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One Belt, One Road – China's new grand strategy

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ABSTRACT

Does the 'One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative' represent a mere nostalgic rhetoric, summing up a wider range of policy initiatives, based on two different regional levels, or is it a bold statement of China's new geopolitical grand strategy? In its geographic focus the 'OBOR initiative' comprises locations which are already within the Chinese government's focus of interest – Central Asia and Southeast Asia with an extension to Europe, as a primary destination for its exports. Consequently, the 'OBOR initiative' can be viewed as a framework of existing political-economic interests of the Chinese government that are aligned to a wide range of different policy proposals. Following such a line of argument one may understand OBOR as the emergence of various processes of regional and sub-regional integration dynamics in which the Chinese leadership will take a more active role. Conversely, one may emphasise the qualitative and explicit adaptations within the 'OBOR initiative' that constitutes China's contemporary geopolitical grand strategy. A final salient point that is demonstrated here, is that this initiative shows that geography continues to shape geopolitics even though we are living in a supposed globalised world.

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1. Introduction

This paper addresses the question, does the 'One Belt – One Road (OBOR) initiative' represent a bold statement of China's contemporary grand strategy or a mere summing up of a wider range of economic and political initiatives that employs a well-established historical rhetoric connecting Asia and Europe.

One only has to examine the geographic focus of the 'OBOR initiative' as the regions concerned comprise the Chinese government's existing focus of interest. This can be seen with Central Asia and Southeast Asia, hence one could argue that 'OBOR initiative' provides a formalised statement for existing political-economic interests that aligns a wide range of different policy proposals. Following such a line of argument one may also anticipate a more active role China may take with regard to various processes of regional integration dynamics.

However, a contrasting interpretation could identify 'OBOR initiative' as a bold statement of China's contemporary geopolitical grand strategy, one which is formulated to counter

not only the American 'Pivot to Asia' strategy, but indeed may also indicate a rather novel and alternative strategy to the existing international institutional architecture characterised by prevailing US interests. After all, the successful implementation of 'OBOR initiative' could enhance China's geopolitical interests and consequently not only increase its sphere of influence, but also reshape, in its favour, a considerable part of its interactions within its periphery, namely Southeast Asia and Central Asia. Accepting such an interpretation would also indicate China's readiness to change from a rule follower to a rule maker, from a status quo power to a revisionist power. Yet, so far, and for the most part, China has been viewed as a conservative rule follower rather than an ambitious revisionist state.

Even if China eventually does become a revisionist state, this would not be a major departure in the history of world politics. After all, the rise and fall of dominant powers are often accommodated by processes in which weaker states become more powerful, through acquiring capabilities, and consequently challenging the existing dominant power. Indeed, European history provides a good example for that millennia old process. A final point, which will be discussed in the context of this initiative, is that geography still shapes politics even though we are supposedly living in a globalised world.

The paper will begin with a short evaluation of the term grand strategy, followed by a discussion of whether China can be viewed as a status quo or revisionist state and to what extent we can interpret the 'OBOR initiative' imitative as China's new geopolitical strategy.

2. Grand strategy and national interests

Before discussing to what extent the 'One Belt - One Road initiative' can be viewed as a bold statement of China's new grand strategy, we shall begin with a definition of what grand strategy actually refers to as its meaning and understanding changed over time.

2.1. Defining grand strategy

Traditionally, as emphasised by Liddell Hart, a grand strategy was linked with war and how best to mobilise and coordinate forces and resources to attain the political objective of a war (1967, 322). Yet, Morgenthau shifts the focus of a grand strategy towards the coordination of different elements of national power, to generate the maximum effect upon those international situations which concern the national interests most directly (1973, 141). Here the original keen focus on the military aspect of a grand strategy is no longer mentioned, though one can argue that influencing the international situation may also include military aspects as well. An alternative interpretation of the meaning of a grand strategy can also be detected in Kennedy's position to include not only the overall political, economic and military aims to preserve the long-term interests of a state, but also a correct balancing of priorities within those interests on the part of the state (Kennedy 1991). Alike, Biddle states that a grand strategy constitute the ultimate objectives of a state, by integrating military, political, and economic means to pursue its objectives within the international system (2004, 252, 253).

Hence, coordinating various national resources – political, economic, military and diplomacy – to pursue specific national interest was then identified as the core task of a grand strategy. Consequently, one can argue that a grand strategy can be viewed as an organising principle for state craft: to organise national priorities hierarchical within a wider and contemporary context so to reach specific goals which are identified of critical national interest.

A grand strategy therefore is an articulated statement of national strategic objectives, a broad statement of strategic action, one which guides policies in pursuing and implementing those priorities. As such it provides a consistent and rational framework, for political decision-making over an extended period of time.

As such, a grand strategy embodies the concreteness of political decision-making which may also include a geographical focus, sub-regional, regional or global in nature. Another aspect of a grand strategy is that it would require an authoritative statement from the highest political authority, which will command the political power necessary to implement it, but it does not have to be publicly announced. This makes it difficult for the analyst to identify a grand strategy, what's more it would be wrong to expect that a grand strategy can be identified easily when implemented, as leaders have to make political compromises, internally and externally, and thus may have to postpone some aspects of their strategies or even to abandon other elements completely.

