

The Belt and Road Initiative and Uzbekistan's New Strategy of Development: Sustainability of mutual relevance and positive dynamics

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Abstract

This text offers a brief evaluation of how dynamism of China- Uzbekistan bilateral relationship may be transformed to synergy necessary for the success of the BRI initiative. This will be done through three parts. First part briefly underlines overlap between New Strategy of Development of Uzbekistan and the BRI of China. The second part will highlight positive dynamics in China-Uzbekistan relationship as well as features of the BRI as a solid basis for successful participation of Uzbekistan in the BRI. The final part will propose discussion of some caveats which should be addressed by parties to strengthen the involvement of Uzbekistan in the initiative further. This paper argues that current ambiguity around ultimate aims and form of the BRI constitutes both a challenge and opportunity to further involve Uzbekistan and other countries in the implementation of the initiative. Precisely, the presence of ambiguity creates room for generating dynamics of local ownership of the BRI by target countries. In its turn, the emergence of local ownership is widely seen as necessary for the realization of the Belt and Road project.

Keywords: *China, Uzbekistan, Belt and Road Initiative, Development strategy*

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Introduction

In 2013, China unveiled its most ambitious global initiative which came to be known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched as a trillion-dollar infrastructure initiative, the initiative holds great potential for redefining trade and economic relations on a global scale. The BRI represents blend of globalism with regionalism as it intends to reshape globalization by improving existing ties and building new linkages between regions of Asia, Africa, and Europe. In this design, Central Asia holds a prominent place. This is underlined by the fact that the BRI was announced to the world for the first time from Astana, Kazakhstan. This text offers a brief evaluation of how dynamism of China- Uzbekistan bilateral relationship may be transformed to synergy necessary for the success of the BRI initiative. This will be done through three parts. First part briefly underlines overlap between New Strategy of Development of Uzbekistan and the BRI of China. The second part will highlight positive dynamics in China-Uzbekistan relationship as well as features of the BRI as a solid basis for successful participation of Uzbekistan in the BRI. The final part will propose discussion of some caveats which should be addressed by parties to strengthen the involvement of Uzbekistan in the initiative further. This paper argues that current ambiguity around ultimate aims and form of the BRI constitutes both a challenge and opportunity to further involve Uzbekistan and other countries in the implementation of the initiative. Precisely, the presence of ambiguity creates room for generating dynamics of local ownership of the BRI by target countries. In its turn, the emergence of local ownership is widely seen as necessary for the realization of the Belt and Road project.

1. Relevance of the BRI for New Strategy of Development of Uzbekistan

Both China and Uzbekistan are dynamic actors on the international stage today. Uzbekistan has peacefully experienced political transition and is using this positive experience to initiate comprehensive social and economic reforms. China has been able to benefit from current international situation to position itself as powerful and responsible global actor with much to offer for global development. Both countries laid out strategies which showcase their developmental objectives and international ambitions. Uzbekistan elaborated a New Strategy for Development which contains detailed agenda spanning administrative, social, economic, and foreign policy spheres.² China has launched the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 which has since been actively debated across the world.³ While there is a difference of level between the two, Chinese and Uzbek

² Action Strategy on Five Priority Areas of the Country's Development for 2017-2021, adopted by Presidential Decree on Action Strategy for Further Development of Republic of Uzbekistan, 7 February 2017

³ Following texts constitute initial official framework of the Belt and Road Initiative: Xi Jinping, "Promote Friendship Between Our Peoples and Work Together to Build a Bright Future" Speech at Nazarbayev University, Astana (7 September 2013); Xi Jinping, Speech to Indonesian Parliament, Jakarta, (3 October 2013); National Development and Reform Commission, "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century

approaches to development may prove complementary to each other and create new opportunities for further consolidation of bilateral links.

1.1 The Belt and Road Initiative (OBOR)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BR), 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.’⁴ Described as the most ambitious foreign policy project adopted by China, the Belt and Road initiative - made up of two components, Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – aims to create greater economic integration between countries along the routes which connect East Asia with Western Europe.⁵ According to Yu Cheng and colleagues, the Belt ‘mirrors the Ancient Silk Road,’ and it continues to represent a favourite route of exchange between China and Europe. The Road which links China to the Mediterranean is one of the most important international trade routes of the future and will connect China to important developing markets.⁶

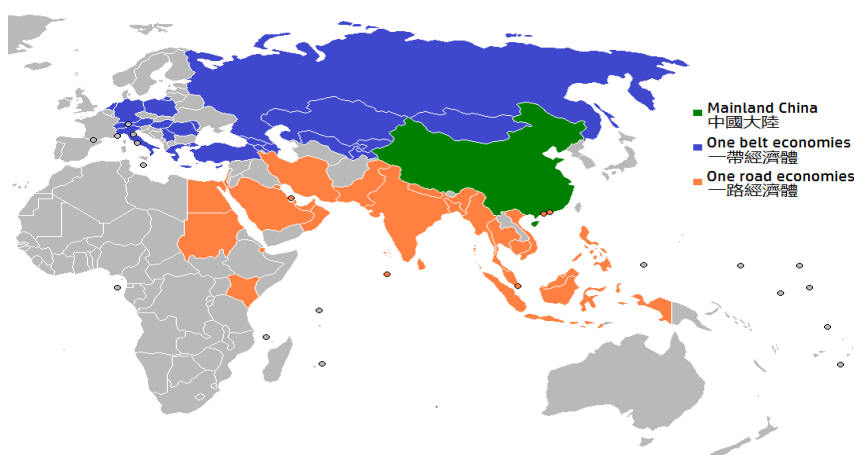


Photo 1: Countries associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons)

