The Rise of New Eurasianism:

China's "Belt and Road" Initiative and Its Implications for Euro-Atlanticism

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Abstract: This article attempts to cast an analytic light on China's "One Belt and One Road" (OBOR) initiative and investigates the prospects for a new China-led Eurasian integration discourse as an alternative to the U.S.-led Euro-Atlanticism. To this end, it compares China's development-oriented strategy in Europe with the security-driven Atlanticist model and examines how the new governance framework relates to present-day international relations. It holds that the Eurasia-centered OBOR signifies a paradigm that is fundamentally different from the Atlanticist strategy that has come to define the European geopolitical landscape since the end of World War II. The OBOR aims to de-emphasize security arrangements and ensure sustainable development and prosperity by introducing an omnidirectional connectivity and cooperation agenda in the Eurasian strategic

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context. It is recognized, however, that although the new Eurasian discourse of inclusive development does not aim to directly challenge the United States' highly-institutionalized security presence in Europe, mindful of its larger paradigmatic implications, the United States is likely to view the OBOR unfavorably and seek to reinforce material and ideological fundamentals of the Atlantic alliance.

Keywords: One Belt and One Road (OBOR); Chinese diplomacy; Eurasianism; major-power relations; Atlanticism.

As a century-old idea, Eurasianism first emerged during the turbulent years of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Although this concept has branched into various forms, each of them holds its particular view on Russia's distinct geopolitical identity as a country stretching across Asia and Europe.¹ During the Cold War era, the Soviet-led Eurasianism confronted the Atlantic alliance of the United States and Western Europe. Nuclear parity between the United States and the USSR in the early 1950s highlighted the nature of confrontation as both countries initiated their own military blocs. Since the disintegration of the USSR, Eurasianism has gradually lost its attraction,² though Russia tries to rejuvenate the idea and enhance its appeal to other post-Soviet states.³ Euro-Atlanticism, on the other hand, still exerts prevailing influence in the world despite minor crises during the early years after the Cold War.

¹David Kerr, "The New Eurasianism: The Rise of Geopolitics in Russia's Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 6 (1995), pp. 978–979.

²See Graham Smith, "The Masks of Proteus: Russia, Geopolitical Shift and the New Eurasianism," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1999), pp. 481–494.

³Here, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) may stand out as two exceptions as they are not geographically comprehensive and confined to the post-Soviet geopolitical sphere. The idea of economic union in the post-Cold War era can be dated back to the early 1990s while the establishment of the EEU, after a number of earlier attempts under different institutional titles, was realized in 2014. Currently, the EEU is composed of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. The CSTO is a non-aggression treaty forged among six post-Soviet states (Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) as well as Afghanistan and Serbia as two observers.

Besides Eurasianism and Euro-Atlanticism, the inclusive development model proposed by China has gained traction in the past decade. Among all these development-oriented programs, the “One Belt and One Road (OBOR)” initiative has stood out as the most significant due in large part to its focus on land and maritime connectivity across Eurasia. As a comprehensive framework for cooperation, the OBOR is designed to create a dynamic ecosystem, streamlining activities ranging from transportation and communication to finance and education among a multitude of state actors and groupings. The emphasis on continental and maritime-based infrastructure building, interconnectivity, and development in Eurasia distinguishes the OBOR from the twentieth-century ideological Eurasianism which failed to offer an alternative to Atlanticism for its lack of economic viability and ideational feasibility. Intended to downplay its geopolitical implications, however, the OBOR is likely to proceed against increasing counteractions from the United States to reinforce its established alliances both in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific.

China's Belt and Road Initiative: Establishing Connectivity with Europe

The OBOR is basically an initiative for Eurasian interconnectivity, which reflects China's vision on global governance that stresses the development-oriented discourse to promote interactions among diverse peoples, ensure common prosperity, and contribute to international peace by exploring shared interests and new areas of cooperation.⁴

As a two-pronged strategy, the OBOR initiative envisions both land and maritime connectivity. The first leg, the “Silk Road Economic Belt,” is

⁴“Silk Road Strategy Attracts Overseas Countries,” Xinhua News, January 25, 2015, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2015-01/24/content_34648046.htm; Zhang Lulu, “China's Belt and Road Initiative Fleshed out,” March 29, 2015, http://www.china.org.cn/business/2015-03/29/content_35185058.htm; and “‘Belt and Road’ Blueprint Boosts Practical Cooperation,” *China Daily*, March 29, 2015, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-03/29/content_19943807.htm.

