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All Roads Lead to Beijing? — The Belt and Road Initiative as a Set of Bilateral Agreements or a Network of Equals

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Summary

The reception of President Xi Jinping's 2013 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Western Europe was at first positive. Germany, France, and the United Kingdom indicated their readiness to participate. Over time, however, and in tandem with China's pursuit of bilateral policies to promote the initiative, criticism grew: it was described as insufficiently clear, and sometimes — as in the 16+1 process including Central and Eastern European states — even divisive. The attendance from Europe at the high-level Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in Beijing in 2017 was mediocre. Also, nearly all participating European Union member states refused to sign an initiative on trade because they felt, perhaps being overly ambitious, that it did not sufficiently take their concerns into account. In reaction, China has explained its position in considerable detail, pointing out that it is prepared to integrate into the present world economic order. Suspicions in Europe continue, however, regarding China's true goals. They could best be allayed by giving the BRI a structure similar to that of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In the absence of such a development, Europe's full participation in the BRI could be at risk.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), New Silk Road, Western Europe, European Union, China, 16+1 process, AIIB

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Introduction

More than half a decade after the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by Chinese president Xi Jinping, the New Silk Road faces a changed reception from Europe. At the very beginning it was welcomed by most European states, sometimes perhaps even a bit too enthusiastically. Over time, however, critical voices arose and more expressions of concern would be heard.

The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) held in Beijing in May 2017 was in many ways a remarkable success for China. In others, though, it has also been an opportunity for some European — and other — states to voice their misgivings about a project that they increasingly perceive as being too China-centered. While a large number of states are readying themselves to cooperate within the framework of the initiative or have already commenced this — even in parts of the world that do not immediately come to mind when one thinks of the old Silk Road —, other states have made it clear that at least for the time being they do not intend to participate. Yet others again are establishing projects that, at least at first glance, appear to compete with the Chinese initiative.

Europeans have taken note of difficulties encountered by BRI projects — for example in Sri Lanka and Myanmar — and the changed approaches of newly elected governments — such as in Malaysia, Pakistan, and the Maldives. They have also observed that in 2018 even within China there was some reticence concerning the high cost of the BRI.

At the outset: A positive reaction from Europe

Initially Europe in general gave a positive reply to the BRI.¹ Germany was among the first European countries to formally and officially welcome it. Already in October 2014, within the “Framework for Action for German-Chinese Cooperation: ‘Shaping Innovation Together!’” adopted at the third German-Chinese intergovernmental consultations,

Germany welcomes the further expansion of transcontinental trade routes for land traffic between Europe and China and the initiative for an economic axis along the Silk Road. This opens new opportunities for German-Chinese and European-Chinese cooperation, and contributes to stability and prosperity in Central Asia and the countries situated along the route. Both countries favor the enlargement of the trade corridor on land and the construction of an economic belt along the Silk Road. (BPA 2014; author’s own translation)

In March 2015, the “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Belt and Road” was issued by China’s National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce, with State Council authorization

1 For the reaction in Germany until late 2016, see Röhr (2018).

(English.gov.cn 2015). This document — which remains also in 2019 the most authoritative one to date on the BRI — makes clear among other things that the initiative’s aim is to span the entire globe. It is described as a great undertaking based on a Silk Road Spirit that is a “historic and cultural heritage shared by all countries around the world,” will “benefit people around the world,” and which has attracted “close attention from all over the world.” It would enable China to further expand and deepen its opening-up, and to strengthen its mutually beneficial cooperation with countries in “Asia, Europe and Africa and the rest of the world.” Wang Yiwei, a professor at Beijing’s Renmin University with close connections to the Chinese government, allegedly even claims that the BRI can “change the world” (Zhang 2015).

France gave its active endorsement to the BRI in early 2015.² A Connectivity Platform was agreed in a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between the European Commission and China in September 2015. It promoted cooperation on infrastructure, including financing, interoperability, and logistics, and is to enhance synergies between the BRI and the European Union’s own connectivity initiatives such as the Trans-European Transport Network policy. During the state visit of President Xi to the United Kingdom in October 2015, also that country — which originally appeared not to be included in the initiative — became part of the project (GOV.UK 201). In a speech made during her visit to Beijing in the same month, German federal chancellor Angela Merkel credited the initiative as being a “highly strategic policy that takes the long-term perspective into account” and builds bridges between different periods (Merkel 2015).