A good example represents the existence of an American grand strategy. Even it is widely accepted that most American presidents can be said to have had one, and examples include the Truman doctrine; the Carter doctrine; or the Reagan and Bush doctrines, Dueck still cautions to be careful when evaluating the existence of an American grand strategy, by trying to identify one through the existence of a prefabricated plan, implemented by the letter, by referring to former president Bill Clinton, who once said that with regard to grand strategies, presidents just made it up as they went along (Dueck 2015, 4).

Taken together, with the expectation that states, especially powerful ones, and that particular leaders formulate and pursue a grand strategy is not novel in the history of international relations, then there should be little doubt that China and its leadership are also pursuing a grand strategy as well. After all, advancing concrete national, domestic and international interests, in the context of a particular geostrategic environment, are not only the purpose of a grand strategy but at the core of politics.

However, before identifying the existence of a grand strategy we have to ask what are the principal objectives a specific government and its leadership aims to fulfil, since this represents the starting point for formulating a grand strategy in the first place.

2.2. Top priorities of China's leadership

As stated regularly in official documentation as well as being enshrined in the Chinese constitution, the top priority for the Chinese leadership is the preservation of China's socialist system. In chapter one, article one, it is stated that the People's Republic of China is a socialist state and that the socialist system is the basic system of the People's Republic of China. Any disruption of the socialist system by any organisation or individual is prohibited (Constitution of the People's Republic of China's 1999). With it, the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) is to be protected as well.

Derived from this principle goal are specific strategies, like generating adequate economic growth to guarantee development and with it social stability and prosperity as well as to make China a powerful and respected country again. Though there have been periods in which the ideological question dominated the political discourse in China (like during the Cultural Revolution), however, at the now famous Third Plenary Session 11th Central Committee (December 1978), generating economic development was again defined as the appropriate strategy to preserve China's socialist system and class struggle was replaced by

economic modernisation as the major strategic focus (Communiqué of the 11th Third Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China' 1978). The Communiqué further stresses that creating a modern and powerful socialist country on the basis of rapid growth and through the modernisation of the industrial production was a critical task for the leadership (Communiqué of the 11th Third Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China' 1978). It is worth remembering that economic underdevelopment also carries a critical political-ideological component; an issue Deng Xiaoping was well aware of back in 1978:

If the rate of growth of the productive forces in a socialist country lags behind that in capitalist countries over an extended historical period, how can we talk about the superiority of the socialist system? (Deng, September 1978)

Moreover, economic backwardness also carried a significant nationalist aspect, as from a Chinese perspective, it deprives China of belonging to the group of leading nations. After all, restoring 'China's rightful place' among the leading nations in the world, was a goal for all Chinese governments since the early nineteenth century, independent of their political colour.

The primacy of development for supporting China's economic development, and with it China's socialist system, did not change over time and maintained its prominence as stated in the Communiqué of the 3rd Plenum of the 18th Party Congress (November 2013). To sustain and bolster China's socialist system the successful reform and opening process is consciously to be supported as economic development and prosperity would decide the face of contemporary China. It was once again stated, that the aim is to create a moderately prosperous, wealthy, and strong socialist country (Communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Party Congress 2013). This development imperative is also identifiable in the repeated references made, that China is still at the primary stage of socialism and that it will be there for a long time to come.

Hence, the development imperative continues to be identified as the pivotal task for the government. Not only for reaching the goal of socialist modernisation, but for China to become a prosperous and strong country once again. One resulting task is to ensure a peaceful and stable international environment, which is seen as conducive for economic development, consequently generating a critical impact on China's international politics and behaviour.

The specific formulation of a grand strategy will therefore not only reflect on the specific strategic task a government have to address, but will also reflect on its capabilities and on its status within the international political hierarchy. This brings us to the enduring discussion about China's national ambitions, not least because of its extraordinarily successful reform project. This discussion centres on the question to what extent China can either be characterised as a status quo power or harbours ambitions of becoming a revisionist state, or to formulate it differently to change from a rule follower to a rule maker.

After all, historically, China did experience a long period of geopolitical primacy, at least within East Asia. This historical position is still remembered today as its self-awareness as one of the world oldest civilizations. As such China, its leaders and its people, do hold a strong self-esteem, which combined with its increasing capabilities may facilitate a stronger sense of 'being heard' and its interests 'being taken into account' both at the regional and global level.

The momentum of rising self-esteem is further enhanced when a country, as China has over the last three decades, experienced a process in which capabilities and with it its power increased considerably, not only in absolute terms but also in comparison with other states. Even so, the Chinese leadership and its population are certainly not the only example where we can identify a well-established self-awareness; European history and colonialism provides evidence for that.

