



Remolding China's 'Empty' Belt and Road Initiative: An Opportunity for the EU

Jasper Roctus

China's controversial Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been subject to ample scrutiny since its inception in 2013. Practical results could be said to be severely lacking in contrast to the project's ambitious plans. Chinese engagement abroad has irrefutably intensified since Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, but whether this can be classified as the fruits of BRI remains unclear. China, in fact, is developing BRI on the go. That gives the EU an opportunity to engage with BRI and remold it into a more desirable form. Because China increasingly sees Europe as BRI's "final destination", the EU has a lot more leverage than it commonly assumes.

"When we whittle away all the things that the Belt and Road is not, there isn't much left to see."¹ Over the years, BRI has grown to encompass a wide – and arguably unconnected – array of Chinese activities abroad, and has even received dubious praise for projects with barely any Chinese involvement at all. The construction

of Turkey's Marmaray rail tunnel is an example of this, as the tunnel was allegedly funded by a Turkey-EU-Japan consortium, but was later lauded by the World Bank as a "model BRI-investment".²

Chinese scholars have done little to dispel outsiders' doubts about the vagueness of the project and the lack of concrete results, especially during its early phase. The 17+1 cooperation framework in Eastern and Central Europe is hailed as "exemplary" for BRI construction, but predated BRI by a year.³ The 2009 purchase of the Piraeus port by COSCO is presented as a crucial link in BRI development, while the start of the lease occurred four years before Chinese president Xi Jinping introduced BRI.⁴

Therefore, the argument that BRI lacks a long-term strategy, or even, "barely exists at all", is to a certain degree understandable. Nevertheless, this paper will argue that while BRI may indeed be lacking in strategic depth at the moment, Chinese policy-makers have been taking a deliberate "adjusting while doing" attitude, especially in regards to cooperation with developed countries. This pragmatic stance

provides adjustment opportunities for willing assertive international actors to (re)mold BRI into a more “desirable” form. As the EU has recently been aiming to engage more actively in *realpolitik*, since in 2016 the Union declared “principled pragmatism” to be the prime guiding principle for its foreign and security policy,⁵ it could step up to the plate and actively engage with BRI in order to change it.

BRI: FROM REINVENTING THE WHEEL TO OLD MULTILATERALISM

The precise content, connotations, and definitions of BRI have been considered to be ambivalent since the project’s very inception, even more so by non-Chinese scholars. The initiative was originally assumed to be focused on infrastructure development and investment in countries on the historic Silk Road, but the scope seems to have greatly increased while the content of the initiative appears to have been drastically transformed over the last few years.

When Xi Jinping introduced BRI in late 2013, he mainly spoke of reviving the Old Silk Road through improved connectivity and infrastructure, with the lofty aim of creating win-win projects.⁶ However, if one compares this speech to more recent discourse by China’s paramount leader, great differences can be discerned. At the opening ceremony of the Second BRI forum in 2019, Xi reiterated his support for free market principles and macro-economic policy coordination, and promised to safeguard intellectual property rights. He also stated that China would increase its imports, and assured the world that the country would keep opening up its economy to foreign investors.⁷

The BRI-debate among Chinese scholars, who are often predisposed to follow government rhetoric, has also evolved over the last few years. During the early phase of the project, a large

quantity of BRI-related treatises showcased an increased sense of self-confidence among Chinese academics. This self-confidence gave rise to an intent to “reinvent the wheel” by proposing BRI as an alternative to the current Western-dominated world system. For example, in 2016 one scholar proposed that from the angle of critical geopolitics, BRI might construct a new, interconnected spatial imagination, which can be understood in the ancient Chinese “yin-yang schema”.⁸ In the same year another academic stated that China’s theoretical system of “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” has proven to be superior to any foreign system. Therefore, by 2049 – the PRC’s 100th anniversary – China should dominate the structures of global governance through BRI.⁹ Ironically, the authors’ description of the “old” Western structures is considerably clearer than the priorities and policies of the novel BRI-based model. This is a returning phenomenon in BRI-related treatises: it seems easier for Chinese authors to meticulously describe the Western system and pinpoint its many faults, than to propose a clear alternative system with BRI at the core.