In his inaugural declaration on the BRI, Xi Jinping focused on the necessity to ‘forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region.’⁷ Official Chinese document on visions and actions for realizing the BRI identified five major goals of the initiative: Policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds. So far, aspects of creating an infrastructure network connecting all

Maritime Silk Road”. Document issued by National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, with State Council authorization (2015)

⁴ Wang Yiwei, *The belt and road initiative. What will China offer the world in its rise?* (New World Press 2016)

⁵ Maximilian Mayer (ed.), *Rethinking the Silk Road: China's Belt and Road Initiative and Emerging Eurasian Relations* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018)

⁶ Yu Cheng, Lilei Song, Lihe Huang (eds.), *The Belt & Road Initiative in the Global Arena Chinese and European Perspectives* (Palgrave Macmillan 2018), 266 p.

⁷ Xi Jinping (7 September 2013)

sub-regions covered by the BRI are attracting the attention of observers.⁸ Practical realization of this infrastructure network is meant to be through Chinese investments and with the involvement of Chinese construction and engineering groups which enjoy strong expertise in infrastructure projects. The BRI represents thus China's massive global investment plan as well as tool facilitating framework for extending the global reach of Chinese companies. For this China has been transferring funds to state-owned banks but also established a Silk Road Fund. Overall estimates of planned investments border \$1 trillion mark.⁹ Observers of Chinese domestic political and economic developments put the figure even higher. For them, China intends to invest a cumulative \$4 trillion in the BRI countries to close the Asian 'infrastructure gap.'¹⁰ As Financial Times reports, 'with \$900 billion of planned investments ranging from ports in Pakistan and Sri Lanka to high-speed railways in East Africa to gas pipelines crossing Central Asia, China's One Belt, One Road project (Obor) is arguably the largest overseas investment drive ever launched by a single country'.¹¹ For reaching global investment plans, China also intends to attract funds from its partners. For this purpose, China initiated the creation of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which started with \$100 bln initial capital which is to be used to fund the BRI projects. As of late 2016, Financial Times estimates of the funding allocated for the BRI stand at \$292 bln.¹²

Even if infrastructure building and investment plans attract the immediate attention of outside observers, the BRI shouldn't be reduced to mere economic rationalities. Both initial documents and later behavior of China show that the BRI carries the potential for reshaping international relations and reorienting narrative of world politics in the years to come. This justifies a strong focus on developing coherent narrative and conceptual framework around the BRI on the part of Chinese actors. The goal of conceptualizing the BRI and creating a coherent narrative is shared by foreign actors as well. Since 2013, different accounts of the BRI has been emerging across Chinese and international public and scholarly spheres.¹³ For Wang Yiwei, the BRI aims to create a new model of regional cooperation.¹⁴ 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

⁸ National Development and Reform Commission (2015)

⁹ Tom Hancock, "China encircles the world with One Belt, One Road strategy", Financial Times, 4 May 2017 <https://www.ft.com/content/0714074a-0334-11e7-aa5b-6bb07f5c8e12> (accessed 18 April 2018)

¹⁰ Mayer (2018), 9.

¹¹ Hancock (4 May 2017)

¹² Gabriel Wildau and Nan Ma, "In charts: China's Belt and Road Initiative", Financial Times (11 May 2017)

¹³ For comprehensive analysis of scope, content and interpretations of the BRI, see Yiwei (2016); Cheng, Song, & Huang, eds. (2018); Mayer (2018).

¹⁴ Yiwei (2016)

community based on shared interests, shared destiny and shared responsibilities.¹⁵ From the perspective of Eurasian countries, Zhenis Kembayev proposed to see the BRI as an opportunity and process to establish a *Silk Road Union* which will be based on partnership between the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union.¹⁶ There is also growing literature which analyzes potential and implications of realization of the BRI in the Central Asian region. These analyses include both regional and bilateral frameworks.¹⁷ This text will further focus on the analysis of Uzbek-China bilateral relationship as part of the BRI.