Yet the debate to what extent China can be viewed as either a satisfied status quo power or a revisionist power is not a new one, and goes back as far as the early 1990s when China's economic success became internationally more visible and questions regarding its political ambitions were being asked.

Gilpin offers a distinctive approach in identifying between a revisionist and status quo state. That revisionist states seek to change the established distribution of power, the existing hierarchy of prestige and the rights and rules which governs the interaction between states. Aside from that, other attempts undertaken by states would be rather more problematic to interpret as revisionist behaviour (1981, 34). Thus, accepting that a balancing strategy in international relations would not sufficiently qualify for identifying a revisionist state. Johnston, after scrutinising China's international activities in detail, concluded that China is a status quo power, by pointing out that since the start of the reform period China has become considerably integrated into the existing international political and economic system as its membership in international organisations has not only increased but China's behaviour is characterised by compliance with the rules and norms of these organisations. Taken together, he argues, this provides a strong indication that China can be identified as a cooperative status quo power (See Johnston [Spring 2003]).

Yet the discussion to what extent China is either a status quo or revisionist power will continue for some time and China's 'OBOR initiative' will certainly offer additional contribution to that discussion. This brings us back to the basic question of this paper of whether the 'One Belt – One Road initiative' can be viewed as a bold statement about China's new grand strategy, a geopolitical statement which identifies China's specific interests and consequently specific spheres of influence China is interested in establishing, or a mere umbrella term for a range of diverse policy initiatives.

3. 'One Belt – One Road' and its geographical distinctiveness

It is worth recalling that China shares a long and geographically diverse border with many different states, which leads to numerous strategic challenges and increases the complexity the government faces. Moreover, we should not overlook that China is still at a stage in which its development process should not be taken as given, even as considerable success has already been reached in both absolute and relative gains. Consequently, any grand strategy formulated by the Chinese leadership would need to manage domestic and international challenges, and therein the range of regional and international political, economic and military interactions.

The origin of the 'OBOR initiative' is widely attributed to comments made during a speech by President Xi Jinping in September 2013, when on a state visit to Kazakhstan. By referring to the long and traditional friendship between China and Kazakhstan he proposed a kind of economic belt along the Silk Road. As to the maritime version, it first was proposed during a speech to the Indonesian Parliament in October 2013. Economic cooperation on various

subjects are at the core of the initiative. This applies to both the land and maritime versions of the initiative.

The National Development and Reform Commission's (NDRC) statement on the 'OBOR Initiative', authorised by the State Council, emphasises the economic focus and claims that it would help to overcome the current weak performance of the global economy resulting from the impact of the 2008 financial crisis. Hence, following the implementation of the initiative, closer economic cooperation among the participating states, it is proposed, would not only be assured but they would also benefit economically. This is a clear reference to equal and reciprocal benefits (Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road 2015).

3.1. The road: the central Asia context

When considering the specific focus of both schemes, the geopolitical dimension cannot be ignored, since the emergence of an interdependent and connected Eurasia would transform global politics. Viewing the situation in Central Asia and its links with either China, Europe, and/or Russia, connectivity is a critical topic.

China has a strong and stated interest in securing access to Central Asia's regional energy resources and supply routes in the region. However, the region has also increasingly been identified as an export market for Chinese products. Another aspect, from a Chinese perspective, portends a potential counter to Russian influence within the region, who continues to view Central Asia as belonging to its sphere of influence. For example, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was founded in Astana in 2014 as Eurasian integration became a geopolitical project for Russia. Russia has the energy and mineral resources of the region in mind, establishing an economic bloc which centres on Russia and may be able to take a balancing position vis-a-vis European and Chinese influence within the region is also on its political agenda (Gallo 2014, 1).

Yet it is important to appreciate that Central Asia experienced economic and political connectedness during the Soviet area and indeed, the actual international borders of the now independent states in Central Asia are based on the administrative division of the region during the Soviet period which never were meant to become international borders. Hence, the independent states of Central Asia are still in a process of state and nation building. Conversely, it can be said that the region inherited a certain historical identity and connectedness based on the Timurid Empire (1370–1607) that may provide a historical basis for cohesion.

However, it is helpful to keep in mind the region's former strong Moscow-oriented connectivity, when evaluating the possible impact of the 'OBOR initiative' on the region, though, in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, a strong emphasis within the region existed to move beyond the Russian sphere of influence, including building a new infrastructure which would allow the region to be less reliant on Moscow and more connected with outside countries, consequently balancing the almost dominant Russian influence. Notwithstanding, the EEU project may offer a signal of a return to a possible renewed orientation towards Moscow throughout the region, though a regional desire to be connected with outside markets (Europe and China) continues to exist. We may discern a double integration process in this regard, one which includes both a re-definition of Central Asian–Russian ties and one of Central Asia with the outside world, i.e. China and Europe. One crucial aspect which will have to be observed is to what extent such a double-integration process,

if such integration dynamic actually occurs, will play out with regard to competing interests of the involved actors.