While the transformation of the debate on BRI in China has been gradual, Xi Jinping’s January 2017 speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos can be considered a turning point. Indirectly responding to the election of Donald Trump, Xi positioned himself as a protector of globalization and sustainable development.¹⁰ This narrative shift had its due consequences for the discourse on BRI, which started to include themes like multilateralism, green development, and anti-protectionism. Furthermore, the “reinventing the wheel” rhetoric began to be toned down significantly. An article from 2019, for instance, concluded that China’s economic rise “merely” mirrors that of Japan during the 1980s and 1990s, i.e. gradually catching up on the US without yet

being able to create an alternative economic and geopolitical system.¹¹

BRI AND BRUSSELS: FROM BILATERAL NEGLECT TO MULTILATERAL PRIORITY

BRI's goals in relation to the EU have also evolved. While there has recently been a sharp increase in the number of Chinese papers on cooperation with Brussels under BRI, Chinese scholars initially seemed to prefer bilateral cooperation with EU member states. This was an application of the “taking a case or two as an example for the rest to follow” theory originally put forward by Xi Jinping: “examples” of successful cooperation under BRI were expected to attract the attention of third nations. This idea – originally aimed at Sino-Pakistani cooperation – was extrapolated to Europe. An article from 2016, for example, suggested that Hungary, the first EU member state to sign a joint statement on BRI, might play such a pioneering role in Europe and could “set the BRI ball rolling West”.¹²

This bottom-up approach in convincing other countries of BRI's advantages has not been fully successful. Recently, more attention has been given to dual-track and top-down cooperation with both member states and the EU as a whole. Chinese scholars appear to have realized that mechanisms such as 17+1 have not resulted in greater acceptance of BRI, but instead have given rise to fears of “divide and rule” tactics.¹³ A sharp contrast is visible with the aforementioned “reinventing the wheel” discourse, which perceived BRI as a novel structure, with policies, norms, and values that stand apart from, and are bound to supersede, the “inferior” established Western order. Furthermore, while Western Europe and the EU institutions originally were excluded from the BRI, or at least were deemed to be of secondary importance, recent discourse

sees them as the “final destination” of the initiative.

Unlike the eulogization of BRI in the Chinese academic debate, criticism of BRI is often carefully veiled by citing European scholars. A popular method to convey criticism is quoting the discourse of EU-affiliated think tanks on BRI, with the alleged objective of “guiding” the think tanks to “a more objective and fair understanding”, while clearing up “misunderstandings” about BRI.¹⁴ While indirect, one should not underestimate the significance of such carefully-selected critical quotations, as they show that the EU's gripes with BRI have reached the ears of Chinese academics, and that room for discussion, and potentially even concessions, has increased.

FROM EMPTINESS TO SUBSTANCE: BRI'S PRAGMATIC ROUTE

Even with the recent decline of the “reinventing the wheel” discourse, and more prominently, the inclusion of Brussels in the scope of BRI, opinion on the content and goals of the project remains ambivalent at best. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that Beijing's seemingly “empty” approach to BRI might be deliberate, or even culturally embedded. An argument could be put forward that the cultural differences in approaching long-term strategic thinking between China (“Confucian, collectivistic, inclined to start with constructing a grand narrative”) and Europe (“Christian, individualistic, inclined to start with making clear and feasible plans”), have caused certain misunderstandings surrounding BRI's objectives, or lack thereof.¹⁵

To employ a famous allegory, Chinese long-term strategic thinking somewhat resembles the ancient game of *go*, with stones being placed seemingly randomly until a pattern eventually

appears, a posteriori giving strategic significance to the initial “random” moves. Western strategic thinking might instead resemble chess, with many specific and clear short-term set pieces giving meaning to a predefined long-term result. The aforementioned BRI timetable can be seen as an example of Chinese strategic thinking, in particular the abstract statement that by 2049 a worldwide “community of common destiny” will have been established under the auspices of BRI, without providing specific steps to achieve this grand objective.¹⁶