Map 1. Preliminary Routes of the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.

Source: Hong Kong Trade Development Council, 2015.

the modern version of the historical land network, stretching westward from the coastal China through Central Asia, the Middle East and on to Europe. The second leg, the “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” is an economic passageway running from the Pacific and Indian Oceans into the Arabian and Mediterranean Seas, ending up in northern Europe. Since the organic development and expansion of the two roads depend on ever-evolving social, economic, and political variables on the ground with multiple actors involved, a conclusive map of the two routes has not been drawn. However, the strategic emphasis of the project as being westward deep into the European heartland is obvious (See Map 1).

Spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa, the Silk Road Economic Belt, in China’s official rhetoric, “will be promoting connectivity, building over-land economic corridors and pillars of maritime cooperation,” and help “enhance policy communicating with other countries, expand the convergence of the shared interests and explore possible areas of win-win

cooperation.”⁵ One of the primary objectives of the initiative is to connect China with the outside world and explore new cooperation and development opportunities.⁶ Another objective is to open up new areas for investment in infrastructure such as rail transport and nuclear energy, and facilitate exports into the Eurasian market and beyond.⁷ The Silk Road Economic Belt is composed of five major routes linking China with Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.⁸ Among the linkages, the most stressed upon has been the “New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor” (also known as the “Northern Eurasian corridor”), due primarily to China’s greater emphasis on integration with the West European markets, and secondly, the favorable geopolitical conditions in Central Asia and Russia thanks to the ever-deepening China-Russia strategic partnership and the existence of several regional security institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).⁹

China prioritizes deeper economic relationship with Europe as the central focus of OBOR. In this respect, it recognizes the importance of easing Russia’s concerns that Beijing’s economic and political rise might reduce Moscow’s influence in Central Asia and Eastern Europe.¹⁰

⁵“China Sketches out Priorities of ‘Belt and Road’ Initiatives,” State Council of People’s Republic of China, February 2, 2015, http://english.gov.cn/state_council/vice_premiers/2015/02/02/content_281475048990884.htm.

⁶“China’s 2015 Diplomacy Focuses on ‘Belt and Road,’” *China Daily*, March 8, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015twosession/2015-03/08/content_19750295.htm.

⁷“Premier Li’s Proposals at ASEM Summit,” *Beijing Review*, October 23, 2014, http://www.bjreview.com.cn/Cover_Stories_Series_2014/2014-10/20/content_645888.htm.

⁸“What Is the Belt and Road Initiative,” Hong Kong Trade Development Council, January 21, 2016, <http://beltandroad.hktdc.com/en/about-the-belt-and-road-initiative/about-the-belt-and-road-initiative.aspx>.

⁹Olga Daksueva and Serafettin Yilmaz, “The Russia-China Security Partnership in the Asia-Pacific Region: Conjectural and Structural Dimensions,” *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (2014), pp. 61–92.

¹⁰Peter Ferdinand, “Sunset, Sunrise: China and Russia Construct a New Relationship,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 5 (2007), pp. 841–867; Vladimir Shlapentokh, “Russia, China, and the Far East: Old Geopolitics or a New Peaceful Cooperation?,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1995), pp. 307–318.

Significant steps have been taken to address the concerns and involve Russia in OBOR more comprehensively,¹¹ including the signing of an agreement on the coordinated development of Russia's Far East region; integration of the Trans-Siberian Railway with China's rail network; construction of new routes for faster movement of passengers and goods; and seeking broader partnership on energy.¹² Institutionally, Beijing has also sought partnership with Russia. During the Putin-Xi summit in Moscow in 2015, the two countries issued a joint declaration, voicing consensus on "coordinating development of the EEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt" to establish a "common economic space" in Eurasia, thereby launching the institutional axis of Beijing-Moscow Eurasian cooperation.¹³ The agreement has cleared a potential obstacle on the way of the Silk Road's Eurasian expansion, signaling formal interaction between OBOR and the EEU.¹⁴

The second leg of OBOR, the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, aims to link up China's coastal ports with ports in Europe through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. One of its primary functions is to connect Asia and Europe through a web of ports, promoting cooperation between regions and cities not only across economic lines, but also

The Belt and Road initiative is primarily designed to connect China and Europe through inclusive development of all participating nations.