Hence, considering Russia's and China's interest in increasing their influence in Central Asia and their connectivity with the region, it raises the question, to what extent their respective proposals, Russia's inspired EEU and China's 'OBOR Initiative', would be compatible. Though there were some statements made from Putin and Xi Jinping to connect EEU and 'OBOR initiative' and a declaration of cooperation between these two projects was signed on May 8 2015, in which Putin stated, 'we think that the Eurasian integration project and the Silk Road Economic Belt project complement each other very harmoniously' adding that we 'will create a common economic space across the entire Eurasian continent' (Press statements following Russian–Chinese talks 2015, 4).

Notwithstanding potential geopolitical consideration underlining Russia's and China's proposals, the comparability of their initiatives is rather questionable. Libman identifies some of the existing challenges, pointing, for example, towards the distinct character which distinguishes the EEU and 'OBOR Initiative'. The EEU, he assesses, is a regional integration agreement, following an approach to regionalism like the EU model, which includes supra-national institutions and various regulatory regimes, like a customs union; nothing of which exists or is planned within the 'OBOR Initiative' (Libman 2016, 43, 44).

Even so, one could argue that, if access is guaranteed, the planned transportation corridors of both initiatives, EEU and 'OBOR initiative', could offer not only some potential for regional cooperation within Central Asia but could even hold the possibility of increasing connectivity with both Europe and Asia. For taking advantage of such a potential trade-off, a critical issue remains, as to what extent either project will be interpreted as a geopolitical project of either Russia or China, to increase their respective 'sphere of influence'. If such a perception becomes widespread, or indeed informs the underlining motivation of their advances towards the Central Asian region, it may undermine both projects and consequently reduce the potential trade-offs.

From a Chinese perspective, increasing cooperation and economic connectivity, and with it influence in Central Asia, may also facilitate economic development in China's most western province, Xinjiang, consequently serving as a catalyst for domestic economic development. As such it would also deliver a fundamental goal of the Chinese leadership, that of generating and sustaining development in a relatively backward province of the country.

Yet, the potential economic effect that both initiatives offer to particular groups within countries of the region is another vital aspect. Even as an improvement of the regional transportation infrastructure can be viewed as a vital part of regional development it is still not without raising some concern. Certainly, China's declaration in offering further investment in the context of the 'OBOR Initiative' is appreciated by all Central Asian states, yet the question remains to what extent such investment not only serve China's own interests, but also the development strategies of Central Asian states. Even when economic prosperity would be generated, it still could lead to dissatisfaction as development inadvertently creates inequality, as China's own development process, successful as it is, provides a good example. And with it the prospect of social conflicts, of generating political instability should not to be ignored either. Hence, time will tell how the impact of socio-economic transition within Central Asia will leave its mark on the societies and nations of that region.

Thus, political constraints generated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the unexpected independence of the former Soviet administrative units continues to provoke social

discontent and consequently increases the spectre of political instability during the transition process. Even as we still have to ask to what extent we are witnessing the existence of a nascent regionalism within Central Asia, there are indications that a new map of Eurasia is possibly emerging as increasing connectivity may provide the opportunity of functional integration for Eurasia, consequently leading to the creation of a new geo-economic and geopolitical sphere.

From a geopolitical perspective we may examine the extent China's 'OBOR initiative' and Russia's EEU project will lead Central Asian states either to become a more cohesive force in international politics or a focus of geopolitical competition. Though, geopolitical rivalry within Central Asia exists mainly between Russia and China, yet Turkey also has demonstrated a willingness to play a more influential role within Central Asia, but it is lacking both economic and geopolitical power.

Yet, as to the possibility of the development of a Eurasian economic sphere and the potential geopolitical shift such a development could bring, the future adaptations within Central Asia are critical, assuming that both China and Europe continue to develop economically. If such a development perspective should materialise it would also raise the question to what extent such an eventuality could alter the geography of global trade flows replacing the Asia-US or Atlantic-EU focus in the global economy. With its changing economic and geopolitical interest would undergo critical transformation as well.

3.2. The belt: China's interest in South and Southeast Asia

Geopolitical considerations for a stronger engagement can be identified with regard to the belt initiative as well. The maritime version of the Silk Road will stretch from southern Chinese ports to Piraeus in Greece, including sensitive maritime routes, like the Malacca Strait and the Suez Canal as well as port facilities within the Indian Ocean. All of which could generate geopolitical implications at a regional and global level.

Though impressive in geopolitical terms, the Belt follows established shipping lanes of which the often quoted Sea Lanes of Communication are a vital part. Even so, China's emphasis in securing port facilities as well as its involvement in building projects focusing on port facilities along the route, constituting a novel development that has generated considerable political and academic attention. This is linked to disputes of what extent the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will secure access to naval facilities along the 'Belt', as any success in these attempts would extend China's naval power projection capabilities. The discussion about the 'String of Pearls' controversy is a specific case in point (See Young, Rustici, Devary, et al. 2014).