Even when putting aside possible cultural roots of strategic thinking, there is ample ground to conclude that the “empty” Chinese approach to BRI is deliberate. China’s Reform and Opening-up campaign (from 1978) is another recent example of an initially “empty” strategy with very grand goals, an ambiguous heading for a hotchpotch of many divergent local experiments (“*go-stones*”), which seemed to lack overall coherence. Narratives on which reform-types were “right” and “wrong” were only constructed in the latter stages of the campaign. The comparison between BRI and China’s domestic reforms was also noted by other scholars. Mao Xinya and Men Jing, for instance, stated that while Brussels would like to see a clear roadmap for BRI with defined geographic boundaries, Beijing has instead taken a pragmatic “adjusting while doing” approach based on domestic economic reforms.¹⁷

This paper therefore argues that China’s bilateral cooperation under the said “empty” heading of BRI should be seen against this background. Countries like Hungary, Serbia, and Kazakhstan, whose involvement in BRI is the focus of a lot of European scrutiny, are not the final destination for the project, and should instead be viewed as “present-day *go-stones*” to test a wide array of policies that might eventually serve as substance

for BRI. However, unlike China’s highly successful economic experiments in the 1980s, the “test phase” of BRI has been much less fruitful. The transformation of the BRI-debate from “reinventing the wheel” to “looking at established structures”, can therefore be seen as a reflection of the failure of the bilateral experiments in adding substance to BRI’s strategic dimension. Chinese policy-makers have become aware that failures abroad are much harder to readjust than the occasional setbacks during the domestic economic reforms.

Therefore, having realized the failure of Xi Jinping’s pragmatic “taking a case or two as an example for the rest to follow”, Chinese policy-makers are increasingly looking for inspiration to an established multilateral project of the “old order”: the EU.

BRI: A SUITABLE TEST-CASE FOR THE EU’S PRINCIPLED PRAGMATISM

Realizing both the emptiness of BRI and the current lack of strategic momentum by the Chinese, is a crucial first step in increasing strategic awareness in the EU. BRI should be framed as the defining attempt of Xi Jinping, the first unrivaled “leadership core” of the CCP in decades, to leave a greater mark on history than his predecessors. Therefore, the EU’s terms of trade vis-à-vis China are a lot better than most of the Union’s policy-makers seem to realize, as the EU has the power “make-or-break” the project. While cooperation with Europe might resemble a small cog, Chinese scholars have emphasized that the continent is BRI’s “final destination”. From the perspective of the Chinese government, neither the Sino-Pakistani economic corridor nor the proposed corridors in South-East Asia could ever match the potential prestige of a “grand Eurasian cooperation” with the EU. Furthermore, Chinese policy-makers are desperately searching for more stable BRI-

cooperation in the wake of the ambiguity, debt trap allegations, and general failures surrounding most projects in Central Asia, and, to an lesser extent, Central and Eastern Europe. Considering the current economic uncertainty due to COVID-19, one might expect the trend to look for safer BRI-cooperation to continue.

Among all officially listed BRI-partners in Chinese discourse, most of which have questionable economic credibility, only the EU as a whole and its Western European member states can provide BRI with badly needed economic stability and overall legitimacy. The Union consequently can attempt to gain economic benefits by increasing cooperation between its own connectivity strategies and BRI, and remold the project from within by making conforming to EU standards a requirement for joint initiatives. Overall, Chinese scholars have welcomed such initiatives (e.g. the European Silk Road and the 2014 Juncker Plan), remarking that they will enable China and Europe to achieve pragmatic win-win results on an equal basis.¹⁸ In this context one should once more take into consideration that Chinese policy-makers are looking to fill the “emptiness” of BRI, and the EU’s own connectivity platforms could provide them with inspiration.

Increased Chinese research on the ongoing BRI-debate among European think tanks demonstrates that Chinese scholars are looking for a new way forward. The EU should be aware of the strong position it has towards China. After all, in face of China’s worsening relations with most developed countries outside Europe (Japan, South Korea, Australia, Canada, and the US), the Union and its Western European member states are the only potential “developed” partners left for China and its BRI.