¹¹Zhang Xiaotong and Marlen Belgibayev, "China's Eurasian Pivot," Asan Forum, December 1, 2014, <http://www.theasanforum.org/chinas-eurasian-pivot/>.

¹²Li Lifan and Wang Chengzhi, "Energy Cooperation Between China and Russia: Uncertainty and Prospect of Development," *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 163 (2015), p. 13; "Beijing, Moscow Agree to Integrate China's Belt Initiative with Russia's Eurasian Vision," *Xinhua News*, May 8, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/08/c_134222767.htm.

¹³Alexander Gabuev, "Post-Soviet States Jostle for Role in China's New Silk Road Project," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 6, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/08/06/post-soviet-states-jostle-for-role-in-one-belt-one-road-initiative-pub-60997>.

¹⁴Gennady Chufrin, "Eurasian Economic Union: Undergoing A Durability Test," *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 170 (2015), p. 5.

social and non-traditional security lines.¹⁵ As a non-monolithic plan, the project envisions a step-by-step enlargement with participation by all interested parties.¹⁶ An integral part of the Maritime Silk Road Plan is the creation of the Asia-Europe maritime route. The development of Piraeus port in Greece into a major trade hub by China is important in this regard, currently comprising the European end of the Maritime Silk Road network.¹⁷ Other than Piraeus in Greece, China has been involved in a number of maritime connectivity projects in Belgium, the Netherlands, Malta, and Poland as well as in countries situated along the Asia-Europe maritime corridor such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Egypt.¹⁸

The fact that OBOR is a comprehensive initiative built upon a multilateral framework reflects Beijing's long-term strategy to create a marketplace of global institutions. In addition to the existing cooperation mechanisms, new institutions are established as the program evolves. In this vein, China has taken the lead to establish the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)¹⁹

¹⁵Marzia De Giuli, "News Analysis: China's Belt and Road Initiatives to be Growth Driver for Europe: Italian Experts," Xinhua News, December 24, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/europe/2014-12/23/c_133874588.htm.

¹⁶Liu Cigui, "Reflections on Maritime Partnership: Building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," China Institute of International Studies, September 15, 2014, http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2014-09/15/content_7231376.htm.

¹⁷"File: Gross Weight of Seaborne Goods Handled in all Ports, 1997-2013 (in million tonnes)," Eurostat, [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Gross_weight_of_seaborne_goods_handled_in_all_ports,_1997-2013_\(in_million_tonnes\).png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Gross_weight_of_seaborne_goods_handled_in_all_ports,_1997-2013_(in_million_tonnes).png); "Piraeus Becomes China's Gateway to Europe," Railway Pro, February 22, 2016, <http://www.railwaypro.com/wp/piraeus-becomes-chinas-gateway-to-europe/>.

¹⁸For a detailed analysis, see Frans-Paul van der Putten Minke Meijnders, "China, Europe and the Maritime Silk Road," Clingendael Report, March 2015, pp. 15–16, <http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/China%20Europe%20and%20the%20Maritime%20Silk%20Road.pdf>.

¹⁹Launched in October 2014, the AIIB is a multilateral institution with participants from a vast geography. Different from a market-based, speculative, and profit-seeking venture or a privately owned investment bank, the AIIB is an international financial organization with particular focus on the promotion of public interest in their respective member economies. The philosophy that lies at the core of the AIIB is the basic rule of international political economy — that intra-regional trade and investment flows and designation of formal institutions foster cooperation and help settle disputes.

and the Silk Road Fund (SRF).²⁰ It is notable that Europe is the second largest participant region in the AIIB (a total of 20 European countries being members to the Bank so far), only after the Asia-Pacific. Europe's interest in the Bank is indicative of, among others, a quest for broader multilateralism. This reality can be contrasted with the U.S. bilateralism (the hub-and-spokes model) in the Asia-Pacific. The AIIB, for that matter, represents an attempt to complement Asian political economy and expand the model into Eurasia through the approach of inclusive development. The dialogue that is currently being established between the AIIB and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) to seek further areas of cooperation signifies the growing institutional synergy between China and Europe.²¹

Advantages and Benefits of China's Eurasian Integration Strategy

For years, the American-led Atlantic alliance has existed as an essentially security-driven regime, with economic arrangements being the extensions of the broader military framework.²² NATO's relevance in the post-Cold War era and its indispensable role in the Atlantic alliance demonstrate that it is practically impossible for European countries to think of "a Europe without an American military presence."²³ Although the scale and prospects of socio-economic connections between the two sides cannot be ignored as the ongoing dynamics around a transatlantic free trade pact show,

²⁰The US\$40 billion Silk Road Fund aims to provide investment and financing support for the projects in countries along OBOR. For more information visit the company website at <http://www.silkroadfund.com.cn/enwap/27363/index.html>. These institutions are linked to the Belt and Road and supported by a number of other mechanisms such as the Energy Development Fund, China-ASEAN Investment Cooperation Fund, and China-Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) Investment Cooperation Fund.