1.2 New Strategy of Development of Uzbekistan

Since peaceful transition of political leadership in late 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been at the centre of domestic and international attention. This attention is commanded by expectations of political liberalization and economic reforms. Uzbek society and the international community expect a continuation of politics of openness, economic development and political reforms initiated since early days of his power.¹⁸ Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been so far responding to these expectations by maintaining initial focus on change. Notably, Uzbekistan's ongoing reform dynamics has crystallized around three grand directions: political and administrative reforms; economic development and industrial modernization; foreign policy opening.¹⁹ As part of this momentum, Uzbekistan recently launched a new development strategy spanning years

¹⁵ Zeng Lingliang, "Conceptual Analysis of China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Road towards a Regional Community of Common Destiny", *Chinese Journal of International Law* (2016), 517-541.

¹⁶ Zhenis Kembayev, "Implementing the Silk Road Economic Belt: from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to the Silk Road Union?" *Asia-Europe Journal* (September 2017)

¹⁷ For analysis of the implications of the BRI for Central Asia as a whole, see, among others, Troy Sternberg, Ariell Ahearn and Fiona McConnell, "Central Asian 'Characteristics' on China's New Silk Road: The Role of Landscape and the Politics of Infrastructure", *Land*, 6/55 (2017); Filippo Costa Buranelli, "One Belt One Road and Central Asia: challenges and opportunities" in Cheng, Song, & Huang, eds. (2018), 207-230; Ikboljon Qoraboyev & Kairat Moldashev in Mayer, eds. (2018), 115-130. For clear and useful analysis of the BRI through China-Kazakh bilateral relations, see Nargis Kassenova, "China's Silk Road and Kazakhstan's Bright Path: Linking Dreams of Prosperity", *Asia Policy*, 24 (2017), 110-116

¹⁸ There are numerous reports on changing dynamics of Uzbekistan in international media. As example, see: Kenneth Rapoza, 'Eurasia's latest economic reboot can be found in Uzbekistan', *Forbes*, 14 September, 2017 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2017/09/14/eurasias-new-perestroika-uzbekistan-silk-road-china/#638cb51b6f25> (accessed 17 April 2018); Neil Buckley, 'Once-repressive Uzbekistan begins a post-Karimov opening', *Financial Times*, 13 February 2018 <https://www.ft.com/content/6c37419c-0cbf-11e8-8eb7-42f857ea9f09> (accessed 17 April 2018); Ashok Sajjanhar, 'A quiet revolution taking place in Uzbekistan', *ORF Online*, 7 December 2017 <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/a-quiet-revolution-taking-place-in-uzbekistan/> (accessed 17 April 2018)

¹⁹ On these different directions of Uzbek reforms, refer to following detailed reports: Anthony C. Bowyer, "Political Reform in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan: Elections, Political Parties and Civil Society", Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, March 2018, 69 p.; Mjusa Sever, "Judicial and Governance Reform in Uzbekistan", Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, March 2018, 45 p.; Richard Weitz, "Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity under New Leadership", Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, January 2018, 55 p.; World Bank, Transition Report 2017-2018, Country Assessment: Uzbekistan.

2017-2021 which is impregnated by a philosophy of inclusive development aiming substantial reforms in five priority areas²⁰:

- *State system and public construction*
- *The rule of law and reforms of the judicial system*
- *Economic development and liberalization*
- *Development of the social sphere*
- *Security, inter-ethnic harmony and religious tolerance, and foreign policy.*

The primary goal sought by the plan of action in the sphere of economic development and liberalization is maintaining macroeconomic stability and high economic growth rates. In particular, the strategy underlines need for developing further international economic cooperation by strengthening relations with leading international and foreign financial institutions and increasing efficient use of foreign investments and credits. Section 3.2. of the Strategy contains several measures to increase the competitiveness of Uzbek economy through structural reforms, modernization and diversification. These include among others improvement of existing and creation of new free economic and industrial zones and techno-parks; development of tourism industry; liberalization and facilitation of export activities; development of transport infrastructures; or introduction of information technologies to economic, administrative and social spheres. Concerning foreign policy aims, section 5.2. of the Strategy provides for conducting ‘constructive foreign policy aimed at strengthening independence and sovereignty of the state, the establishment of security belt around Uzbekistan, ensuring stability and good neighborliness and strengthening the international image of the country.’ This section also underlines the need for improving international standing of Uzbekistan by providing pertinent information to the international community about ongoing reforms in the country.

1.3 Uzbekistan and the Belt & Road Initiative

Uzbekistan is among 65 countries covered by the Belt and Road projects. Uzbekistan is an indispensable actor to realize China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, one of the six economic corridors which make up the Belt& Road Initiative. This Asian corridor spans across five Central Asian countries as well as two countries of West Asia (sic.) which are Iran and Turkey. Costa Buranelli highlights mutual interest between the BRI and Uzbekistan from the perspective of both countries. For him, China needs to involve Uzbekistan as the latter is the ‘geographical and territorial pivot of Central Asia.’ From the perspective of Uzbekistan, the BRI could help open the corridor to the Persian Gulf, enabling expansion of commercial and trade routes for the