Hence, it will be telling whether China's involvement with maritime infrastructure projects along the Maritime Silk Road will lead to a mere improvement of connectivity along the sea route for China's merchant fleet, or will it have greater military relevance for the PLAN, to improve its regional and global reach. For the time being, it rather seems that China's merchant fleet may profit more from the expansion. It is also important to appreciate the magnitude of China's commercial fleet, being not only the third-largest ship-owning country in terms of tonnage but also the leading nation in terms of numbers with 5,312 ocean-going merchant ships (van de Putten and Meijinders 2015, 18). Hence, securing access to port facilities may be sought to accompany the needs of its commercial fleet. What's more, China's potential security challenges are closer to home, for example the South China Sea (SCS) dispute, the Taiwan issue, the Yellow Sea and East China Sea area.

Even so, it should not be ignored that the PLAN is extending its reach and the building of a so called 'blue water navy' is underway with the PLAN about to reach out to the Western Pacific (China to send nuclear-armed submarines into Pacific amid tensions with US 2016). The 2015 version of China's Military Strategy paper states that seas and oceans contribute to China's sustainable development and lasting stability. Consequently, securing its maritime rights and interests are a critical task for its Navy. Accordingly, the PLAN aims to shift its focus from 'offshore defence' to a combination of 'offshore defence' and 'open sea protection' that will enhance its maritime capabilities for strategic deterrence and maritime counterattack (Full Text: China's Military Strategy's 2015). However, the 2015 version of China's Military Strategy paper also recognised that the world has become increasingly interconnected, and that multi-polarity and economic globalisation bind countries together, consequently generating a shared destiny, and that a favourable international environment offers China a strategic opportunity for development (Full Text: China's Military Strategy's 2015). Here, again, the development imperative of China's domestic policy agenda is clearly recognisable.

Yet, the 'OBOR initiative' further facilitates China's engagement with Southeast Asia. After all, Southeast Asia is not only a vital geographic area for China, but also an area of strong economic interests. China's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia over the last two decades provides evidence for this relevance. An official statement from the NRDC acknowledges that building economic corridors with ASEAN should help to support China's relations and links with Southeast Asian nations as well as to economically develop some of the lesser developed areas within ASEAN, which in itself forms an important part of the 'OBOR Initiative'. It is further emphasised that Yunnan province offers a strategic location for increasing China-ASEAN connectivity and would also enable China to play a more active role within the Greater Mekong Sub-region (Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road 2015).

In the 2012 Joint Declaration on the strategic partnership between ASEAN and China, ASEAN members declared that their relationship has steadily and comprehensively improved since 1997 and that China has become an important partner of cooperation in political, economic and security issues, adding that economic relations have been equally beneficial. The Chairman's Statement of the 18th ASEAN-Chinese Summit (November 2015) describes the relations in a similar tone by stating that ASEAN leaders appreciate China's support for ASEAN's central role in the evolving regional institutional environment and recognised the achievements made in the implementation of their strategic partnership. An appreciation of the progress made in increasing the connectivity between the two was also emphasised. It was further stated that ASEAN appreciates the critical importance of ASEAN-China economic relations for narrowing the development gap within the region and in achieving a greater regional economic integration (Chairman's statement of the 18th ASEAN-China summit Kuala Lumpur's 2015).

This positive impression is also reflected from the Chinese side, as stated in a NRDC publication, that the ASEAN-Chinese Strategic Partnership is a comprehensive and forward looking cooperation for both parties (Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road 2015). China's PM, Li Keqiang, also expressed his support toward Southeast Asia's regionalism, by declaring that China not only firmly supports ASEAN's integration and community building efforts, but interprets the ASEAN Community as a milestone in the regional integration and cooperation process. Since China and ASEAN countries are at a crucial stage of development, it is imperative that we

deepen our cooperation to boost development at home. It was also confirmed, by Li Keqiang, that China likes to take an active part in ASEAN Connectivity's Master Plan, with the 'OBOR Initiative' providing the opportunity of doing so (Full Text: Li Keqiang's speech at the opening plenary of Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2016).

A similar tone is identifiable in Li Keqiang's statement at the Boao Forum (March 2016) as he refers to the continuing impact of the 2008 financial crisis on the region adding that the increase of geopolitical risk and underdevelopment form particular challenges. In that context, China's 'OBOR Initiative', aligned with regional development strategies and ongoing cooperation within regional organisations, will not only lead to a new regional development paradigm, but should assist developing countries within the region in their development strategies (Full Text: Li Keqiang's speech at the opening plenary of Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2016). Although infrastructure projects are of importance, China and ASEAN members also focus on the establishment of industrial zones and parks along the Belt route to increase economic trade-offs and interregional trade.

Within the ASEAN focus, China–Singapore relations seem also to be on track, particularly as Singapore is a focus within the Maritime Silk Road concept. The Joint Statement between China and Singapore can be interpreted as evidence of their cooperation (November 2015). Singapore's government not only welcomes the 'Chinese Road and Belt Initiative' but also views existing intergovernmental cooperation mechanisms as a means for the implementation of various strategies and programs, as economic cooperation is a key pillar on which Singapore–China relations rest (Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Singapore on the Establishment of an All-Round Cooperative Partnership Progressing with the Times 2015).