The European Investment Bank (EIB) in May 2016 signed a cooperation agreement with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Mo 2016) — an entity closely related to the BRI — to promote cooperation in infrastructure, equipment, technologies, and standards. In the “Joint Declaration on the occasion of the 4th government consultations,” in June 2016, Germany and China would in a quite detailed manner

welcome the cooperation between China and the EU to develop European-Asian transport corridors through the Belt and Road Initiative. Within the framework of existing mechanisms (including the EU-China Connectivity Platform), both sides will discuss the option of further boosting the participation of German companies in developing European-Asian transport corridors, as well as possibilities to cooperate in the fields of industrial investment and finance. Both sides support efforts, within a multilateral framework, toward the technical and legal harmonisation of European-Asian transport corridors with a view to increasing the capacity and efficiency of European-Chinese freight train routes. Both countries’ customs authorities will focus on cooperating to simplify

2 Fu (2015) mistakenly claims that by publicly announcing its endorsement, France took the lead among Western European countries.

customs clearance formalities along Chinese-European freight train routes and will seek to facilitate Chinese-European transport. (BPA 2016)

Most European observers regarded an initiative that, by then, covered at least 4.4 billion people in more than 60 countries — constituting about two-thirds of the global population (Wang 2016) — as the essence of Chinese foreign policy, at least for East, Central, and South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and East Africa. It was seen as a strategy for a major part of the globe spanning decades — perhaps until 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China — and covering the relations between China and countries in these regions in the political, economic, scientific, and cultural fields.

Seventeen EU member states as well as four other European countries have so far become members of the AIIB; two other EU member states are prospective ones (AIIB 2018). Germany was among the first EU member states to sign up as prospective founding members, and also among the first EU states to ratify the Articles of Agreement. With a share of nearly 5 percent, Germany is the bank’s fourth-largest shareholder — after China, India, and Russia.

In European academia, there also was at first considerable support for the BRI. The EU was called upon to offer concrete proposals and make it a genuine Europe-China initiative. Analysts pointed to three key objectives that were pursued by China: it was looking for new impetus for its economy; it wanted to alleviate its thirst for energy; and it aimed at building a *cordon sanitaire* of regional stability. While China had long accepted to integrate into the existing system of regional and global governance, the BRI was regarded as an indication that it was now no longer content to be subject to governance rules decided mainly by industrialized nations. It was time for Europe to recognize this, and to make the initiative a strategic priority. Here was a chance for the EU to be an agenda-setter rather than an agenda-follower. It would be wrong to wait for the BRI to become more specific; it would develop over time, and Europe should grasp the opportunity to shape its future (Schaefer et al. 2018).

Chinese scholars described the initiative in lofty terms as offering Europe an opportunity to rediscover its ties with China, take East-West integration to new levels, and to return Europe to its historic place at the center of human civilization (Wang 2015). None other than Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi pointed out in an April 2017 press conference that China was hoping to promote the construction of a “more fair, reasonable and balanced global governance system” (MFA 2017) — an agenda well beyond mere infrastructure and connectivity aspirations.

The May 2017 BRF, and its results

When heads of state and government of 29 countries gathered in Beijing in May 2017 for the BRF, they were attending not only one of that year’s highest-level international conferences in China but also, indeed, one of the most important

global meetings of 2017. President Xi attended the opening ceremony, and chaired a Leaders' Roundtable Summit. The United Nations secretary general, the president of the World Bank, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund, and representatives of more than 60 international organizations were all among the more than 1,000 participants attending from over 100 states — the largest gathering of high-ranking global leaders in China since the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in 2008.

This high-level attendance at the Forum, whose theme was “Strengthening International Cooperation and Co-building the ‘Belt and Road’ for Win-win Development,” was only one indication of the remarkable development that the initiative had undergone. Well over 100 countries and international organizations had by then joined it, of which more than 50 had signed cooperation agreements with China. They easily represented one-third of global gross domestic product, and one-quarter of world trade — with a rising tendency.

Some of the themes of the sessions to be held at the Forum went well beyond infrastructure and connectivity: “Jointly Build the Bridge of People’s Hearts and Promoting Prosperity and Development” appeared more as a blueprint for improved intercultural relations than for enhanced train and road connections. Small wonder therefore that some outside China, including in Europe, started wondering if the BRI had more far-reaching aims (Stanzel 2019). While China had portrayed it as an honest attempt to share the fruits of its stellar economic development with neighbors and countries further afield, some states — particularly in the West — started alluding to a lack of detail and criticized a perceived insufficient transparency. They pointed out that for more than two years there had been no update of the *Vision and Actions*, and that there was still no official map of the BRI. They missed details on how to understand the recent evolution or to shape the forthcoming development of the initiative. In a widely published interview, State Councilor Yang Jiechi in February 2017 had indeed limited himself to explaining in a rather general manner that the Forum was aimed at discussing ways to boost cooperation, build platforms, and share outcomes (Madar 2017).