²⁰ Action Strategy on Five Priority Areas of the Country’s Development for 2017-2021, adopted by Presidential Decree on Action Strategy for Further Development of Republic of Uzbekistan, 7 February 2017

country.²¹ The latter point acquires particular importance taking into account recent focus of Uzbekistan to promote the export of Uzbek goods in foreign markets. Uzbekistan already stressed its readiness to participate in the Belt and Road projects through bilateral and regional platforms. Uzbekistan is a regular participant of annual China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum which is held regularly to promote cooperation between parties to build the Silk Road Economic Belt jointly. The fifth edition of China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum was held in August 2017 with main topic "Building bridges for promoting Belt Road cooperation and combining efforts to ensure peaceful development and prosperity."²²

The Belt and Road Initiative: Six Economic Corridors Spanning Asia, Europe and Africa

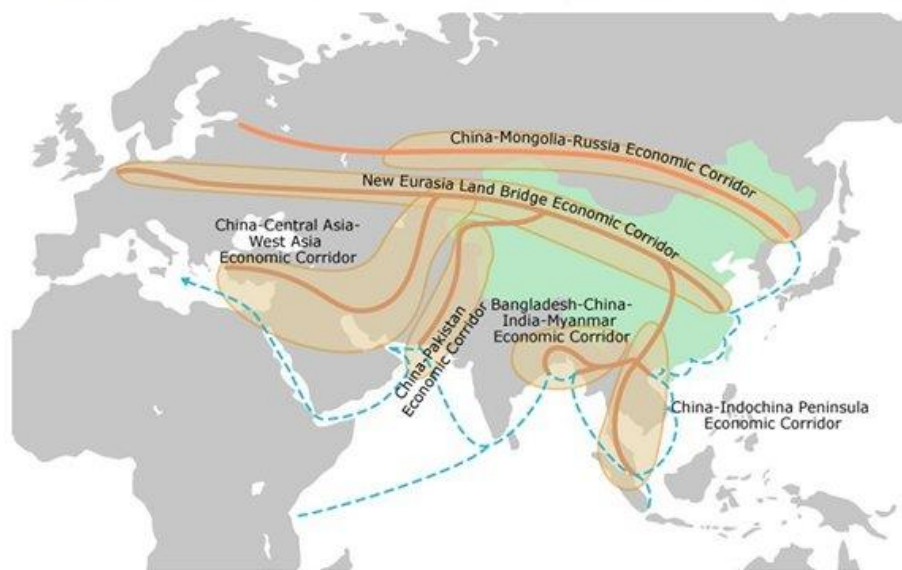


Photo 2: Main corridors along the BRI (Photo credit: Honkong Trade Development Council)

Shavkat Mirziyoyev, President of Uzbekistan, was among honor guests of the First Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing on 14-15 May 2017.²³ During his visit, President Mirziyoyev stressed Uzbekistan's willingness to 'maintain close high-level exchanges with China and enhance bilateral economic and trade cooperation, as well as ties in investment, capacity, infrastructure, water conservancy areas under the initiative.' President Xi Jinping also identified Uzbekistan among early supporters of the BRI and expressed China's intention to increase cooperation with

²¹ Costa Buranelli in Cheng, Song, & Huang, eds. (2018), 217-218.

²² "China and Central Asia: Cooperation for joint development", Secretariat of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2 August 2017 <http://eng.sectsc.org/news/20170802/309105.html> (accessed 17 April 2018)

²³ 'Belt and Road Forum kicks off in Beijing', Uzbek National News Agency, 14 May 2017 http://uza.uz/en/politics/belt-and-road-forum-kicks-off-in-beijing-14-05-2017?ELEMENT_CODE=belt-and-road-forum-kicks-off-in-beijing-14-05-2017&SECTION_CODE=politics& (accessed 17 April 2018); Catherine Putz, 'What's next for the Belt and road in Central Asia?' The Diplomat, 17 May, 2017 <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/whats-next-for-the-belt-and-road-in-central-asia/> (accessed 17 April 2018)

Uzbekistan within the framework of the initiative. Notably, Uzbekistan is among founding members of Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, a financial institution meant to be one of the main institutional pillars of the BRI.²⁴

China and Uzbekistan already established a record of solid cooperation in trade, investment, and infrastructure. According to Bakhtiyor Saidov, ambassador of Uzbekistan to China, China has been one of his country's most important investment partners. He also underlined recent increase in bilateral trade by noting expected an increase in trade to \$5 billion in 2017.²⁵ These expectations seem to be reasonable considering recent bilateral developments related to the implementation of the BRI. Most notably, during President Mirziyoyev's visit to China in May 2017, two countries signed 115 deals worth more \$23 billion on enhancing their cooperation in electrical power, oil production, chemicals, architecture, textiles, pharmaceutical engineering, transportation, infrastructure and agriculture.²⁶

These developments show that Uzbekistan's readiness to participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative. This is explained by compatibility of development agendas of both countries. China's presentation of the BRI as a framework for realizing investments and capacity-building transfers in the sphere of infrastructure resonates well with Uzbekistan's agenda of economic and industrial modernization and foreign policy objectives.