Yet, China's more assertive behaviour as to its SCS claims threaten to undermine successful policies in facilitating a closer China–ASEAN cooperation, one which was carefully crafted to alleviate regional concerns about its intentions, going back as far as the early 1990s. A good example was China's support for ASEAN members during the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997, which had undermined the regional perception of U.S. commitment to the Southeast Asian countries. From a regional perspective, China's more constrained relations with Vietnam and the Philippines, because of contested territorial disputes in the SCS, so far, has not lead to an open split between ASEAN members and their respective opinion on how to respond to China's assertive behaviour in the SCS dispute.

There are some additional layers of complexity which limits the ASEAN willingness to challenge China outright. One is related to the stated aim of 'ASEAN centrality' which refers to ASEAN's aim of continuing to play a central role at the regional level (See ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together, Jakarta: ASEAN Secretariat, November 2015). Hence, challenging China would lead to a confrontational relationship at the regional level and could consequently undermine ASEAN's position within Southeast Asia. A further imperative is that participation in China's 'OBOR initiative' strategy offers the prospect of development, a challenge many ASEAN member states continue to face. Even so, ASEAN and its members do not want to see China extending its security and political influence in the region.

Yet, even on a bilateral level, states in Southeast Asia are rather reluctant in challenging China outright. In the case of the Philippines, which secured a favourable ruling by the Arbitral Tribunal in The Hague in July 2016, as to its SCS territorial disputes with China, it so far has declined from actively implementing it. Indeed, its newly elected president, Duterte,

even announced the end to the close Philippines-US relationship by declaring a separation from the U.S. and a realignment with China, adding that solving the China-Philippine SCS dispute will be achieved by bilateral negotiations (Duterte aligns Philippines with China, says U.S. has lost Thu 2016). In the case of Vietnam, it seems to be more willing to address directly conflict with China in the SCS and welcomes U.S. support. Yet, despite noteworthy developments such as the first U.S. navy ship visit to Vietnam after the end of the Vietnam War at Cam Rah Bay occurred in October 2016, the U.S. general support for a liberal democratic political system may limit the space for deeper cooperation between the leadership in Hanoi and Washington in the long term.

As for the political impact of China's more assertive stance in the SCS dispute, Li Keqian stated at the 18th China-ASEAN Summit that political trust must be at the centre of the China-ASEAN relationship as a peaceful and stable environment is a prerequisite for regional prosperity (2015). He further stated that China is committed to a peaceful settlement of the SCS dispute through negotiation and consultation (Li Keqiang 2015).

Thus in the context of the established economic and political relationship between China and ASEAN and its member states, the 'OBOR Initiative' does not offer a novel strategy, but rather an attempt to supplement existing bilateral and regional policy frameworks, taking advantage of existing initiatives. Thus, in the context of our discussion, as to what extent the 'OBOR Initiative' can be seen as either an all-embracing concept for existing policy frameworks, or China's new geopolitical strategy for China-ASEAN relations, the evidence discussed points to the former.

However, it is worth recognising that although some 60 countries are participating in the 'OBOR Initiative' China continues to seek the participation of more countries, consequently aiming at extending the area covered by the initiative. Even so, the willingness of other countries to participate is a critical requirement for the initiative to be successful. Although infrastructure investment is a vital consideration of many countries in participating in the 'OBOR initiative', lacking the required financial resources themselves, China's strategic initiative may not always be welcomed. India can be viewed as such an example.

4. The 'OBOR initiative', a charm offensive which can be resisted: India the reluctant partner

Some may argue that India is a special case, as it harbours its own geopolitical ambitions beyond South Asia, and there are strong indications that its relations with the U.S. are improving and its overtures toward the ASEAN, as a regional organisation, and towards particular ASEAN members, such as Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar and Indonesia, continue. Further, India also shows a strong interest in deepening its relations with Japan as well.

As to India's participation in the 'OBOR Initiative' we can identify a number of ambiguities. Firstly, the existence of significant geopolitical anxieties to participate in the initiative, as it would allow China to increase its influence within South Asia, a geographic area which India views as its own sphere of influence. This is not to speak of the China-Pakistan dimension (Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor) within the 'OBOR Initiative' and China's traditional close relationship with Pakistan. On the other hand, as pointed out by Deshmukh, the 'OBOR Initiative' would offer vital investment in infrastructure projects in India's underdeveloped north-eastern region, for example, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which could in turn generate an economic growth dynamic. Moreover, such infrastructure

investments would also increase India's connectivity with ASEAN, which is a specific strategic aim of India's own 'Act East Asia' policy (Deshmukh 2014).

