

Reviving the Ancient Silk Road – Concepts, Actors and Perspectives

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Report by Lara Hammersen, Carolin Rosenberg, Christian Schneider and Marie Welling

China has its own ideas and perspectives about how the world works and how it is structured. Chinese policy tries to shape these structures and processes through the establishment of a world encompassing plan: the Silk Road Initiative. Its different dimensions were addressed at the workshop “China’s Silkroad Initiative – Concepts and Actors” at the Confucius-Institute Berlin on June 28th and 29th, 2019, hosted by Prof. Dr. Nele Noesselt (University Duisburg-Essen) and Prof. Dr. Katja Levy (Free University Berlin).

The first panel dealt with the social and ecological dimensions of the Silk Road Initiative, also known as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Prof. Dr. Bettina Gransow’s (Free University Berlin) contribution described the role of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) regarding the social and ecological standards. Projects of the AIIB, Gransow concluded, offer the potential of sustainability but require certain prerequisites. In the following talk, Prof. Tang Xiaoyang (Tsinghua University) showed that international sustainability standards are increasingly accepted by Chinese players within overseas projects, who simultaneously maintain a unique position towards these topics.

In the second panel, young researchers covered various subjects, including civil society, digitalization and security policy. Anja Ketels (Free University Berlin) discussed the role of NGOs in the BRI with regard to China’s aim of expanding its soft power. Towards this goal, Chinese NGOs are increasingly internationalizing and cooperating with foreign counterparts. Marianna Levtov (University of Zurich) followed with a presentation of digital aspects of the BRI, taking into account various ways of process enhancement towards the goal of technical global leadership. Chinese conflict interventions were the topic of the talk held by Tanja Walter (University Duisburg-Essen). By looking at different dimensions, Walter explained why the principle of non-intervention appears to receive a more flexible interpretation in recent years.

The afternoon session started with a roundtable on political instability in Africa and the BRI. Prof. Dr. Christof Hartmann (University Duisburg-Essen), Prof. Dr. Nele Noesselt (University Duisburg-Essen) and Prof. Liu Haifang (Peking University) discussed the readjustment and diversification of China’s approach to the African continent from various perspectives. In recent years, Chinese political leaders have become increasingly concerned about Africa’s stability and security, potentially triggering spill-over effects.

The second day’s discussions started with Prof. Liu Tao’s (University Duisburg-Essen) presentation on social policy diffusion in the BRI. Increasing international

migration raises the demand for new social protection institutions. Using the example of Mekong river countries, Liu showed how China has moved from being a knowledge-receiver towards a knowledge-sender, proving that diffusion no longer progresses only from North to South. Dr. Giulia Romano's (University Duisburg-Essen) talk looked at the concrete challenges of policy diffusion by focusing on the urban conservation and urban renewal plan, implemented in Yangzhou in the early 2000s. According to Prof. Markus Taube (University Duisburg-Essen), who closed the 3rd panel, the BRI can potentially enable the promotion of norms and values – however, the effects are too diverse and remain uncertain.

The 4th and last panel dealt with the economic aspects of the BRI. The challenges and opportunities posed by the BRI towards deeper European integration were at the centre of Dr. Margot Schüller's (GIGA Institute for Asian Studies) talk. According to her argumentation, especially Central, Eastern and Southern European countries can profit through greater participation in global trade and increased levels of investment. Schüller's lecture was followed by Prof. Yang Leike (Free University Berlin) questioning whether the BRI has increased levels of trade and investment in officially declared partner countries, using a country and sectoral analysis. All in all, his results showed no clear signs that joining the BRI will boost Chinese investments in the country. Moving towards Central Asia, Oyuna Baldakova looked at Chinese financial flows under the BRI in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, showing that local agency matters. As a stable authoritarian regime with strong institutions, Kazakhstan can follow a coherent strategy towards China and subsequently has an enhanced bargaining position. Marked by internal power struggles and a frequent change of key players in the government, Kyrgyzstan fails to find a clear strategy towards China, resulting in a weaker bargaining position.

Is China's image declining? This overarching workshop question was highlighted in Prof. Noesselt's wrap-up. The different panels linked domestic development to the global outreach of the BRI which renews trade corridors and infrastructure, connecting China and the world. Seeking a new balance and to become a new centre of innovation, the Silkroad Initiative is a response to the "Opening Up and Reform" of 1987 and the following transformation. However, contrary to China's stated goals, the BRI is often perceived as a challenge to the Liberal World Order. Looking at the different dimensions, the panels and discussions displayed a diverse and multi-level perspective on the BRI, although at times uncritical. The workshop "China's Silk Road Initiative – Concepts and Actors" offered many different and interesting takeaways going far beyond the public media coverage.

Lara Hammersen, BA
MA student Internationale Beziehungen und Entwicklungspolitik,
Universität Duisburg-Essen
lhammersen@outlook.de

Carolin Rosenberg, BA
MA student Internationale Beziehungen und Entwicklungspolitik,
Universität Duisburg-Essen
carolin.rosenberg@gmail.com

Christian Schneider, BA
MA student Internationale Beziehungen und Entwicklungspolitik,
Universität Duisburg-Essen
christianphilip@t-online.de

Marie Welling, BA
MA student Internationale Beziehungen und Entwicklungspolitik,
Universität Duisburg-Essen
marie.welling95@gmail.com