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One Belt, One Road: A comparative regionalism approach

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This chapter aims to contribute to development of conceptual framework of OBOR relying on comparative regionalism studies. First, risk of domination of geopolitical approach over OBOR thinking is identified and a need to overcome this limitation by broadening conceptual tools is stated. Then, relevance of regionalism studies for OBOR is underlined. Thirdly, the paper will conceptualize OBOR as a 'functional region' which may help emergence of new 'regional identities' along the Belt and Road. Lastly, the paper will conclude by highlighting advantages of integrating comparative regionalism to studies of One Belt, One Road initiative.

Keywords: OBOR, comparative regionalism, regional integration, geopolitics

President Xi Jinping proposed revival of the traditional Silk Road in the form of Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in September 2013 and October 2013, respectively.¹ Systemic links between these two projects were further consolidated in an official document published jointly by three Chinese institutions in March 2015. "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road", issued by National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China outlined in detail principles, priorities and mechanisms of OBOR.² Since then these twin proposals came to be known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative.

OBOR is thus relatively recent topic and it has already attracted huge interest from media, policy-makers and scholars. However, most of these studies are of exploratory nature. Scholars and journalists alike are trying to explore nature of OBOR initiative which is still an open question. This indeed is an important task that of conceptualizing OBOR and undertaking projections about future research projects around it.³ Choosing right concepts and

¹ See: Xi Jinping (2013a) and Xi Jinping (2013b)

² National Development and Reform Commission (2015)

³ About scope and nature of explanatory studies, see: Mouton & Marais (1996). Mouton and Marais define the goal of exploratory studies as "the exploration of a relatively unknown research area. The aims of such studies may vary quite considerably. They may be: - to gain new insights into the phenomenon; - to undertake a preliminary investigation before a more structured study of the phenomenon; - to explicate the central

analytical prisms for elaborating on policy initiatives is not something to be ignored as merely a scholarly exercise. OBOR is clearly an outwardly directed project and as such needs approval and acceptance from target countries to succeed. Framing and conceptualization of particular policy initiatives by external actors are important factors in determining their success. This is true for successful realization of One Belt One Road which is meant to materialize across different geographical and political spaces.

Initial scholarship regarding OBOR seems to concentrate policy analysis and geopolitical evaluations.⁴ The prevalence of images of OBOR as a geopolitical tool is partly due to lack of clear definition of OBOR as a concept. This lack of precision as to content and scope of OBOR was pointed out by many observers of Chinese foreign policy. For Theresa Fallon, “the precise contours of the “Belt and Road” initiative have not been completely defined. At the moment the “Belt and Road” appears to be a versatile label for China’s foreign policy in Eurasia”.⁵ For Nadine Godehart, accounts of OBOR proposed by Chinese officials remain to this day diffuse and vague because they haven’t yet proposed “a language – that works in Chinese as well as in Western languages” to tell the world what OBOR is really about.⁶

Even if geopolitical thinking is essential in reading international politics, restricting analysis of One Belt One Road related projects to geopolitical approach alone may lead to rise of skepticism about the initiative. It is important to avoid that OBOR repeated experience of recent Eurasian regional initiatives like SCO or Eurasian Economic Union in that these institutional initiatives were right from the beginning perceived as foreign policy tools of China and Russia to be used in geopolitical confrontation with the West and this perception slowed down emergence of comprehensive scholarship around these Eurasian regional organizations. Most of scholarship on SCO and Eurasian Economic Union produced during the last decade carries heavy dose of geopolitical analysis.⁷ Another feature of scholarship was prevalent skepticism with regard to successful outcome of regional institutions in Eurasia

concepts and constructs; - to determine priorities for future research; - to develop new hypotheses about an existing phenomenon”.

⁴ I thank Maximilian Mayer (Tongji University) to point to this feature of emerging scholarship on OBOR.

⁵ Fallon (2015), 142.

⁶ Godehart (2016), 23.

⁷ See: Qoraboyev (2010b)

and Central Asia.⁸ It is important then that the work of conceptualizing OBOR using alternative frameworks to geopolitical analytical tools be carried out from the beginning without delay.