Given the perceived absence of clear indicators of China’s objectives, some observers therefore went so far as to privately question the country’s general political intentions. They implied that the Forum might be more about shaping a new world order geared toward Beijing’s geopolitical interests than directed at furthering infrastructure development, connectivity, and trade. They argued that China might strive to fill the vacuum left by the Donald Trump administration in order to promote a more Sinocentric world order. Founding the AIIB, they claimed, was just a first step in replacing the established Washington consensus with a new Beijing one. Even those who took the Chinese narrative of a win-win reconstruction of the old Silk Road at face value were sometimes skeptical of certain of its elements: Beijing’s cooperation with 16 Central and East European

countries — the 16+1 process — started to be regarded in Brussels and some West European capitals as a veiled attempt to split the EU.

This more pessimistic view may well be one of the reasons why, surprisingly, not a single word was mentioned about the BRI in the September 2016 Hangzhou G20 Leaders' Summit Communiqué. It may also explain the somewhat patchy attendance of heads of state and government at the Beijing BRF. In part, this was truly impressive: seven out of ten ASEAN countries were represented by their leaders. From Europe, however, only six of the 28 EU member states and five nonmember ones were represented at the level of head of state or government. Russian president Vladimir Putin was the only leader from another BRICS state to be present, Italian prime minister Paolo Gentiloni the only leader of a G7 nation. Of the other countries geographically situated between China and Europe, only five were present at the Leaders' Roundtable. Attending, however, were the presidents of Argentina and Chile — countries that, at least so far, had appeared to have little relevance for the BRI. But close partners of China like Germany, Britain, France, or Australia were not represented at the highest level. Nor were important neighbors Japan, North Korea, or South Korea — that so far had not been mentioned in connection with the BRI, just as little as the United States or Canada.

Yet China was particularly well placed to host an international forum of major importance in early 2017: The world had become insecure about Washington's intentions, ability, and preparedness to provide leadership under a struggling Trump administration. With his widely applauded address at the Davos World Economic Forum in early 2017, President Xi had raised the expectations of an international community looking for guidance in uncertain times. The BRF was thus an opportunity for Beijing to add further impetus to the initiative, and also to show that China had recognized that the time had come for it to assume a greater degree of responsibility in shaping a prosperous, reasonable, fair, and balanced global order.

From the European vantage point, the Forum clearly showed that China was coming ever closer to its goal of being on a par with Washington and Brussels in the international political arena. At the same time, it became increasingly clear to Europe that China no longer followed Deng Xiaoping's foreign policy dictum "to bide one's time, maintain a low profile, and never claim leadership." At a moment in history where the US appeared to be bidding farewell to the international political stage, or at least toning down its global leadership position by following narrow-minded policies and pursuing egotistical aims, China adroitly took on the role of a new center of the world order. China was seen as creating a potentially worldwide network with Beijing at the center, with its own financial structures and possibly setting new political, economic, and cultural standards.

A major point of friction during the Forum was the refusal of the participating EU member states — with the exception of Hungary — to sign the "Initiative on Promoting Unimpeded Trade Cooperation along the Belt and Road" (MOFCOM

2017). They complained that it did not address major European concerns such as the openness of markets, a rules-based trade system, and the rule of law. It can, however, be argued that this refusal was an exaggerated reaction, as the — clearly more important — “Joint Communiqué of the Leaders Roundtable” referred in its paragraphs 7, 9, 11, 12, and 14 to virtually all the issues that the EU members found missing in the trade initiative:

Open economy; free and inclusive trade; opposition to protectionism; a universal, rules-based, open, nondiscriminatory, and equitable multilateral trading system with WTO at its core; trade and investment based on a level playing field; market rules and universally recognized international norms; social cohesion; inclusiveness; democracy; good governance; rule of law; human rights; transparency; consultation on an equal footing, role of the market; open, transparent, and nondiscriminatory procurement procedures; sustainability. (Joint Communiqué of the Leaders Roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation 2017)

Perhaps the procedure pursued by Beijing was as much a reason for most EU member states not to sign the trade initiative as its content was. Many EU member state delegates were under the impression that the initiative was presented to them as a take-it-or-leave-it proposition, and that inputs were not welcome. Apparently there were also misgivings because the EU as such was not accepted as a negotiating party until quite late. EU Commission vice president Jyrki Katainen was apparently only invited to the lunch of the heads of state and government after some EU member states had exerted their influence with the Chinese hosts.