India's engagement strategy with ASEAN is based on Commerce, Culture, and Connectivity, and shares a theme also raised in China's 'OBOR Initiative'. India's relations with the ASEAN were upgraded to a Strategic-Partnership in 2012 and its willingness to extend its Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN to include service and investment is another indication of India's strategic interest in close relations with Southeast Asia. Hence, when considering India's reluctance in participating in China's 'OBOR Initiative' one has to consider India's own strategic interests; a critical aspect not to be overlooked when assessing the willingness of other countries to participate in the 'OBOR initiative' as well. However, a pivotal issue for India–ASEAN strategic relationship and India's potential role within Southeast Asia relates to India's ability of being a reliable partner, which is tied to India's own economic performance. Economic underperformance at home could undermine its position as a reliable regional and international partner.

Even as serious questions remain about India's long-term economic strength and to what extent it can afford to take on a strong position as an active actor at the regional level, Rajendram points out, that India's former 'Look East' policy has evolved into a complex strategic approach, including bilateral and multilateral levels, and was under the Modi government, upgraded to what is now referred to as 'Act East Policy' (2014, 3). Economic considerations contributed to this significant change in India's strategic thinking, since trade with East and Southeast Asia now outweighs trade with the U.S. and the EU. However, Rajendram argues that China's quite successful engagement with South Asian countries represents another dimension to India's own strong focus on East Asia, which one could almost interpret as a counter move (2014, 9).

When evaluating India's position on China's 'OBOR Initiative' it is worth remembering that India's primary security challenges are located within South Asia. Hence, its national interests are primarily linked with a stable and secure situation within South Asia. As such, its overtures toward East Asia may be of secondary importance, particularly if the security situation in South Asia deteriorates. The recent serious military clashes in Kashmir (September and October 2016) and the potential fallout from it is a timely reminder of the challenges India is facing closer to home and in combination with its limited economic power, constraints to its potential advances towards East Asia may should be observed.

An additional aspect as to India's own participation in the 'OBOR Initiative' should not be overlooked either. If the 'OBOR initiative' is successfully implemented, and India abstains from participating it could lead to a situation where not only its ambitions of building a closer relationship with the ASEAN could be seriously undermined, but even its position within South Asia could become under pressure as well. A prospect Deshmukh refers to, by stating that since India's neighbours have already committed to participate in the 'OBOR initiative', Indian reluctance not only increases the pressure faced at the regional level, but it may also miss an opportunity of gaining domestic economic benefits, which in turn could undermine its regional status further (2014, 26).

As for China's 'OBOR Initiative', India's case is a good example of the challenges China may encounter, even though it offers considerable infrastructure and potential economic advantages to its prospective partners.

5. A new geopolitical strategy or an umbrella term for a diverse set of specific policy initiatives

Answering the question conclusively presents a challenge, when taking into consideration the various arguments presented throughout the paper.

There should be no misunderstanding in recognising, that if the 'OBOR Initiative' is implemented successfully, or even only partially, it could create a new economic space which will extend along an east–west direction from China, Central Asia to the EU and on a north–south–west direction from China to the ASEAN states and further on to parts of South Asia as well. Such a development would raise additional geopolitical and geo-economic issues as it could lead to a shift in the global economy. To be sure, the potential for creating such an alternative geopolitical sphere, characterised by a Eurasian geopolitical space which would present an alternative to the existing geopolitical landscape which privileges American–Europe and American–Asian connectivity, is for the time being rather remote. Even so, if implemented, it could herald a shift from maritime-based networks towards a continental-based one. Newly established transport links may also lead to the establishment of new economic hubs consequently altering the existing geo-economic landscape. Increasing connectivity between the states of Central Asia and Southeast Asia with China may facilitate market access in both directions, though China, as the economically stronger partner, may profit more. This in turn may also, even as economic aspects and connectivity are emphasised, increase China's political influence with the countries and regions involved.

However, if the various policies associated with the 'OBOR Initiative' are implemented successfully, China would generate a multilateral framework within its periphery, one which would be shaped by its political and economic interests. The NDRC statement on the 'Road and Belt Initiative' also emphasizes that the 'Belt and Road Initiative' facilitates the trend towards a multipolar world and economic globalisation by promoting comprehensive development of bilateral relationships (Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road 2015). Re-shaping the geopolitical landscape in its periphery and in its favour would be a major political success for China and may contribute to the continued success of the reform period which is linked to the primary task of the government, as the development imperative still dominates and economic success is linked to the preservation of China's socialist system. Hence, such a reading would provide a strong argument in favour of interpreting the 'Road and Belt Initiative' as a bold statement of China's new geopolitical strategy.

Conversely considering the various policy initiatives associated with the China–ASEAN relationship, independent of the 'OBOR Initiative', the outlook becomes a rather different one. It should be recognised that the success of the 'OBOR Initiative' is based on the contribution of a wide range of different states, who advance different national interests, even when infrastructure investment offered by China, and the potential economic benefits resulting from it, are strong drivers for participation. After all, many of the partners within the 'OBOR Initiative' are countries who face development challenges and who do not have the resources to finance the required infrastructure project themselves. Even so, their agreement for participation is required, and the 'OBOR initiative' may not always compliment with their national priorities, despite that infrastructure investments are welcomed. This suggests that many decisions on the success of the 'OBOR Initiative' are well out of Beijing's reach. A further focus for identifying the 'OBOR Initiative' as China's new geopolitical strategy is the military

dimension. Not so much in the form of fighting a military conflict, but in enhancing its power projection capabilities, though one could argue that this may be a specific political strategy to increase the success of the 'OBOR Initiative'. And with increasing economic connectivity, close political relations follow and may result in strategic relations, which may also include strategic military topics. If this would be the case, it has the potential of offering China enhanced power projection capabilities in the form of base rights agreements and actually could be, at least in some quarters, interpreted as a strategy to challenge the US 'pivot to Asia' policy.