OBOR: Need for going beyond geopolitical analysis

It was mentioned that relying exclusively on geopolitical prism may hinder emergence of sound analysis of different international phenomena. The case of Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a good example to illustrate this point. Created in 2000, it is a regional organization with broad perspectives. It aspires to be part of a multilateral international order. However, it was conceptualized either as a regional organization defending authoritarian norms or a geopolitical tool of China to counter US and Russian advances in Central Asia.⁹ For Emilian Kavalski, Shanghai Cooperation Organization seemed “to confirm the re-enactment of the normative power of *Pax Sinica*.”¹⁰ In the West, Shanghai Cooperation Organization came to be known as “a political and military block led by anti-Western Russia and China against US and Western interests in the region”.¹¹

The same trend seems to emerge with respect to OBOR. Initial reactions to the initiative present OBOR as another tool in Chinese foreign policy inventory. Especially, two points are made with respect to OBOR from this perspective. First, OBOR is seen as China’s instrument to strengthen its negotiating position in different forums of global governance. China uses OBOR to push the West to bend to Chinese requests for increasing its say in global governance. Otherwise, China threatens to restrict its engagement with global institutions and instead to rely on China-led frameworks like OBOR or Shanghai Cooperation Organization to increase its global leverage. Shaun Breslin’s analysis of China-led global initiatives illustrates well this approach. He notes that “if reforms of existing structures are not possible, or slow in emerging then China is prepared to introduce new structures of governance to coexist alongside existing ones. The creation of BRICS and the SCO are both examples of groupings

⁸ See: Hancock & Libman (2016); Laruelle & Peyrouse (2012)

⁹ See :Ambrosio (2008); Collins (2009); Bailes , Dunay, Guang, & Troitskiy (2007); Allison (2008); European Parliament Directorate-General for External Policies (2012); Flikke & Wilhelmsen (2008)

¹⁰ Kavalski (2008)

¹¹ Dadabaev (2014)

that aim to provide at least some governance functions in arenas where China can exert considerable influence”.¹²

Second approach depicts OBOR as a reactionary move by China to counter advances that are being realized by the US in Asia-Pacific region. From this perspective, China was obliged to come up with its own interpretation of modern Silk Road only after initial US declarations on the same matter. Theresa Fallon’s genealogy of OBOR is representative of this trend. Here is her account of how China came up with OBOR initiative:

*“Hillary Clinton first referred publicly to her vision of a “New Silk Road”, in a speech in Chennai, India on July 20, 2011 [...] Chinese officials were flummoxed to find that she used the term Silk Road to describe a US policy. According to one Chinese diplomat, “When the US initiated this we were devastated. We had long sleepless nights. And after two years, President Xi proposed a strategic vision of our new concept of Silk Road”.*¹³

An initial reaction by the West to launching of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is in fact considered as one of main pillars of OBOR, in 2015 is also helpful in seeing prevalence of these arguments in favor of geopolitics. Mike Callaghan and Paul Hubbard explain how the West approached the AIIB with suspicion. For China-skeptics,

*“China is frustrated with the US reluctance to cede it power at the IMF and the World Bank, and so is attempting to usurp the US economic leadership by creating its own institutions to rival the Bretton Woods institutions, starting with the AIIB. The AIIB [...] will not be a true multilateral institution committed to common objectives. Instead, it will be a vehicle for China to advance its own unilateral strategic objectives in Asia at the expense of the US”.*¹⁴

One way or another, above-mentioned factors are leading to establishment of primacy of geopolitical prism over readings of OBOR. While acknowledging necessary presence and usefulness as well as attractive force of geopolitical logic in international affairs, it would be unfortunate to limit analysis of a comprehensive and complex initiative such as OBOR to geopolitical aspects alone. Association of OBOR with zero-sum thinking may lead to increase of skepticism and resistance, a real risk for the success of OBOR as underlined by some Chinese scholars.¹⁵ Furthermore, conception of OBOR as a Chinese tool against US or other great power foreign policy interests will also cause reluctance on the part of target countries. Zhan Yungling, professor and a CPPCC member, writing about external threats to OBOR, says that “the most serious one [threat] is the suspicion with which other countries view

¹² Breslin (2016)

¹³ Fallon (2015), 141.

¹⁴ Callaghan & Hubbard (2016), 116

¹⁵ ECFR (2015),4

China's aims and strategic purposes. Many fear that the OBOR is a veiled attempt by China to dominate its neighboring regions. These doubts mean that many countries are reluctant to cooperate in the initiative".¹⁶ This is even more delicate when China needs willing participation of countries situated along Belt and Road as the OBOR is presented as '*a systematic project*' which depends on engagement of countries other than China to succeed.¹⁷ As Tommy Koh rightly points out, "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".¹⁸ Focusing exclusively on exogenous readings of OBOR will also undermine endogenous dynamics and normative value that it carries for going beyond Western-centered international relations approaches. Prospect of geopolitics claiming exclusivity over *OBOR-analytics* is thus not desired by neither China nor other interested countries. Understandably, in March 2015 Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi felt obliged to reject geopolitical stipulations by stating that the OBOR is "the product of inclusive cooperation, not a tool of geopolitics, and must not be viewed with an outdated Cold War mentality".¹⁹