²¹Press Office, "EBRD President Calls for Strong Cooperation with AIIB," European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, June 27, 2015, <http://www.ebrd.com/news/2015/ebrd-president-calls-for-strong-cooperation-with-aiib.html>.

²²Francois Heisbourg, "The European-US Alliance: Valedictory Reflections on Continental Drift in the Post-Cold War Era," *International Affairs*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (1992), p. 669.

²³Robert J. Art, "Why Western Europe Needs the United States and NATO," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 111, No. 1 (1996), p. 6.

these arrangements remain secondary, generally complementing and promoting the military aspect.²⁴

The end of the Cold War signaled the emergence of new Atlanticism. Though the transition did not alter the security characteristic of the alliance, certain adjustments had to be made.²⁵ Throughout the 1990s, the alliance dealt with the issue of finding a *raison d'être* for NATO under the changing geostrategic and geopolitical environment in the Eurasian theater. Governments on both sides of the Atlantic were tasked with redefining the alliance, either politically or militarily.²⁶ Politically, greater emphasis was placed on stability and NATO's reaching out to former Warsaw Pact countries. Militarily, NATO needed to undergo a major overhaul in terms of its structure and strategy. Through intensive intra-Atlantic debate, areas of cooperation were re-determined, with new concepts and terminologies such as "risk" and "instability" replacing the old ones like the notion of "threat." The restructuring produced a more capable NATO that could deal with traditional and non-traditional security challenges, bringing Europe firmly within the transatlantic fold.²⁷

As opposed to the transatlantic experience, the Russian Eurasianism during the Cold War years was conceptually confined, drawing on nationalism rather than a broader regional outlook based on economic and political integration. Therefore, it could hardly offer an alternative paradigm to the reformed Atlanticism.²⁸ The failure of old Eurasianism could in part be attributed to its exclusive focus on territory and culture, at the expense of other aspects such as trade and development.²⁹ After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the concept lost whatever ideational

²⁴Heisbourg, "The European-US Alliance," p. 670.

²⁵Helene Sjursen, "On the Identity of NATO," *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (2004), p. 691.

²⁶Heisbourg, "The European-US Alliance," p. 665.

²⁷Paul Cornish, "European Security: The End of Architecture and the New NATO," *International Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (1996), p. 768.

²⁸Dmitry V. Shlapentokh, "Eurasianism: Past and Present," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1997), p. 148.

²⁹For a brief analysis of post-Soviet Eurasianism, see Dmitri Trenin, *The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2001), pp. 283–287.

and material power it had had and could no longer offer anything tangible.³⁰

In contrast, China has set to promote Eurasianism in an unconventional way that is based on — and supported by — the country's omnidirectional diplomacy and institution- and infrastructure- (transportation, communication, logistics, and others) building capability. In its new sense, the idea of Eurasianism is stripped from the former nationalist or exclusive territorial connotations, but advocates Eurasia-wide integration instead. That is exactly why the new Eurasianism can meaningfully offer an alternative to the security-driven Atlanticism in Europe.³¹ In the face of the strong historical and geostrategic rationale of the Atlantic alliance, China's development drive in Eurasia can be viewed both as a natural extension of the country's economic progress over the past decades and a response to numerous geopolitical scenarios in the Asia-Pacific and beyond, which would provide a strategic necessity and historic opportunity.³² The new Eurasianism offers China the much-needed space to mobilize strategies across a vast geography of great economic and political significance. It must be noted here, however, that although the OBOR initiative will help China consolidate its global position as an indispensable economic partner and demonstrate in real practice its foreign policy conceptualization as a rising power, the Eurasian focus will unlikely lead to a negligence of the maritime periphery of the country. In fact, the Belt and Road initiative involves at once maritime and land domains, which underlines China's multi-spherical diplomacy.