The cooperation of EU member states at the Forum also showed that there are clear distinctions among them concerning their preparedness to cooperate with China on the BRI:

- Hungary, Greece, Italy, Spain, and others hope that cooperation will help them overcome current economic difficulties.
- Also Poland and the UK appear prepared to cooperate with China without too many preconditions. Poland hopes to find a remedy for its large trade deficit with China. The UK is eagerly looking for new trade relationships for the time after its anticipated Brexit.
- That leaves Germany and France as the major states most ready to voice concerns about the BRI's perceived deficits, and to follow them up with political action.

Many European states are under the impression that the considerable funds that would be announced both at and since the Forum are only in part “fresh money” provided by China. Such fresh funds included CNY 100 billion for the Silk Road Fund, CNY 2 billion for famine aid, CNY 1 billion for the South-South Cooperation Fund, and CNY 60 billion over the following two to three years for the development of countries situated along the Silk Road. But the exceedingly

high amounts to be provided by the China Development Bank, the China Exim Bank, and by the five large Chinese state banks — totaling some CNY 700 billion — are not to be funded by the Chinese state. Some European observers estimate that between 20 and 50 percent of credits granted in connection with the BRI might eventually be lost, but that China is prepared to accept this with a view to the political advantages it expects to nevertheless still gain.

From the European vantage point, it is important to take into account the position of a number of states that appear to resist the initiative — or, at least, that may only participate in it reluctantly. India resents the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, as it crosses territory claimed by itself; India also fears being encircled by China's advances toward Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. As seen from Delhi, Beijing is quietly laying the groundwork for a Sinocentric global order while at the same time being responsible for glaring mistakes such as Sri Lanka's Hambantota airport — that can boast of neither planes nor passengers (Small 2018).

Russia is in the eyes of many Europeans a reluctant player, but because of its current economic weakness it cannot counter China's influence in Central Asia in any meaningful way. Most ASEAN member states were highly represented at the Forum — but while they hope for investment from China, they are worried by its territorial claims in the South China Sea. The states of Central Asia accept Beijing's influence, as its investment is more easily obtained than funds from Brussels or the international development banks. The US and Japan — the world's largest and third-largest economies respectively — were not highly represented at the Forum, and have so far not figured in the BRI narrative. North Korea sent greetings to the Forum in its own very special way — with a missile test.

At the same time, EU member states welcome the opportunities that the initiative can bring to their companies. China is clearly prepared to invest in states that have such a high level of political and economic risk that other investors often shun them; Pakistan is just one example. Were infrastructure to be improved in these states, European companies could profit — even though they might not have participated in its construction. Expanded trade routes are significant for China's most important European trade partners; this is particularly so for ports.

The train connections between China and Europe that are often mentioned by Chinese diplomats are, as seen from Europe, of secondary importance. Rates for sea freight are low and will probably remain so for the foreseeable future, while the problem that the trains that arrive full of Chinese goods in Europe are half-full at best when they return apparently still persists.

While such advantages are recognized by European observers, they tend to be more skeptical regarding the opportunities for European companies to participate in building new infrastructure. Orders are expected to go to Chinese companies in the first place, then to ones from the host states — and only then to companies from third countries. Some observers even fear that Chinese procedures about which

European businesses have persistently complained — about the obligation to enter into joint ventures, insufficient access to public tenders, and about less than transparent awards — could spread to states along the BRI route too. That concern, however, appears exaggerated.

In academia, further issues have been raised that are, however, not necessarily endorsed by European governments:

- A number of projects have been subsumed under the BRI that predate its launch, sometimes by years? Yes, but as such this rebranding is not detrimental; it is quite common in Western societies too.
- The initiative is possibly not more than a tit-for-tat reaction to the proposal of a Trans-Pacific Partnership — that circumvented China — by the Barack Obama administration? Even if this were true, it would not detract from the initiative's intrinsic merits.
- In many states targeted by the BRI there are political risks including terrorism, financial problems, and corruption? True, but each construction company, bank, or trader intending to participate has to do its own due diligence.
- Some Chinese infrastructure projects have suffered from cost overruns? That unfortunately happens to projects around the world, not only Chinese ones.
- Does the initiative's strategic value not depreciate as it evolves into one open to all countries (Zeng 2017) — when the BRI is everything, it becomes nothing? This is indeed a risk, but could be prevented through careful management of the initiative.
- The BRI is little more than a fig leaf for China's strive for hegemony? No, there are no reasons to see the initiative in such a negative light.