This void in conceptualizing OBOR and prevalence of zero-sum thinking in OBOR-related analyses push scholars to look for alternative frameworks for elaborating on OBOR. This paper argues that comparative regionalism studies may well be an apt alternative to geopolitical readings of OBOR. The discipline of comparative regionalism studies is indeed one of main frameworks which endeavor to go beyond zero-sum thinking to come up with long-term prospections about socio-political and economic processes in different parts of the world. This paper does not aim at giving detailed account of the discipline here. Instead, it will continue with elaborating on OBOR relying on premises and concepts drawn from comparative regionalism studies.²⁰

Regional features of OBOR

¹⁶ ECFR (2015),11

¹⁷ National Development and Reform Commission (2015)

¹⁸ Koh (2015)

¹⁹ IISS (2015)

²⁰ For a comprehensive account of comparative regionalism in world politics, see: Börzel & Risse. (2016)

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We must note that thinking on OBOR relies heavily on regionalist premises. Regional basis is evident in official speeches and documents that introduced the initiative to the international community. For President Xi Jinping, who is usually presented as the leader whose vision was essential in launching of OBOR²¹, building an economic belt along the Silk Road will ‘deepen cooperation and extend development space in the Eurasian region’ while 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road will take China-ASEAN cooperation to new levels.²² Official clarification regarding OBOR in 2015 further accentuated regional focus of the initiative. According to official position of Chinese government, OBOR’s objective is ‘to promote the connectivity’ of different regions in Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas.²³ Michael Swain underlines this focus on particular regions by quoting Chinese sources for whom:

*“Central Asia, Russia, South Asia, and Southeast Asian countries will be given priority consideration . . . while Middle Eastern and East African countries are in the junction” linking the Asian with European countries. The author adds that over the long term, “Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and some African countries may also participate in cooperation.”*²⁴

As for the objectives, Chinese government documents outlining actions and visions for realizing OBOR illustrates well these objectives:

*“The initiative [...] is aimed at promoting orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets; [...] and, jointly creating an open, inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation that benefits all”.*²⁵

The same document lists several regional cooperation instruments among mechanisms for realization of OBOR: SCO, ASEAN, APEC, ASEM or CAREC. On more substantial level, harmony of OBOR is maintained through ‘five links’: unhampered trade, road links, currency circulation, linked-up policy, and links between people’s hearts.²⁶ These announced objectives of OBOR and methods of realization fit well with traditional goals sought by regionalism projects in modern world. Luk van Langenhove and Marchesi elaborated on three main

²¹ For presentation of OBOR as closely linked to foreign policy thinking of Xi Jinping, see: Fallon (2015); IISS (2015); Godbole (2015)

²² See: Xi Jinping (2013a) and Xi Jinping (2013b)

²³ National Development and Reform Commission (2015)

²⁴ Swaine (2015), 6

²⁵ National Development and Reform Commission (2015)

²⁶ This is description given by Michael Swaine. In the official document, these links are presented with slightly different wording: policy coordination, interconnectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bond. See, Swaine (2015)

objectives that are sought by different generations of contemporary regionalism: economic integration, regional governance of public goods and regional actorness in international arena.²⁷ While first two objectives are more evident in the list of OBOR, successful realization of OBOR will surely lead to increasing importance of several Eurasian and Asian regional organizations as regional actors in world politics.

From these developments, it is evident that OBOR can be well described as regionalism project. Recent works by Chinese scholars tend to underline regionalism aspects of One Belt, One Road initiative. Wang Yiwei states that, OBOR has three main objectives: 1) finding a way for global economic growth; 2) realizing global rebalancing; and, 3) creating a new model for regional cooperation.²⁸ For Zeng Lingliang, One Belt and One Road initiative will rely on two main instruments (regional integration and interstate partnership) in order to realize a new model of regional community based on shared interests, shared destiny and shared responsibilities.²⁹ Thus, theories and concepts forged by comparative regionalism scholars could be useful in furthering analysis of OBOR as a regionalism project.

OBOR as a ‘functional region’ of prosperity and peace: Emergence of new regional identities in Eurasia

Raimo Väyrynen distinguishes between two different types of regions: physical regions and functional regions. For him, “*physical regions refer to territorial, military, and economic spaces controlled primarily by states. Functional regions are defined by non-territorial factors as culture and the market that are often the purview of non-state actors*”.³⁰ If we take these categories to ponder upon OBOR, how can it be conceptualized as a region? First, it is based on a physical notion of region. This is because it aims to link together several physical regions, like Central Asia, Southeast Asia or Europe. Its objective is to increase connectivity across Eurasia. OBOR depends also on willing cooperation of states which control these spaces. The relevance of physical regions for OBOR is thus evident. However, it is not merely about linking several physical regions. Long-term perspective of OBOR is to consolidate further these linkages and to create a functional region, or even a mega-region. OBOR will “connect countries that represent 55 percent of World GNP, 70 percent of global

²⁷ Van Langenhove & Marchesi (2008)

²⁸ Yiwei (2016)

²⁹ Zeng (2016)