Its accumulated political and economic strength allows China to formulate policies for a Eurasia-centered integration. Politically, Beijing has constructed deep relations with countries and institutions along the Belt and Road. Economically, it is now the world's largest trading nation and a key contributor to global economic growth. Material strength is important since it enables institutional buildup that facilitates discourse making in which ideas are put into practice. It is therefore unsurprising that international organizations such as the AIIB and the New

³⁰Abbott Gleason, "Eurasia: What is it?," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2010), p. 29.

³¹Kerr, "The New Eurasianism: The Rise of Geopolitics in Russia's Foreign Policy."

³²Gleason, "Eurasia: What is it?" p. 32.

Development Bank (NDB) have attracted worldwide interest. This, for instance, can be contrasted with the U.S.-led New Silk Road Initiative. Revealed in 2011, the strategy envisioned connecting Central and South Asia through highways by “linking India and Pakistan via Afghanistan to the formerly Soviet republics of Central Asia” and creating a free trade zone.³³ However, aside from the unrealistic geopolitical presumptions inherent in the plan and lack of political inclusiveness,³⁴ the economic capacity of various actors to support and sustain the initiative has remained questionable.³⁵

China's Belt and Road initiative enhances new Eurasianism as an alternative model to the U.S.-led Atlanticism.

The Eurasia-centered development policy offers China a number of potential benefits. First and foremost, it enables Beijing to defuse the growing U.S. pressure in the Asia-Pacific under its rebalancing strategy.³⁶ This is of critical significance for Beijing given that Washington's renewed full-spectrum dominance in the Asia-Pacific is designed to bar China from enlarging its sphere of influence via secured access into high seas.³⁷ The expansive Central Asia,

which functions as a corridor to Eastern and Western Europe, is therefore considered the “starting point of the Eurasian pivot” of China, and also relatively free from the U.S. military domination. Thus, Beijing may be

³³Younkyoo Kima and Fabio Indeob, “The New Great Game in Central Asia Post-2014: The US ‘New Silk Road’ Strategy and Sino-Russian Rivalry,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (June 2013), pp. 278.

³⁴Gao Fei and Li Junyang, “China's Diplomacy in the Era of Xi Jinping: Inheritance and Innovation,” in *Interpretation on New Philosophy of Chinese Diplomacy*, compiled by State Council Information Office of the PRC (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2014), p. 149.

³⁵Zhang Xiaotong and Marlen Belgibayev, “China's Eurasian Pivot,” Asan Forum, December 1, 2014, <http://www.theasanforum.org/chinas-eurasian-pivot/>.

³⁶The U.S. rebalancing strategy was debated in detail in *Global Asia*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2012). Expert views can be accessed at <https://www.globalasia.org/issue/the-us-pivot-to-asia/>.

³⁷Dmitri Trenin, “From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente,” The Carnegie Moscow Center, April 2015, p. 7, <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP.Trenin.To.Asia.WEB.2015Eng.pdf>.

able to move westward easily, finding enough space for policy execution and responding to the U.S. naval thrust on its eastern flank.³⁸ Aside from actively engaging its maritime domain in the Asia-Pacific, as, for example, is happening currently in the South China Sea, the Eurasian strategy may enable China to expand and multiply the fronts of diplomatic interaction and comprehensive economic dialogue.

Second, the Eurasian integration strategy within the OBOR framework serves as a real-life demonstration to the international community of the broader ideational characteristics of China's foreign policy. Indeed, over the past four decades, China's foreign policy conceptualization has radically moved away from ideological solidarism to pragmatic and inclusive development.³⁹ With this shift, punitive instruments of diplomacy were further sidelined and greater emphasis has been placed on ideas such as non-interventionism and respect for sovereignty. The Eurasian outlook advanced by China exemplifies the country's ideas on regional and global governance. China's economic size and capacity lend support to its foreign policy approach. The country's relevance and weight in international trade and investment has become manifest over the past years. In 2013, China surpassed the United States as the world's largest trading nation, with 124 countries considering China their largest trading partner.⁴⁰ China's development track record has reinforced its global image in terms of sustainable infrastructure and advanced logistics. The country's newly built national high-speed rail network has become a viable diplomatic tool to demonstrate its technological and logistical capabilities.⁴¹ These material advantages have had a positive impact on the advancement of China's Eurasia policy.