2. Dynamics of Uzbekistan's involvement in the BRI: political leadership, foreign policy activism, and language of the BRI narrative

Besides this initial overlap, there are several factors which plead for consolidation of Uzbekistan's involvement in the BRI. These factors can be identified as shared features of political leaders of China and Uzbekistan; dynamism of Uzbekistan in international arena; and sovereignty-respectful and flexible nature of the Belt & Road Initiative.

2.1 Political leaders who share a focus on the development

Leaders of both countries enjoy popularity and support within their constituencies, and solid political mandate supports their leadership. President Mirziyoyev is a newly elected president of Uzbekistan whose agenda of reforms is encouraged and supported by both domestic society and the international community.²⁷ President Jinping has recently been re-elected to its second

²⁴ 'Xi urges broader cooperation with Uzbekistan in building Belt and Road', Global Times, 12 May 2017 <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1046673.shtml> (accessed 17 April 2018)

²⁵ "Belt and Road a 'great opportunity': Uzbek official", China Daily, 12 May 2017 https://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-12/05/content_35220365.htm (accessed 17 April 2018)

²⁶ "Uzbekistan: President's China Trip Yields Giant Rewards", EurasiaNet, 16 May 2017 <https://eurasianet.org/s/uzbekistan-presidents-china-trip-yields-giant-rewards> (accessed 17 April 2018)

²⁷ Jack Farthy, "New Uzbekistan president's conciliatory tack brings hope of change", Financial Times, 5 December 2016 <https://www.ft.com/content/92a19386-baf0-11e6-8b45-b8b81dd5d080> (accessed 17 April 2018). For

mandate as Head of the Chinese state and stands as the most powerful leader since Deng Xiaoping.²⁸ Most notably, two recent developments give Xi Jinping special stature heralding 'Xi Jinping era' in the contemporary history of China: inclusion of Xi Jinping's political thought in the text of Chinese constitution²⁹ and abolition of the two-term rule which paves the way for his possible third term in the future as the first person of China.³⁰ Their peers in the world politics appreciate both leaders. If Xi Jinping is increasingly acquiring posture of a global leader, President Mirziyoyev is establishing close political relationships with foreign countries across both Western and Asian countries. Bilateral relations between political leaders are an important factor in guaranteeing the success of multilateral initiatives and enforceability of international agreements in Asia. From this point of view, the personal backing of Chinese and Uzbek leaders for implementation of the BRI may prove essential for the success of the initiative in bilateral relations. The BRI and the new Strategy for Development documents are intricately related to leaders of China and Uzbekistan. The BRI is strongly associated with the figure of Xi Jinping. Maximilian Mayer argues that this association is indeed a crucial factor for the success of the initiative. For him, Xi Jinping, who is the strongest leader since Den Xiaoping, carries political capital and bureaucratic strength to successfully realize the initiative.³¹ In Uzbekistan, President Mirziyoyev is seen by the international community as a leader with strong development agenda and carrying the potential of realizing economic reboot in the country. Financial Times quoted an Uzbek official defining President Mirziyoyev's leadership as the epoch of intensive development.³² Aware of these expectations, Mirziyoyev is playing a personal card by positioning himself as the personal guarantor for international investors. This strong political mandate and international support is a crucial factor which enables these leaders to focus on the most important task of their political program: economic rejuvenation and development.

overview of first 100 days of Mirziyoyev's term which underlines international support for reform agenda, see International Crisis Group (ICG), "Uzbekistan: The Hundred Days", Europe and Central Asia Report N°242, 15 March 2017 <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/uzbekistan/242-uzbekistan-hundred-days> (accessed 17 April 2018). For recent evaluation of first year of Mirziyoyev in office which points to positive approach of foreign actors to his foreign policy behavior, see: Neil Buckley, 'Once-repressive Uzbekistan begins a post-Karimov opening', *Financial Times*, 13 February 2018 <https://www.ft.com/content/6c37419c-0cbf-11e8-8eb7-42f857ea9f09> (accessed 17 April 2018)

²⁸ "China's Xi Jinping consolidates power with new ideology", BBC News, 20 October 2017 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-41677062> (accessed 17 April 2018)

²⁹ "Inclusion of Xi's thought a highlight", China Daily, 31 October 2017 http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-10/31/content_33922179.htm (accessed 17 April 2018)

³⁰ "China parliament scraps presidential term limits", Al Jazeera English, 11 March 2018 <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/china-xi-jinping-expected-secure-lifetime-presidency-180311062057325.html> (accessed 17 April 2018)

³¹ Mayer, eds. (2018), 8

³² Buckley (2018)

