external actor to respect the sovereignty of individual Central Asian states. In case of the SREB it is satisfied by very cautious approach of Chinese officials that present BR as an initiative rather than a project or a strategy. While usage of terms such as project or strategy may sound very interventionist to the neighbors of China, the term 'initiative' is inviting and leaves room for supporting or rejecting it. So far, there were no claims, at least on official level, of any political or other reforms within the framework of the BR that can sound disturbing to ruling regimes of Central Asia. In his speech, Xi emphasized that 'China respects the development paths and policies chosen by the peoples of regional countries, and will never interfere in the domestic affairs of Central Asian nations. China will never seek a dominant role in regional affairs, nor try to nurture a sphere of influence.'⁴³

Any rhetoric on neo-imperial ambitions or China's sphere of influence within the BR can cause serious opposition from variety of forces in the region.⁴⁴ In such situation, constituencies in Central Asian states would rely on nationalist discourse and apply significant pressure on officials to keep the cooperation with China low profile.

Moreover, BR builds on positive experience of the SCO which has been able to retain support and engagement of Central Asian countries due to its explicit commitment to sovereignty of its member states. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states and China have peacefully solved previous border disputes and decreased military presence in

the cross-border regions. The discourse generated by Chinese officials is very cautious and respectful to country's neighbors. In return, Central Asian states restrain themselves from any interference to Uyghur issue and are open to Chinese investment. Nevertheless, this should not lead to conclusion that the rise of China and its regional initiatives are desecuritized.

The securitization of Chinese initiatives is common in Central Asian societies. Some actors present investments from China as a threat to the security of their nations. Particularly, the acquisition or long-term rent of land by Chinese companies in Tajikistan led to popular resentment.⁴⁵ In Kazakhstan, the statements about the possibility of renting vast amounts of land to Chinese companies in 2009 led to protests. In another case, the rumors that Chinese companies benefit from changes to law that gives foreigners the right for long-term rent of land resulted in a series of protests in 2016.⁴⁶ These were serious challenges for ruling regimes and in the aftermath of the 2016 events, the President of Kazakhstan acted immediately by introducing a moratorium for implementation of the law in order to regain control over the situation. These cases show that China needs more investments in the 'people to people' approach.

It should be noted that by using the concept of securitization we neither imply nor reject the possibility that certain actors in Central Asia exaggerate the security threat for some political ends. We use this concept in neutral terms and agree that 'desecuritization is not always better than securitization'.⁴⁷ The news on Chinese investors' reluctance to hire local staff or their extensive use of land often appear in Central Asian media.

The second factor of economic opportunity is core of the BR and it is supported by inflow of vast Chinese investment into Central Asian states that has started long before the announcement of this initiative. The projects in close cooperation between China and Central Asian states include investment in oil and gas pipelines, the construction of railways and roads, and the establishment of the Khorgos dry port. The existence of completed and ongoing projects and readiness of China to invest billions of dollars via Silk Road Fund and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank into infrastructure development makes BR an attractive initiative for decision makers in Central Asia. As noted by Yang Jiang in this volume, China and Japan are attractive partners for Central Asian countries, as they do not promote radical liberalization and support gradual reforms.⁴⁸

The third factor that determines the outcome of regionalism initiatives in Central Asia is their contribution to regional stability. This factor influenced the responses of Central Asian

states to several regionalism projects initiated by the United States. Before actual C5+1 initiative that brings together representatives of the US and Central Asian countries for non-committing dialogues, the US tried to promote the project of Greater Central Asia.⁴⁹ These initiatives were meant to strengthen sovereignty of Central Asian states by reducing their dependence on Russia and to promote economic and trade linkages between Central and South Asia. Despite a clear commitment to sovereignty of Central Asian states and the presence of a critical economic and trade potential, these initiatives lacked support in the region. Such reluctance can be explained by the factor of regional security. The states included in Greater Central Asia project, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, are close to Central Asia and offer crucial access to the sea, but they are overwhelmed by regional and domestic political and security conflicts. Central Asian countries couldn't simply engage themselves to create integrated space with South Asian region and Afghanistan as this move harbors security uncertainty. Hence, they showed little interest to US initiatives of building stronger links between Central Asia and South Asia.⁵⁰

Conclusions: Towards Comprehensive Regionalism

The expectations and perceptions of external actors are important for the success of China's Belt and Road initiative. If the BR becomes associated with a zero-sum, conflict-driven agenda, this may reduce the likelihood of other countries' cooperation to achieve objectives of the initiative. This scenario has all potential to unfold in regions like Central Asia where we've observed the discursive consolidation of a new great game and security competition throughout last two decades. Several regionalism projects failed to take off due to prevalence of zero-sum assumptions. Both China and its partners are aware of these risks. Therefore, they are in search of a new language, which is understandable by all and will contribute to the advancement of BR objectives.

This study contributes to comparative regionalism studies by viewing the BR and Central Asian states responses to it as comprehensive regionalism project with multiple dimensions rather than 'zero-sum' game. For the BR to be successful it should follow comprehensive regionalism logic and motivate voluntarily involvement of targeted states through providing inclusive framework for cooperation. We explain this necessity by fact that Central Asian policy-makers and opinion leaders are not ready to decide among different

priorities needed to ensure socio-economic coherence and political independence in the region. The BR needs to adopt a multi-dimensional approach as political, economic or societal challenges are intertwined in the regional context. Hence, in the case of Central Asia, one of the priorities for the BR ought to be the respect and comprehension for concerns of political independence, aspirations for economic development and need for security and stability. For Central Asian countries, these three factors are equally important and they cannot be considered separately from each other. Central Asian countries also expect that BR initiative will be inclusive in scope so that existing regional and international structures of which they are part can be positively involved in realization of the initiative aims. Pushing Central Asian countries to incline to particular regional organization at the expense of others may be perceived as part of geopolitical competition for primacy in the region and may cause backlash. Any regionalism initiative, including the BR, may experience lukewarm reactions from the region if it fails to accept this logic. On the other hand, the BR may lead to a real take-off phase of regionalism in Central Asia, if it succeeds to come up with a discourse based on a comprehensive approach to regionalism.

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