Therefore, BRI is the perfect opportunity for the EU to implement its “principled pragmatism”. The Union must explore the fine line between its non-negotiable principles (“red lines”) and the pragmatic reality that China is an authoritarian power that has shown great resilience to democratic reforms. As the CCP will likely continue to rule China for the unforeseeable future, it is important to emphasize that the EU should hold on to the “pragmatic” element of its foreign policy concept. China has shown itself to be resolutely opposed to the EU’s previous unilateral focus on “values-based diplomacy”. Even Chinese scholars that have an overall positive attitude towards deepening cooperation with the EU seem to dread the memory of Brussels’ constant promotion of democratization and human rights over the last few decades, which they have perceived as a direct attempt to overthrow the country’s governmental system.¹⁹

While democratization as a topic could be “pragmatically ignored” for the sake of cooperation, excessive human rights violations should still be condemned, however. Another “red line” that should be maintained is the demand for an unconditional end to “divide and rule” tactics against the EU – such as China’s “face-mask diplomacy”. The EU should remind China that it has committed itself to support European integration and reinforcement of the EU’s economic union.²⁰ The EU can take a “transactional” – *realpolitik* – approach to defend itself against China’s “divide and rule” approach by threatening to limit Chinese access to the European market; sanctions and embargos can be considered. Fortunately, such drastic measures probably are not required. In order to achieve its objective of a moderately prosperous society, China also needs more “face” internationally. Thus, Brussels threatening to limit or terminate certain prestigious BRI cooperation initiatives

should be enough to make the country reconsider most of its “divide and rule” practices.

Convincing EU member states that a unified standpoint towards China also increases their own terms of trade vis-à-vis the country is imperative. This is a tall order, considering the rise of populism – and even authoritarianism – in certain member states. Therefore, Brussels must adopt a pragmatic approach towards the member states that have so far shown themselves to be most open towards bilateral cooperation with China under BRI (Greece, Hungary, and Italy, among others). Greece, for example, could be reminded that in spite of the EU’s harsh terms for financial support in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the Union has at no point required the country to lease one of its ports to it for 35 years in return for this support.

EU policy-makers have to understand that despite China’s staunch opposition to the Union’s “values-based diplomacy”, the country is still very much interested in the EU’s supranational and multilateral institutions. This provides the EU with additional leverage. Chinese scholars have, for instance, examined whether the EU’s regulations on tax collection,²¹ as well as its dispute settlement mechanisms,²² could be applied to the BRI countries. China seems particularly interested in how the EU’s treaties maintain both binding force while still recognizing cross-country cultural and developmental differences. This provides the EU with an opportunity to “transactionally” share this knowledge with China, while pragmatically (re)molding the structures that China wishes to establish into a more desired shape.

CONCLUSION: DON’T YIELD TO PESCO-PESSIMISM

As one of the final international actors of the developed world still enjoying somewhat cordial relations with China, the EU should be aware of its leverage. In the face of the strategic emptiness of BRI, Chinese scholars have lost part of their initial confidence in promoting the initiative as a novel structure that is destined to eventually supersede the “old Western order”. Instead, they are looking for multilateral cooperation with the very order they originally dreaded in order to provide substance for BRI. EU policy-makers have to be aware that the “emptiness” of BRI could be deliberate, thereby providing the Union with a unique opportunity to jointly decide the project’s future direction.

Said policy-makers should be aware of China’s internal narrative shift on BRI, take notice of the EU’s improved leverage, highlight their own connectivity platforms to influence BRI, and use creatively “principled pragmatism” so as to remold BRI into a more desirable shape, on its own terms. An end to China’s “divide and rule” approach against the EU should be an unconditional red line throughout this process, while at the same time, the Union must pragmatically convince its own member states that a unified approach to China is in the best interests of all.

Jasper Roctus, who is completing his MA in sinology at Ghent University, was a Research Assistant at the Egmont Institute in the spring of 2020. He now plans to pursue a PhD.