Third, the development-oriented Eurasian strategy also enables China to emphasize the structural differences between approaches of Washington

³⁸Zhang and Belgibayev, "China's Eurasian Pivot."

³⁹Joseph Y. S. Cheng and Zhang Wankun, "Patterns and Dynamics of China's International Strategic Behaviour," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 11, No. 31 (2002), pp. 235–260.

⁴⁰"China Overtakes US as World's Largest Trading Country," RT News, February 11, 2013, <https://www.rt.com/business/china-us-largest-trading-country-908/>.

⁴¹"Premier Road Show: Li Takes CEE Leaders on High-speed Train Ride," *China Daily*, November 25, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015liattendsASEAN/2015-11/25/content_22517637_4.htm.

and Beijing. In general terms, the old paradigm, which prioritizes security in order to sustain common development, is contrasted with a new paradigm that prioritizes development to ensure common security. Other than the actual material implications on the ground in the form of new institutions and trade routes, this paradigmatic contrast will undoubtedly lead to a gradual change of perception among relevant state actors regarding the ideal mode of global governance. The enthusiasm toward the AIIB has signified such ideational shift. Western Europe is definitely an essential domain where this change is taking place. Divergence between the models promoted by China and the United States gives Europe a certain room to maneuver without facing entrapment or abandonment by its security commitments with the United States, and countries in Europe could avoid the risk of being seen as siding with China at the cost of U.S. influence, even though Washington remains concerned about Europe's tilt toward the China-led institutionalization, as seen in its explicit objection to the membership of its allies to the AIIB. It is difficult to rationalize that existing economic frameworks might be endangered if China is able to set up alternative global regimes.⁴² For this reason, European countries have so far largely ignored the warnings from the United States.⁴³

It follows that, since China's Eurasian framework stands in contrast with Atlanticism in many respects, it is appropriate for European countries to think of it as a parallel model and a potential alternative. The parallel feature suggests that the Chinese and U.S. frameworks may coexist peacefully as their primary focuses are not identical. The alternative feature, on the other hand, suggests that the two paradigms cannot coexist since they are essentially antithetical and thus mutually exclusive. The U.S. response, in this case, would be seeking ways to eliminate the challenge, meaning that coexistence would continue to be contentious. In any case, for either of these scenarios to materialize, aside from China's sustained and systematic push for deeper economic and political integration, a change of perception among European decision-makers and the general public would be needed to enable a shift from security-centered thinking to one related to

⁴²"US Should Write Laws of Global Economy, not China — Obama," RT News, April 17, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/business/250497-obama-economy-china-trade/>.

⁴³"AIIB Complementary to ADB, World Bank: China's Finance Minister," *People's Daily*, March 21, 2015, <http://en.people.cn/business/n/2015/0321/c90778-8866727.html>.

development and eventually to an institutionalized “Eurasian anti-unilateralism.”⁴⁴ Only at such level would it be viable to talk about the China-led Eurasianism as a coexisting or an alternative paradigm.

Interestingly, such paradigmatic change appears to be ongoing. The active participation in China-initiated projects by Central Asian and European states, such as the alignment of the OBOR with the Russia-led EEU, the early talks between China and Europe to streamline the functions of the EBRD and the AIIB/Silk Road Fund, the initiation of a slew of transportation projects in Eastern Europe, the proposed high-speed rail between China and Russia and, potentially, Central Asia and beyond, as well as the launch of new rail lines connecting China and Western Europe, all indicate an incremental emergence of development politics. This paradigm can be both liberating and empowering for Europe not the least because it offers “the opportunity to magnify effect” in such a way that “the Chinese Silk Road initiative can become a way out for the EU, which is suffering from a protracted economic slowdown, and may strengthen Eurasian continental powers both politically and economically.”⁴⁵ Hence, viewed from a purely economic perspective, the China-led development policy seems to be the rational choice.

Finally, greater connectivity, investment, and trade across Eurasia with China at the center could further bolster its aggregate power. Among others, the OBOR initiative enables China to mobilize its excess production and construction capacity, facilitate faster and cheaper transportation of goods and commodities, and help deepen bilateral economic ties with countries along the route. Furthermore, China’s position as the largest trading partner for most economies in Eurasia gives it the opportunity to conduct trade in the Chinese currency (RMB), which helps elevate the RMB’s status as a global reserve currency. Overall,

European countries
tend to embrace
China’s Eurasian
integration efforts
mainly for economic
gains.