Some views that can be heard in Europe are, contrariwise, overly positive. Consultants, lawyers, and accountants have quickly recognized that the BRI presents them with lucrative business opportunities. Their descriptions of the initiative as providing potential customers with nearly unlimited opportunities for investment in nearly all areas primarily serve their own commercial interests and can — alas — therefore not be taken at face value. The same, however, is true for praise that emanates from China, *inter alia* that — as was claimed in Fudan University's 2017 Shanghai Forum — the initiative is “China's greatest gift to the world,” with it promising to bear fruit for “hundreds or thousands of years.”

One concern that was shared by many chancelleries across Europe can now, however, be laid to rest: the apprehension that the BRI might not outlive the year 2023, when President Xi's second term in office was set to expire. After the 2018 lifting of the clause in the Chinese constitution that limited the president's tenure to

two consecutive terms, most European governments now expect him to serve well beyond that date. If anything, this adds stability and reliability to the BRI.

Following the Beijing BRF, the views of many Europeans of the initiative were therefore guided by the following tenets:

- The expectation that China would continue the initiative with the full support of its foreign and economic policy.
- Doubts about China's readiness to shape the initiative in such a way as to live up to the guarantees on its content and its procedures, regarded as necessary by most Europeans.
- The recognition of the need to give European companies an opportunity to participate in BRI projects.
- The aim to influence China in such a way that it lets the initiative develop into a network of partners with equal rights — as opposed to its current state, which Europeans perceive to be a number of bilateral agreements that Beijing concludes with interested states or regions.

In other parts of the world, misgivings made themselves felt too: Australia, Japan, India, and the US — called by some the “Quad” — appear to be readying themselves to find their own answer to the rise of China in what they now sometimes term the “Indo-Pacific.” Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe in early 2018 made a historic visit — the first ever in fact — to some Central and Eastern European states, while that country's foreign minister paid the first in 15 years to Sri Lanka. Japan proposes a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” under which it will enhance “connectivity” between Asia and Africa in order to promote “stability and prosperity across the regions” through “quality growth” and “quality infrastructure” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2017). This is an obvious response to the BRI (Johnson 2018).

Chinese explanations

The overall reaction in Germany and Europe has recently been such that China evidently feels compelled to better explain its position. In March 2018 the Chinese ambassador to Germany published an article in *Handelsblatt*, a paper widely read by Germany's business elite (Shi 2018). He stated that while Germany was among the first countries to have welcomed the BRI, recent discussions in political and economic circles, the media, and think tanks had been “quite heated.” “Concerns, misunderstandings, and even warnings” had been expressed. The BRI was, however, nothing but an international public good that China offered to the international community. In no way was it aimed at a “globalization with Chinese characteristics.” Today's globalization followed objective rules; besides this general globalization, there could be no such thing as one with Chinese characteristics. The BRI promoted and enhanced the current process of

globalization, giving it new life. China was prepared to shape it jointly with Germany and Europe.

The BRI was an integral part of the current system of the global economy, and did not aim at changing the world or replacing a system. It bore witness to China's opening, and to its participation in global governance. While there were a large number of international mechanisms and rules in the creation of which China had not participated from the outset, it did not intend to destroy these — being prepared to fully abide by them, in fact. That was why the initiative was an addition to the system of the world economy, and not a threat to it. Nor was it a strategy to restrain the influence of the West.

China did not strive for dominance nor did it attempt to export its own system to neighboring countries, and it would never do that in future. The BRI was not a geostrategic instrument; those who thought that China was striving for hegemony showed that their mindset remains stuck in the Cold War era. The initiative gave the decisive role to companies, the role of the state being a subservient one. All participating states would cooperate as equals; they were builders of the BRI as well as beneficiaries, and would participate in its profits equally.

The BRI supported European integration, and did not countenance the Union's fragmentation. The 16+1 process was part and parcel of the initiative, and it neither impaired nor split the cooperation between China and Europe. China respected the EU's legal system, and adhered to its rules. That is why this cooperation would not and could not divide the EU. To the contrary, the initiative contributed to rendering the existing development gap between Central and Eastern European states on the one side and developed Western European ones on the other smaller — thus furthering European integration.

As China was a country with limited resources and capabilities, it continued to depend on the active participation of Germany and Europe for the huge long-term project of the Silk Road. It therefore welcomed the participation of German companies. Furthermore, an improvement of the economic development of the states along the Silk Road would enhance Europe's security. There have been a number of similar statements by Chinese statesmen and diplomats along these lines, but none quite as detailed and comprehensive as this.