The author warmly thanks Sven Biscop for his comments and suggestions when writing this paper.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Shepard, Wade. “How China is Losing Support for its Belt And Road Initiative”. *Forbes*. Published February 28, 2020. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2020/02/28/how-beijing-is-losing-support-for-its-belt-and-road-initiative/#6fca62342199>
- ² Greer, Tanner. “One Belt, One Road, One big mistake”. *Foreign Policy*. Published December 6, 2018. Accessed April 30, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/12/06/bri-china-belt-road-initiative-blunder/>
- ³ Lin Qiaoting 林巧婷. ““16+1 hezuo” jiang cheng “yidai yilu” yangbanfang.” “16+1 合作”将成“一带一路”样板房 [The “16 + 1 cooperation” will become a ‘BRI model house’]. *Renmin ribao baiwaiban* 人民日报海外版 [People's Daily Overseas Edition]. Published November 25, 2015. Accessed April 11, 2020. http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2015-11/25/content_2972021.htm
- ⁴ Liu Zuokui 刘作奎 (2015). “Jingti “yidai yilu” de touzi fengxian——Xila Zhengju bianhua dui “yidai yilu” zai Ouzhou buju yingxiang” 警惕“一带一路”的投资风险——希腊政局变化对“一带一路”在欧洲布局的影响 [Beware of the Investment Risks of BRI: The Impact of Changes in the Greek Political Situation on the BRI Layout in Europe]. *Dangdai shijie* 当代世界 [Contemporary World] 04: 21-24.
- ⁵ European External Action Service. “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy.” Published June 02, 2016. Accessed May 01, 2020. https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf
- ⁶ Cui Dong 崔东、Geng Cong 耿聪. “hongyang renmin youyigongchuang meihao weilai” 弘扬人民友谊 共创美好未来 [Promote Friendship Between Our People and Work Together to Build a Bright Future]. Published on September 8, 2013, Accessed on March 24, 2020. <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/0908/c1001-22842914.html>
- ⁷ Wang Keyuan 王珂园, Chang Xuemei 常雪梅. “Xi Jinping zai di er jie “yidai yilu” guoji hezuo gaofengluntan kaimushishang de zhuzhi yanjiang” 习近平在第二届“一带一路”国际合作高峰论坛开幕式上的主旨演讲 [Xi Jinping's Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Second BRI Forum for International Cooperation]. Published April 26, 2019. Accessed March 25, 2020. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0426/c64094-31052479.html>
- ⁸ Zeng Xianghong 曾向红 (2016). ““Yidai yilu” de diyuan zhengxi xiangxiang yu diqu hezuo” “一带一路”的地缘政治想象与地区合作 [The Geopolitical Imagination of BRI and Regional Cooperation]. *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* 世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics] 01: 46-71+157-158.
- ⁹ Wang Yiwei 王义桅. “Wang Yiwei wei “yidai yilu liechu shijianbiao: 2049 nian jiancheng gongtongti” 王义桅为“一带一路”列出时间表：2049年建成共同体 [Wang Yiwei lists the Timetable for BRI: Community to be Built by 2049]. *Zhongping she* 中评社 [China Review News]. Published March 30, 2016. Accessed May 01, 2020. <https://beltandroad.zaobao.com/beltandroad/analysis/story20160330-598604>
- ¹⁰ Qian Zhongbin 钱中兵. “Xi Jinping zhuxi zai shiji jinji luntan 2017 nian nianhui kaimushi shang de zhuzhi yanjiang” 习近平主席在世界经济论坛 2017 年年会开幕式上的主旨演讲（全文） [Full Text: Chairman Xi Jinping's Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the World Economic Forum]. Published January 18, 2017. Accessed April 2, 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com//politics/2017-01/18/c_1120331545.htm
- ¹¹ Gao Cheng 高程 (2019). “Zhongmei jingzheng yu “yidai yilu” jieduan shuxing he mubiao” 中美竞争与“一带一路”阶段属性和目标 [Sino-US Competition and the Attributes and Goals of BRI's Current Development Stage]. *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* 世界经济与政治 [World Economics and Politics] 04: 58-78+156-157.
- ¹² Gao Chao 高潮 (2016). ““Yidai yilu” jianshezong Xiongyali de touzi jiyu” “一带一路”建设中匈牙利的投资机遇 [Investment Opportunities in Hungary under BRI]. *Zhongguo duiwai maoyi* 中国对外贸易 [China Foreign Trade]: 74-75.