⁴⁴Xiang Lanxin, “Washington’s Misguided China Policy,” *Survival*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2001), p. 22.

⁴⁵“Silk Road to Link Asia to Europe, Strengthen Continental Powers,” Sputnik News, May 18, 2015, <http://sputniknews.com/business/20150518/1022284412.html>.

further reinforced and streamlined connectivity across Eurasia will assist China both politically and economically as the country is simultaneously working toward reconfigured global governance and an upgraded national economy.

Challenges Ahead for China's Belt and Road Initiative

To be sure, a geo-economic shift in the Eurasian landscape would not translate into the weakening of the U.S. presence in the European strategic landscape overnight. As the post-Cold War expansion of NATO has shown, the United States enjoys extensive political leverage over Europe due to its mainstay status as a security provider. Two main factors have played roles in the persistence of the U.S.-led security discourse in Europe. On the one hand, the dissolution of the Soviet Union did not change in a sustained way the prevailing Cold War perceptions among the members of the Atlantic alliance, apart from a certain update in the rhetoric. After a momentary rapprochement and thawing of the frozen relations, geostrategic mistrust has returned to the center of Russia-Atlantic interactions. The persisting concerns arising from Europe's dependence on Russian energy resources and the most recent developments in Ukraine enhanced the idea that European security still stood on a precarious ground and needed U.S. protection. On the other hand, there has been no contender to challenge the U.S. geopolitical presence in Europe. China, for its part, continuously relays the message that it is not interested in contesting the U.S. supremacy in Europe. Rather, it is keen on keeping the Sino-European relations within the well-defined economic commitments. Indeed, as mentioned above, China's recent drive for broader institutionalization in Eurasia has been limited to the twin objectives of connectivity and development. Thus, European security will remain exclusively a U.S. domain, leaving European countries with no other tangible option to develop alternative security frameworks, even if they would seek to do so.

Nevertheless, China's assurances of not wanting to develop security relations with European countries have not assuage Washington's concerns. The United States seems to be suspicious of China's political motivation behind its Eurasian integration strategy. First, as demonstrated explicitly in President Obama's appeal to maintain U.S. capability to dictate international trade rules, decision-makers in Washington fully understand that

a heavily militarized alliance without adequate economic incentives is fragile.⁴⁶ Washington's dual push for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) in Europe and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in the Asia-Pacific clearly points to such diversification strategy. However, the United States, even with successful conclusion of the TTIP, would not be able to distance itself from the security framework in Europe because military support is still its most viable diplomacy instrument that no other country can perceptibly match or rival against.

The second concern from Washington is the distinct characteristic of China's foreign policy as being conceptually different from that of America's former existential rival, the Soviet Union, which had put great emphasis on military might at the cost of sustainable economic development and aggregate national power, thus it lacked idea-making capacity for global appeal. Currently, although the United States is able to influence the decision-making process within the global economy, China maintains healthy economic fundamentals such as a strong manufacturing base, huge foreign exchange reserves, growing inflow and outflow of foreign direct investment (FDI), and extensive global trade penetration. As has been pointed out previously, China's abundant material basis has added weight to its influence on the world economy, and enabled it to create ideas of global governance put in institutionalized practice. Thus, well-versed against a Cold War opponent that was similar in terms of the logic of competition and threat perception, China could be regarded by the United States as a different kind of rival that is capable of putting forward operational ideas for global governance. This has prompted the United States to pressure China on multiple flashpoints such as the South China Sea and the Korean Peninsula, and to adapt to a certain degree to the emerging global discourse by strongly advocating its own narratives under liberalized frameworks.

Washington, on its part, could try to rival with Beijing where the latter is diplomatically most advantageous at the moment — that is to say, on economic terms. Aside from advising against European participation in China-led economic institutions, the United States might continue to seek to consolidate its economic position in Europe. Certainly, transatlantic

⁴⁶Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President on Trade," the White House, May 8, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/08/remarks-president-trade>.

economic ties are quite strong, with annual bilateral trade value in goods amounting to US\$700 billion. Beyond trade, the level of financial integration and mutual investment is also comprehensive across the Atlantic.⁴⁷ The transatlantic economic relationship will be further strengthened if the TTIP negotiations can be successfully concluded this year.⁴⁸ In this light, the United States will be likely to employ the TTIP as a rival framework to OBOR.