The strong commitment of President Xi, Premier Li Keqiang, and Foreign Minister Wang to the BRI has been remarkable, among other times during the sessions of the National People's Congress in 2018 and 2019. In October 2017, the initiative had already been added to the Chinese Communist Party's Constitution. It has also become clear that China regards the BRI as one — or, perhaps, the — foreign policy component of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era” and a corollary to “Building a Community of Shared Future for Mankind” — two more recent principles of Chinese domestic and foreign policy.

In December 2018, China published a “Policy Paper on the European Union” in which it described the BRI as a global public good that observes international rules and market principles while pursuing high quality and high standards tailored to local conditions. It welcomed the participation of EU member states and other European countries in building a road that promotes peace, prosperity, openness, and innovation, connects civilizations, facilitates green development, and upholds high ethical standards (China Daily 2018a). It also promoted the development of the China-EU Connectivity Platform, greater synergy between BRI and EU development plans, and sought to leverage the roles of the AIIB, the EIB, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) (China Daily 2018b).

Western Europe’s current position: Not all roads should lead to Beijing

The reaction in Western Europe’s major capitals continues, however, to be guarded. In Germany, the coalition agreement of the three parties which shape the government formed in March 2018 characterizes the BRI as exemplary for “opportunities and risks” (Ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa 2018) — a far cry from the unmitigated welcome it received in the declarations on the occasion of the last two rounds of intergovernmental consultations (BPA 2014 and BPA 2016). While the Chinese semiofficial report about the telephone conversation in which Federal Chancellor Merkel — who herself had just been reelected three days ago — congratulated President Xi on his reelection states that the chancellor pointed out that China and Germany should promote cooperation within the framework of the BRI (Zhang 2018), the official German account of this conversation remains silent on this issue (Die Bundesregierung 2018).

The then German foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel, had in early 2018 repeatedly described China as the only country in the world that has a genuinely global geostrategic concept and developed a comprehensive systemic alternative to the Western model. It was not one, however, founded on freedom, democracy, and individual human rights. With a view to the 16+1 process, he had also demanded that — just as Europe follows a “One-China” policy — China should not attempt to split the EU and follow a “One-Europe” policy (Gabriel 2018).

Germany’s present foreign minister, Heiko Maas, has been even more outspoken in stressing the BRI’s risks. Castigating China’s “state capitalism” as an obstacle to fair competition and criticizing Beijing for forced technology transfer, massive nontransparent state subsidies, and political interference in the affairs of private companies, he claimed that the BRI could only be successful if China was ready to no longer regard it as a project geared to its own specific interests. Rather, it should treat the initiative as a platform that brings opportunities for all states concerned to create added value, adheres to environmental and social standards, and refrains from “splitting” the EU through such formats as the 16+1 (Maas 2018).

In an interview before his January 2018 state visit to China, French president Emmanuel Macron described the BRI as “very important” and stated that France was ready to play a “leading role” in it. But he cautioned that a “good relationship with multilateral authorities” was necessary, that one had to identify projects “together,” and that he favored “ecological silk roads.” Cooperation had to take place “within the framework of a balanced partnership,” and rules of finance had to correspond to “our standards.” It was important to cooperate not only with states and businesses, but also with the “civil society” of partner countries — thereby contributing to defining the “equilibrium of contemporary multilateralism” (China.org.cn 2018). Equally straightforward were remarks made during his visit, in particular that the roads could not be “one-way” and that they could not be those of a “new hegemony” (Rose 2018). French prime minister Edouard Philippe, for his part, described the BRI in February 2018 as either being one of civilization and prosperity or of a disequilibrium (Philippe 2018). These represent quite a number of conditions, most of which are not from the Chinese playbook.

During a visit to Beijing in January 2018, UK prime minister Theresa May refrained from signing a MoU that would have given her country’s official endorsement to the BRI. She merely stated that she hoped the UK and China could work together on the initiative, to ensure that it met international standards (Liu 2018a). In an editorial, the *Financial Times* supported this position: Giving blanket political support to the BRI would mean being associated with “all sorts of projects which may never happen, could go badly wrong or might be used to further China’s sectional strategic interests rather than liberalise world trade” (ft.com 2018). As China was not interested in rules-based trade, also other governments and financing institutions should hold back from giving a broad-based imprimatur to the initiative.

Clearly, the three largest EU member states’ position on the BRI has become one of increasing skepticism. At the same time, they are well aware of China’s enormous and growing economic significance. Chancellor Merkel, for example, had pointed out in her address at the Munich Security Conference in 2017 that while over the past 25 years the GDP of the world had tripled and that of the EU doubled, China’s had grown 28-fold in the same period (Merkel 2017). Small wonder, therefore, that China in 2016 overtook the US and France to become Germany’s most important trade partner.