³⁰ Väyrynen (2003)

population, and 75 percent of known energy reserves”.³¹ In another account, Beijing has estimated that the ‘Belt and Road’ will eventually reach 4.4 billion people in more than 65 countries.³²

At the same time, OBOR fits more with a description of functional region. It aims to form an extended space of interconnectivity, unimpeded trade and financial integration as well as a common space where people-to-people bonds are consolidated. It will be apt for realization of large-scale investment projects across countries along OBOR. Most importantly, it wants to become main vehicle for integrating development strategies of involved countries. In the long term, it aims to achieve a “region of harmony, peace and prosperity”. In Zeng Lingliang’s words, One Belt and One Road initiative will realize a new model of regional community based on shared interests, shared destiny and shared responsibilities. Use of the term of regional community implies not only creation of new trade and economic opportunities, but also focus on values and distribution of responsibilities among participating countries.

If OBOR succeeds its take-off on these premises, many target countries may well be willing to join in. One compelling reason may be that OBOR projects will help to forge new regional identities along the ‘Road and Belt’. Question of regional identity appears prominently in regionalism studies. One of important contributions from this perspective is definitely the work of Anssi Paasi. For him, regional identity is a key element in the making of regions as social and political spaces. We have to distinguish between region’s identity and regional identity. For Paasi, region’s identity is external features of a region (like, features of nature, culture or people) by which other actors try to identify and distinguish one region from others. Regional identity is a “process consisting of the production of territorial boundaries, symbolism and institutions”.³³

In the case of several regions that are today linked with OBOR, regional identities were mainly forged through outside-in processes. Central Asia– a regional concept which is indeed historically imported concept - is an example of an outside-in regional identity where external actors identify it with such factors as authoritarianism, terrorism and political instability.

³¹ ECFR (2015)

³² Verlare & Van der Putten (2015)

³³ Paasi (2003)

Central Asia is a clear example an outside-in approach to regions where powerful States name and shape regions according to their own purposes and interests.³⁴ Images of Africa and its subregions as lacking capacity of collective action and failing to achieve economic development are corroborated by realities of the region. Local governments then need not only to tackle with problems of socio-economic developments on the ground, but they must also address the necessity of correcting regional images in order to be attractive for foreign investments and international trade. From this perspective, target countries and regions of OBOR will engage with the Chinese initiative with enthusiasm if they are convinced of successful take-off and completion of it. They would prefer to be perceived, from the outside, as parts of dynamic space of OBOR and thus acquire new ‘clean’ regional identities. Positioning OBOR as an advocate of ‘new type of international relations’ based on the principle of wide consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits may sound well for countries across Eurasia and Africa from several perspectives. Principles of consultation and joint contribution imply actorness of these states which are traditionally viewed as passive actors in international politics. Principle of mutual respect and shared benefits could facilitate participation of these countries in the initiative as they would perceive that their sovereignty concerns will be better addressed. Addressing issues of infrastructure, transportation and logistics implies a comprehensive approach to economic development which will be appreciated by these countries. Large number and diversity of participating countries could another attractive point of the initiative as it will foster image of OBOR as an inclusive project integrating both North-South and South-South relationships promoting economic cooperation and cultural exchanges between different sets of countries.

Conclusions

Approaching One Belt, One Road initiative from the perspective of comparative regionalism studies will thus help to address several issues faced by OBOR in its early stages. Firstly, comparative regionalism enables smooth communication between major regions covered by OBOR. Comparative regionalism studies were mainly inspired by successful experience of European integration. In recent years, scholarship on regionalism has been integrating experiences of other regions of the world. From this perspective, main premises as

³⁴ Qoraboyev (2010a). For outside-in construction of regions, see: Neumann (1994); Katzenstein (2005)

well as theoretical and conceptual frameworks of comparative regionalism are shared and understood across different regions today. This is an important opportunity for OBOR as it is in need of a common language that will be understood both in the West and in the East. Comparative regionalism may well serve purpose of such kind of common language. Shift to comparative regionalism which includes discourse on both regional integration and regional cooperation seems to be consolidating. Two recent works by Wang Yiwei and Zheng Lingliang rely indeed on discourse of regionalism. If Wang Yiwei focuses on potential of OBOR for developing regional cooperation and regional integration in Eurasia, Zheng Lingliang underlines that OBOR may even carry discourse on regional integration further to achieve a coherent regional community. From these perspective as well, comparative regionalism may be well relevant. ‘Functional regions’ and ‘regional identity’ are some examples from the vocabulary of comparative regionalism which may help develop discourse on OBOR as regional community. Focus on OBOR as a functional region may facilitate participation of a large number of countries located across different physical regions. It will also shape OBOR as an inclusive and dynamic space. Focus on comprehensive approaches to economic development may enable reshaping of regional identities across Asia, Europe and Africa to enable inclusive mechanisms of intercontinental cooperation and integration.

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