- ¹³ See among others: Wang Zhenling 王振玲 (2019). “Oumeng jigou dui ‘yidai yilu’ changyi de renzhi yiji Zhongguo de yingdui zhanlue——renzhi yu quanxian leibie jichushang de duo zhong duijie” 欧盟机构对“一带一路”倡议的认知以及中国的应对策略——认知与权限类别基础上的多重对接 [EU Institutions’ Understanding of BRI and China’s Coping Strategies: Multiple Sorts of Interactions Based on Cognitive and Authoritative Categories]. *Taipingyang xuebao* 太平洋学报 [Pacific Journal] 27: 64-77.
- ¹⁴ See among others: Gao Xiaosheng 高小升 (2017). “Oumeng gaoduan zhiku dui ‘yidai yilu’ changyi de renzhi pingxi” 欧盟高端智库对“一带一路”倡议的认知评析 [The EU’s high-end think tanks’ perception of BRI]. *Guowai lilun dongtai* 国外理论动态 [Foreign Theoretical Trends]: 110-120.
- ¹⁵ Zhao Shasha, 赵莎莎 (2017). “Oumeng dui ‘yidai yilu’ changyi de renzhi yanjiu” 欧盟对“一带一路”倡议的认知研究 [Research on the EU’s Vision of BRI]. *Shijiqiao* 世纪桥 [Bridge of Century] 06: 94-96.
- ¹⁶ See endnote 10.
- ¹⁷ Mao Xinya 毛新雅, Men Jing 门镜 (2017). “‘Yidai yilu’ jianshe yu Zhongou jingmao hezuo” “一带一路”建设与中欧经贸合作 [BRI Construction and Sino-EU Economic and Trade Cooperation]. *Dangdai shijie yu shehui zhuyi* 当代世界与社会主义 [Contemporary World and Socialism] 04: 139-145.
- ¹⁸ See among others: Han Ding 韩丁 (2020). “Oumeng xin Yazhou zhanlue yu ‘yida yilu’ changyi” 欧盟新亚洲战略与“一带一路”倡议 [The EU’s New Asia Strategy and BRI]. *Quyuan yu quanqiu fazhan* 区域与全球发展 [Area Studies and Global Development] 04: 20-30+153-154.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ “Zhongou shuangfang” 中欧双方 [China and the EU]. “Guanyu shenhua huli gongying Zhongou quanmian zhanlue huoban guanxi de lianhe shengming” 关于深化互利共赢中欧全面战略伙伴关系的联合声明 [Joint Statement on Deepening the EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for mutual benefit]. Published March 31, 2014. Accessed March 30, 2020. <http://ozs.mofcom.gov.cn/article/hzcg/201601/20160101233948.shtml>
- ²¹ Chen Ming 陈明 (2018). “yi dai yi lu” beijing xia de quyuan shuishou xietiao —— Oumeng qiye suodeshou jingyan jiejian” “一带一路”背景下的区域税收协调——欧盟企业所得税经验借鉴 [Regional Tax Coordination in the Context of BRI: Learning from the EU’s Experiences with Corporate Income Tax]. *Difang caizheng yanjiu* 地方财政研究 [Subnational Fiscal Research] 12: 90-95.
- ²² Dong Jingran 董静然 (2018). “‘Yidai yilu’ changyi xia touzizhe — guojia zhengduan jie jue yanjiu —— jiyu oumeng guoji touzi fating zhidu de kaocha” “一带一路”倡议下投资者—国家争端解决机制研究——基于欧盟国际投资法庭制度的考察 [Research on the Investor-State Dispute Settlement Mechanism under BRI: A Research based on the EU’s International Investment Tribunal system]. *Jiangsu shehui kexue* 江苏社会科学 [Jiangsu Social Sciences] 01: 173-180.