2.2 Dynamism of Uzbekistan in the international arena

Foreign policy opening and dynamism has become signature of Shavkat Mirziyoyev's leadership and 'the most public element of Uzbekistan's new strategy.'³³ Warm welcoming by international community enabled Uzbekistan to accelerate its integration into the global community. In his speech at the UN General Assembly on 19 September 2017, Mirziyoyev announced Central Asia as the priority area of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. At the same time, he also underlined Uzbekistan's readiness to initiate and strengthen partnership with all partners in advancing causes of peace, progress, and development.³⁴ International community welcomes this dynamism. Major international institutions have responded positively to Uzbekistan's new dynamism and have been upgrading their presence in the country. A significant development in this regard is the return of the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development to Uzbekistan.³⁵ The ongoing cycle of President Mirziyoyev's foreign visits shows the ambitious scope of foreign policy and economic cooperation dynamism of Uzbekistan. Since he was elected to the office, President Mirziyoyev visited countries like China, Russia, Turkey, South Korea and USA (to attend the UNGA) which are all important political and economic actors in the world. Uzbekistan has also strengthened its regional standing in Central Asia. With his recent visit to Tajikistan, President Mirziyoyev has completed a cycle of tours in all four Central Asian nations.³⁶ His visits helped to address most urgent issues in regional politics and prepared ground for a new stage in Central Asian politics. The current policy of Uzbekistan is thus to be open to any bilateral or multilateral initiative coming from an international community which can contribute to the development of the country. One of the outstanding features of these visits is involvement of highly skilled top managers from these countries as advisors to different Uzbek agencies.³⁷ This underlines the will to establish linkages with developed countries on professional and managerial levels and facilitate inbound flow of

³³ "Toward a New Uzbekistan", *US News*, 22 November 2017 <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/world-report/articles/2017-11-22/5-ways-uzbekistan-is-modernizing-its-economy-and-state> (accessed 17 April 2018)

³⁴ Address by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the General Debate of 72nd Session of UN General Assembly, 19 September 2017. See also Vladimir Norov, "Role of new regional policy of Uzbekistan in political and economic processes in Central Asia", *Astana Times*, 15 November 2017 <https://astanatimes.com/2017/11/role-of-new-regional-policy-of-uzbekistan-in-political-and-economic-processes-in-central-asia/> (accessed 17 April 2018)

³⁵ "EBRD enters new stage of engagement with Uzbekistan", EBRD, 8 November 2017 <http://www.ebrd.com/news/2017/ebrd-enters-new-stage-of-engagement-with-uzbekistan.html> (accessed 17 April 2018); "EBRD opens office in Tashkent and provides \$120 million for new projects", AKI Press, 9 November 2017 <https://akipress.com/news:598652/> (accessed 17 April 2018)

³⁶ "Mirziyoyev: No unsettled issues left in relations with Tajikistan", *Eurasia Daily*, 12 March 2018 <https://eadaily.com/en/news/2018/03/12/mirziyoyev-no-unsettled-issues-left-in-relations-with-tajikistan> (accessed 17 April 2018)

³⁷ About Turkish national appointment, see: "Advisor from Turkey to start work at State Tourism Committee of Uzbekistan", *UzDaily*, 4 November 2017 <https://www.uzdaily.com/articles-id-41466.htm> (accessed 17 April 2018); Following account speaks about appointment of Korean nationals as honorary advisors to two Ministries (Health and Labour): "Leaders of S. Korea, Uzbekistan voz efforts to enhance bilateral ties", *Yonhap News Agency*, 24 January 2018 <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2018/01/24/0301000000AEN20180124010800315.html> (accessed 17 April 2018);

skills and experience to meet modernization agenda of Uzbekistan. From this perspective, the Belt and Road Initiative indeed represents important framework with the major potential to contribute to socio-economic development agenda of Uzbekistan either through creating new investment flows or by initiating capacity-building exchanges. The consciousness of this importance explains Uzbekistan's early support for the BRI and its involvement with several institutional and investment initiatives within the framework of the initiative. Focus on connectivity and infrastructure development makes the BRI an irresistible option for Uzbekistan, a double land-locked country which is in everlasting need of more connectivity with major global markets

2.3 Attractive power of the BRI narrative

Picturing of the BRI as a multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure investment project and the bulk of them originating from China has sparked genuinely global interest in the initiative. Backer Mackenzie Report describes the BRI as 'the most important and impactful macro-economic undertaking in the world, for at least the next 10 years'.³⁸ China has been able to present the BRI in the form of a 'very powerful narrative'.³⁹ International forums are regularly organized in this perspective. Global Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 16+1 Forum, China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum or Tbilisi Belt and Road forum are examples of global and regional meetings at the highest level which contribute to the consolidation of the BRI narrative. Asian and Western countries covered by the BRI usually share the Chinese side's BRI enthusiasm.⁴⁰ This narrative respectful of sovereignty concerns correspond to foreign policy vision of Uzbekistan and also to that of the Central Asian region. Uzbekistan and its regional neighbors are countries cherishing the principle of sovereignty. Uzbekistan has also declared a policy of avoiding any military and political blocs aiming to partition the world into mutually exclusive political spaces. The BRI in its actual formulation can perfectly accommodate foreign policy vision and perspectives of Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries. They already have experience of cooperating with China both within SCO and bilateral frameworks. The BRI could be a consolidating addition to this habit of cooperation on the basis of mutual respect for each other's sovereignties.⁴¹