In spite of prodding to the contrary by their larger EU partners, smaller West European states Greece (Mo 2018) and Portugal (Liu 2018b) in 2018 signed MoUs with China on the BRI. In 2019, Italy (Cao 2019a) also did so, amid criticism from the US among others; it is the first G7 member state to have signed one. Going largely unnoticed, Luxembourg (Cao 2019b) also signed a MoU this year. That brings the number of EU member states that have signed a MoU with China on the BRI to 15 — meaning the majority thereof.

The EU and most of its Western European member states presently regard the BRI as a formidable challenge to the world order as it has evolved since World War II. Values such as human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and the equality of states are all seen as at risk. As viewed from Western Europe, China is prepared to shoulder considerable short- and medium-term economic losses in order to achieve its long-term political goal: a new world economic order with Chinese characteristics, one that is allegedly better adapted to the needs of developing countries. In April 2018, it was reported that 27 of the 28 EU member states' ambassadors in Beijing — with Hungary the odd man out — had in an internal report described the BRI as hampering free trade and putting Chinese companies at an advantage (Heide et al. 2018).

In the EU, therefore, many are now pondering how best to deal with this challenge. Taking into account the opportunities that the initiative offers for European companies, it does not appear wise to turn one's back on it completely. That is why Brussels and other Western European capitals tend to continue their constructive engagement with China. Not supporting declarations that are regarded as unbalanced — as during the Beijing BRF — is clearly not enough: containment alone is not a viable strategy. That is why they attempt to influence the BRI with a view to fostering “Western” values, in particular within the framework of the EU-China Connectivity Platform and also through the European Neighborhood Policy as well as the Central Asia Strategy.³

The “Joint Declaration on the Occasion of the 5th German-Chinese Intergovernmental Consultations,” adopted in July 2018, thus welcomes, once more, cooperation between China and the EU regarding the development of European-Asian transport corridors and pledges to identify, on the basis of the EU-China Connectivity Platform, synergies between the BRI and European infrastructure planning. And, not to forget, opportunities for the improved participation of German companies in the construction of transport corridors between Europe and Asia are also mentioned (BPA 2018).

Similarly, the “Joint Statement of the 20th EU-China Summit” also held in July 2018 — the first such statement since 2015, as the two previous summits had not been able to agree on one — notes that the two sides will continue to forge synergies between the BRI and the EU's initiatives and promote cooperation in connectivity via maritime, land, and air transportation, energy grids, and digital networks. The two sides stressed that this cooperation should improve the economic, social, fiscal, financial, and environmental sustainability of Europe-Asia connectivity, and abide by the shared principles of market rules, transparency, open procurement, and a level playing field for all investors (Consilium 2018).

3 Bohman et al. (2018) suggest as an EU strategy greater coordination and a rebranding of European initiatives on development financing.

In September 2018, the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy submitted a “Joint Communication” that set out the EU’s vision for a new and comprehensive strategy to connect Europe and Asia (European Commission 2018). Perhaps its most remarkable feature is that, while it is clearly a reaction to the BRI, it does not mention it in a single word. It does, however, list stepping up cooperation with “relevant third countries, including in [sic] EU-China Connectivity Platform” as a key action, and points out that the EU should strengthen the existing cooperation with China on infrastructure and development. Only the “Fact Sheet” published in conjunction with the Communication refers in its last paragraph briefly to the BRI (European Commission 2018).

On the basis of the Joint Communication, the Council of the EU on October 15, 2018, adopted the “Council conclusions on connecting Europe and Asia — Building blocks for an EU strategy.” They point out that the EU will promote an approach which is

sustainable, comprehensive, and rules-based, [...] will advance investment and trade [...] based on high standards of social and environmental protection [...] guaranteeing respect for individual rights [...] founded on the respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights [...] and defending international law, multilateralism, transparency, and accountability. (Council of the EU 2018)

The Conclusions remain silent on the BRI too. They limit themselves to setting out that the EU should create synergies with all relevant partners, “notably with China (building on the [...] EU-China Connectivity Platform) and Japan,” ASEAN and its member states, as well as with India and Central Asia. It remains to be seen if this basis for an EU strategy — one that mentions the EU-China Connectivity Platform but stays silent on the BRI — will suffice for the EU to regain the initiative eventually.