Indirectly, U.S. policies may hamper China's connectivity and infrastructure building efforts along the Belt and Road. In particular, the Russia-U.S. confrontation constitutes a potential obstacle. The U.S.-led sanctions on Russia have generated significant impacts on the country's economy. On the one hand, deteriorating relations with the West gives additional impetus for Moscow to deepen strategic partnership with Beijing. On the other hand, however, the crisis undermines Moscow-EU relations, thereby endangering its geographical utility as a conduit between the two ends of Eurasia. In such geostrategic conjecture, China's efforts may be sidelined or marginalized since the United States will continue to confront Russia in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Apart from the complicated situation in Europe, the OBOR initiative is faced by the U.S.' counterweighing actions and rising U.S.-Russia confrontation.

In addition to the U.S. element, China's OBOR initiative, as it thrusts deeper into the European landmass, will face further challenges since it involves multiple actors with economies at different stages of development as well as diverse political regimes and regional circumstances. Thus greater multilateralization might make it harder for China to manage the multitude of national interests and priorities that might be at odds with each other. In this respect, the nature of interaction among these individual states and

⁴⁷For a wealth of trade and investment data, visit the European Commission's website: <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/united-states/>; see also the official website of the EU's delegation to the United States: <http://www.euintheus.org/what-we-do/eu-us-facts-figures/>.

⁴⁸The statement of the EU Chief Negotiator following the conclusion of the 12th round of talks can be accessed at http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2016/february/tradoc_154325.pdf.

groupings is as important as China's bilateral relationships with other countries. For instance, the disagreement between Russia and the EU over the Ukraine crisis might encourage Moscow to advise the EEU member states to slow down their paces of involvement in the China-proposed transcontinental high-speed railway extending to Europe. Furthermore, certain issues pertaining to domestic governance such as corruption and inefficiency in countries along the Belt and Road might also get in the way of the successful execution of development programs initiated under various OBOR platforms.

Conclusion

It is obvious that if China's OBOR initiative gains further momentum and achieves tangible outcomes, the new Eurasian framework will be set as a contemporary model different from both traditional Eurasianism and historical Atlanticism. In that case, the emerging development-oriented Eurasianism will create not only economic but also political and security implications. The OBOR initiative will result in greater connectivity and prosperity in Eurasia and beyond. Economic development, in turn, will accelerate political rapprochement and peace among diverse regimes in the region, as China's long-held diplomacy principles such as non-interventionism and non-aggression become viable international norms. In the long run, the China-led initiative may emerge as an alternative paradigm to the U.S.-led Atlanticism in Europe, undermining in general the utility of the over-militarized regional and international regimes.

Europe is one of the key regions on the entire Eurasian continent whose geopolitical landscape has been largely defined by its firm attachment to the post-WWII international order dominated by the United States. The notion of an all-around decoupling of Europe from the U.S.-centered security framework would currently be unrealistic. However, as has been witnessed during the membership enlargement of the AIIB, Europe may continue to view China's plans favorably as it actively charts its way between approaches of China and the United States. As long as China continues to underline the inclusive development nature of the OBOR initiative, European countries would remain keen to participate in it despite the U.S. diplomatic pressure. It is, therefore, anticipated that Europe will try to strike a balance between the security cooperation with the United States

and new economic linkages with China. If the OBOR initiative successfully leads Europe to a sustained balancing strategy, this would be a major advancement in the discourse-making capacity of China's diplomacy.

As has been voiced elsewhere, "if China keeps up the general pace and direction in which it is now working, a more integrated Eurasia-Africa economic space with China as an increasingly central actor could begin to take shape in the coming decade or so."⁴⁹ It is likely that China's economy-driven strategy will increasingly shape a larger space in the Eurasian economic-political landscape, and that its structural differences from the U.S.-led Euro-Atlanticism will stand out more forcefully with broader connectivity and common development increasingly visible on the ground. Given that the proposed integration of OBOR with the EEU and the EBRD is fully realized, the Eurasian framework will then achieve a unique institutional synergy and mandate spanning from China through Central Asia into Europe. Without losing sight of the existing and potential challenges, China needs to further theorize, refine, and institutionalize its distinct approaches to global governance.

⁴⁹Van der Putten and Meijnders, "China, Europe and the Maritime Silk Road," p. 33.