³⁸ Baker Mackenzie & Silk Road Associates, "Belt & Road: Opportunity and Risk" (2017) https://www.bakermackenzie.com/-/media/files/insight/publications/2017/10/belt-road/baker_mckenzie_belt_road_report_2017.pdf?la=en (accessed 17 April 2018)

³⁹ "Interview: Theresa Fallon on Understanding China's One Belt, One Road Plan", Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 15 May 2017 <https://www.rferl.org/a/interview-china-silk-road-theresa-fallon/28489793.html> (accessed 17 April 2018)

⁴⁰ Cheng, Song, & Huang, eds. (2018)

⁴¹ For detailed analysis of compatibility of features of the BRI with features of regional politics in Central Asia, see Costa Buranelli (2018); Qoraboyev & Moldashev (2018)

2.4 The BRI as carefully designed narrative to ease sovereignty concerns of target countries

There are several intentional elements of this narrative which aim to dissipate concerns around the BRI initiative, the most ambitious project of contemporary China. First of all, Chinese side avoided so far the use of the word ‘strategy’ and insisted on the use of ‘initiative’ term to refer to the Belt and Road project. According to Chinese scholars and practitioners, the strategy involves egoistic and zero-sum calculations involving conflicting national interests while the initiative is a soft call for voluntary win-win cooperation in matters of mutual interest. So the BRI wouldn’t be considered as a Chinese attempt at regional or global hierarchy and hegemonic project.⁴² As such, the BRI seems to be designed as a practical answer to decades-long academic and policy discussions around whether China’s rise a global power would constitute indeed a ‘Chinese threat’ to the world.⁴³ The BRI narrative tries to reject this perception both in narrative and in practice. The BRI is intentionally framed as an initiative open for voluntary participation of other countries, and these countries are expected to bring in their initiatives and ideas to improve it. So, it is not one-way traffic based on Chinese interests, but a mutually beneficial project. The third element rendering the narrative attractive is an element of flexibility and inclusiveness. China intentionally avoided limiting the BRI scope to already existing regional institutions like SCO or 16+1 framework. It involves input from institutions like SCO, AIIB or 16+1, but goes beyond them and is open to countries not taking part in these institutions. There is no single and rigid institutional or treaty framework. Therefore China actively tries to correct English denomination of the project with which it was associated first: One Belt, One Road (OBOR). China is now calling international community to call the project simply as the Belt and Road Initiative. For Chinese side, the BRI is defined by such features as flexibility, voluntary participation, and equality of participants, coordinated progress or Silk Road’s spirit of inclusiveness. This flexibility and inclusive scope help to ease concerns for the national sovereignty of participating countries and to avoid disappointment from being excluded. The fourth element is well described by title of Wang Yiwei’s book which represents the first comprehensive account of the BRI by Chinese scholars

⁴² See, among others: François Godement and Agatha Kratz, eds. “China’s Great Leap Outward”, European Council on Foreign Relations (2015); IISS, “China’s ambitious Silk Road vision”. Strategic Comments, 21(6) (2015)

⁴³ Following works are representative of early scholarly discussion on China’s rise: A. Friedberg, “Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia,” *International Security*, 18(3), (1993/94), 5–33; A. I. Johnston, "Is China a status quo power?" *International Security*, 27(4), (2003), 5-56; D. Kang, "Getting Asia wrong: The need for new analytical frameworks", *International Security*, 27(4), (2003), 57-85; A. Acharya, "Will Asia's past be its future?" *International Security*, 28(3), (2003/04), 149-164; A. Friedberg, "The future of US-China relations: Is conflict inevitable?" *International Security*, 30(2), (2005), 7-45; D. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power and Order in East Asia*, Columbia University Press, (2007), 274 p. For recent account of ‘China rising’ debate, see Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2017). See also, Amitav Acharya. "After liberal hegemony: the advent of a multiplex world order." *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017), 271-285.

and is endorsed by the Central Committee of the CPC. Yiwei's book is entitled "*The Belt and Road Initiative: What will China offer the world in its rise*".⁴⁴ It again insists on presenting the BR project as initiative, and it implies that China is ready to act as responsible actor ready to contribute positively to several pressing issues of the international community. According to Yiwei's account, the BRI offers opportunities for regional cooperation; opportunities for Europe to change the world; and opportunities for global development. For him, the language of the initiative shows that China is not imposing itself on others. China is offering positive contribution the world direly needs to solve problems of international and regional cooperation.

3. Challenges of sustainability of positive dynamics of the BRI: Addressing ambiguities and cherishing local ownership of the initiative

The BRI seems to offer many interesting opportunities which could benefit Uzbekistan to realize its national development strategy. That's why Uzbekistan is already participating in both formal and informal actions around the BRI. As such, Uzbekistan is one of many states which have so far supported the initiative. However, the BRI is embedded in global dynamics of international relations. It requires collective efforts of China and other interested countries to make the BRI dynamics sustainable. There are several elements which should be addressed to maintain the relevance of the BRI.