Adopted just three days before the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) held on October 18–19, 2018, the Conclusions came too late to impact on the deliberations of this summit. It was chaired by the president of the European Council, Donald Tusk, whose “Chair’s Statement” (Asia-Europe Meeting 2018) noted that leaders welcomed the adoption of the ASEM definition of “connectivity” that had been agreed by foreign ministers in 2017 (Asia-Europe Meeting 2017). This stresses, among other things, the following principles:

[A] level-playing field, free and open trade, market principles, multi-dimensionality, inclusiveness, fairness, openness, transparency, financial viability, cost-effectiveness and mutual benefits. [...] Sustainability.

The “EU-China Joint Statement” issued at their summit in April 2019 repeats that the two sides will forge synergies between the EU strategy on connecting Europe and Asia, the EU Trans-European Transport Network policy, and the BRI, and

welcomes an agreement reached on the terms of reference for a joint study on sustainable railway-based corridors between Europe and China (Consilium 2019).

Europeans are closely watching recent difficulties encountered by China in smoothly pursuing the BRI: In Indonesia, there is so far only one major project — the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway line. Myanmar has reduced outlays for a Chinese-backed port on its coast. Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad cancelled or toned down major projects. The new Pakistani government stated that it wants to renegotiate the cost of projects in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Sri Lanka has run into problems with two BRI projects: a port and the aforementioned airport. The outcome of elections in the Maldives in September 2018 was not favorable to China. Even within China itself there apparently have been concerns that outlays foreseen for the BRI may be too high.

Outlook

For the Europeans it is crucial to make China understand that Europe takes Beijing at its word: It cannot suffice that President Xi at Davos and the Boao Forum (Xi 2018) styles himself as a champion of globalization, thus creating a welcome contrast to US President Trump. It is also necessary to let deeds follow words: open the Chinese market for foreign investment, abolish — not only revise — the negative list for foreign investors, end the obligation to enter into joint ventures in certain industries, guarantee protection of the data of foreign enterprises, strengthen their intellectual property rights, and grant them smooth access to their home companies via the internet. Some welcome steps in this direction have been taken in 2018 and 2019, arguably as a reaction to the policies of the Trump administration. But more will have to follow, in order to demonstrate that — to the satisfaction of European eyes — China is really prepared to implement wide-ranging reforms. Also, from the European perspective internationally accepted standards of environmental protection, social security, and occupational safety should be implemented in the realization of BRI projects.

It is unsatisfactory from the European point of view when the BRI takes the form of a multitude of bilateral — or, at best, regional — agreements, with Beijing always exclusively holding the reins. Such is the case — at least as seen from Brussels — in the 16+1 process for example. At the Beijing BRF, European participants had the impression that China took it for granted that procedures and the content of instruments to be adopted would be shaped by itself alone; they saw this as being at variance with accepted international norms.

For Western European capitals, it continues to be of overriding significance that:

- Market economy rules are followed.
- The interoperability of planned infrastructure networks with existing networks is ensured.

- Projects are economically viable; in other words, no “white elephants.”
- Projects take into account the requirements of the local population: no expropriation without compensation, no forced resettlements.
- The decades of experience of existing development banks and other organizations is drawn on.
- There should be a transparent, level playing field in trade and investment.

This should not be overly difficult: all these issues are embraced in the Beijing BRF’s “Joint Communiqué of the Leaders Roundtable,” and many of them figure in China’s December 2018 “Policy Paper” too. They now just have to be implemented. Furthermore — in a requirement that is often overlooked — China should clarify what it means when it states that the BRI aims at establishing a more fair, reasonable, and balanced global governance system and a community of shared future for mankind.

A model for fruitful BRI cooperation between China and its partners that takes the latter’s concerns into account could be the AIIB. It is also a Chinese initiative, one with a Chinese president and a seat in Beijing; nevertheless, it follows a truly multilateral approach of partners on a par with each other while also strictly applying international standards such as transparent public tenders (Clauss 2018). It is to be expected that Brussels and other Western European capitals will attempt to steer the BRI’s development in this direction.

Still, major European states doubt that Beijing is prepared to let the BRI morph into an organization based on principles that are similar to those governing the AIIB. Should China show a lack of preparedness to go the extra mile to meet these states’ concerns, their participation in the initiative could, in the long run, be at risk. It would, however, be unfortunate if the European reaction to the BRI were to mirror the Trump administration’s overly critical view as for example set out by Vice President Mike Pence in his November 2018 remarks at the APEC CEO Summit: namely that it is a ploy to “drown [...] partners in a sea of debt”; “a constricting belt or a one-way road” (Pence 2018).

Now is the time for China to clarify whether it is prepared to let the BRI develop into a truly multilateral initiative — the global public good as which it has characterized the initiative throughout.

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