3.1 Addressing ambiguities around the BRI

Primary element of the initial success of the BRI is due to its flexible nature and inclusive scope. This same feature may also hinder advancing the BRI beyond initial enthusiasm. China has so far avoided characterizing scope and substance of the BRI. Even if it features functional (connectivity) and infrastructure aspects, the BRI will necessarily involve substantial visions and projections on the global order in the long term. Insisting on initial ambiguity beyond reasonable prospect can turn the tide against the BRI. Ambiguity may cause the emergence of alternative external interpretations. In particular, the BRI may fall victim to '*geopoliticization*' phenomenon whereby a unilateral or multilateral initiative can be exclusively seen through the prism of geopolitics and great power confrontation leading to divergences and conflict when it comes to its realization. This may well hinder the further advancement of the BRI. Both Chinese and external participants are aware of this risk. This awareness explains Chinese efforts to avoid presenting the BRI as strategy or One-centered project. But these unilateral efforts are not enough to sustain interest and support of the international community. The BRI needs to develop a clear language which suits development needs but also political sensitivities of target countries.

⁴⁴ Yiwei (2016)

The BRI faces ambiguity in the plan of prospected plans. So far, both old and new projects were dubbed as part of the BRI. That is Chinese-led projects which predate the BRI launch are also presented as part of it.⁴⁵ This can lead to the understanding that the BRI is just a rebranding of Chinese involvement in different international platforms and channels. However, the BRI also depicts itself as something new and sui generis. This novelty aspect may conflict with rebranding image. China must prevent any misperceptions which could stem from this contradiction.

Another ambiguity stems from the legal status of the BRI. So far, major references for identifying the framework and scope of the BRI are domestic documents and programs issued by China. Initial references were two significant discourses of President Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013 respectively and inter-agency documents entitled ‘Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. Document issued by National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, with State Council authorization from 2015. Surely, several summits were concluded with political declarations of international support for the BRI. Recent reports unveiled China’s intention to set up international courts which will have competence to resolve disputes related to realisation of the BRI projects. From reports, it is understood that these courts will be closely related to the Supreme People’s Court of China.⁴⁶ These efforts show China’s efforts to develop normative foundations of the initiative. But, China should think about how to prevent indexing the BRI legal status on exclusively national documents. Otherwise, the sovereignty-respectful image of the BRI can be undermined and this could lead to erosion of support from the part of target countries.

3.2 Sustainability of inclusive scope and necessity of local ownership

China should also call more actively for the emergence of local ownership, a condition for the success of the BRI. Tommy Koh from Singapore recently proposed three suggestions to the Chinese to increase chances of success of the BRI: 1) substantial work of explanation; 2) strengthen the open and inclusive scope of the initiative; and 3) listen to partner countries and obtain their ownership of the initiative. Securing target country’s ownership is vital for the success of the BR beyond initial phase. The BRI needs to cherish local ownership to succeed. Local ownership emerges when China solicit their views and incorporate their visions into plans and projections around the BRI. This kind of interactions may lead to supplant the view of China as

⁴⁵ Fallon (2017)

⁴⁶ “China to create Belt & Road courts: report”, *The Global Times*, 25 January 2018
<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1086598.shtml> (accessed 17 April 2018)

sole owner and beneficiary of the initiative with a belief that the BRI is genuinely international project.⁴⁷

One way of local ownership and internationalizing the BRI would be more bilateral and regional consultations whereby the BRI plans as initiated by China could be updated and completed using inputs from target countries. In the example of Uzbekistan, this would involve closer scrutiny of the National Development Strategy of Uzbekistan by Chinese policy-makers and scholars and try to incorporate essential concerns and goals of this strategy into the realization of the BRI.

Conclusions

China's Belt and Road Initiative is presented as a unique multilateral framework for inclusive and cooperative development. At the same time, its implementation passes through regional mechanisms as well as by its ability to forge close partnerships with key countries in target regions. Uzbekistan is an important country in Central Asia which takes central place in Belt and Road projections. From the perspective of Uzbekistan, the Belt and Road Initiative can contribute to its national development strategy launched in 2017. Previous sections of this text demonstrated that this mutual interest may well generate linkages between these two initiatives. For this, it is essential to integrate relevant elements from Uzbekistan's national strategy into existing and future Belt and Road projects. It is equally important to maintain the focus on inclusive character of the Belt and Road Initiative. Maintaining inclusive scope of the BRI and avoiding exclusive categories is essential for the continuous involvement of Uzbekistan with the BRI. Uzbekistan's current internationalization is not limited to any specific region or civilization. President Mirziyoyev has been active in rejuvenating existing partnerships or establishing new friendships in many different directions as represented by his visits to countries like China, Russia, South Korea, Turkey or USA. Sustainability of the BRI's inclusive scope and voluntary nature is thus vital factor for maintaining mutual dynamics between Uzbekistan and the BRI.

⁴⁷ Tommy Koh, "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," *The Straits Times*, 4 August 2015
<http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/21st-century-maritime-silk-road> (accessed 17 April 2018)