Yet, for the time being this is rather speculative as the repeated focus of the 'OBOR Initiative' is on connectivity and in generating economic development. However, as stated before, a geopolitical strategy neither needs to be presented as a coherent approach, as it would allow opponents to mobilise against it, nor would it require the implementation of a coherent and singular policy proposal in one go. Hence, partial and limited as it may be the 'OBOR Initiative' may still be interpreted as a bold statement of China's new geopolitical strategy.

Even so, there are additional points that need to be raised, which speaks against such a characterisation. That is, some of the most critical issues of China's foreign policy are not included in the 'OBOR Initiative', including its relations to the U.S. and the wider subject of political and security dynamics within north-east Asia, such as those related to North Korea and the China–Japan relationship. China–South Korea relations would also fit within this specific context and are not covered by the 'OBOR Initiative' either. Nor is the China–Russia relationship a feature of the initiative despite that the dynamic between these countries will be influenced by China's ability to establish itself as a reliable and key partner for Central Asian states. The failure, or deliberate act, of not including those critical foreign policy aspects within the 'Road and Belt Initiative' does limit its application as China's new geopolitical strategy.

As does another critical aspect. To what extent the 'OBOR Initiative' supports the over-riding strategic goal of the government, to enable the continuation of the socialist system in China. Without doubt, if successfully implemented and considering the economic benefits generated, China's development imperative will be well served. Yet, as stated before, the success of the 'OBOR Initiative' relies on the cooperation of a diverse set of countries, who have their specific interests, that in turn increases the risk of failure or at least limits its success, in implementing fully the 'OBOR Initiative'. We therefore can question if China would be willing to jeopardise the implementation of its fundamental goals, the preservation of its socialist system and generation of economic prosperity, by relying on a strategy whose success depends on such a diverse set of actors outside of its control. This is a rather unlikely scenario.

This then would lead to an assessment that the 'OBOR initiative' can be interpreted rather as an umbrella framework for a diverse range of different policy initiatives, rather than China's new geopolitical strategy. At least for now. After all, a key criteria for a geopolitical strategy is only fulfilled partially, that of a statement of national strategic objectives, since it neither engages with potential military considerations nor, as stated above, some of China's most critical foreign policy relations, even if it does provide a broad and comprehensive statement in political and economic terms.

6. Conclusion

This paper assessed the question of whether the 'Road and Belt Initiative' offers a bold statement of China's new geopolitical strategy or rather a mere umbrella term for a diverse range of policy initiatives the Chinese government is following concurrently.

Considering the two most important geographic areas on which the initiative focuses, Central Asia and Southeast Asia, it was argued that we must recognise the differences in the existing political and economic cooperation efforts. In this regard, China's economic cooperation is more convincing in the case of Southeast Asia, thus the 'OBOR Initiative' rather extends existing cooperation patterns. The China–Central Asia cooperation is lesser established, therefore the 'OBOR Initiative' rather attempts to set a new impetus for deeper cooperation, to enhance a comprehensive economic cooperation. This assessment also applies for parts of South Asia, by including Bangladesh and proposing offers of cooperation to India, as well.

As such a clear differentiation in the extent of policy coordination and institutional cooperation can be identified in regard to the different geographic areas comprising the 'OBOR Initiative', thereby highlighting the strategic character of the 'OBOR Initiative'.

Particularly, if we consider that a geopolitical strategy comprises a comprehensive statement of national strategic objectives even as the 'OBOR initiative' provides a comprehensive statement of general and specific policy proposals, it does not include crucial aspects of China's foreign policy, such as China–U.S. relations nor China's political, economic and security interests in Northeast Asia, including the Korean Peninsula. Indeed, China's security challenges are largely neglected. Assuming that such an oversight is a conscious political decision, this in turn undermines the argument that the 'OBOR Initiative' can be understood as China's new geopolitical strategy.

Another critical issue is whether or not 'OBOR initiative' can support the overriding strategic goal of the government: to enable the continuation of the socialist system in China. Certainly, if successfully implemented, economic benefits will be generated, and China's development imperative will be well served. Yet, the success of the 'OBOR Initiative' depends to a great extent on the cooperation of a diverse set of countries, who hold often competing interests, which in turn increases the risk of failure or at least limits its potential gains. It would be a risky strategy for China to place the survival of its political system on such a wide range of different self-interested actors. This too limits the application of the 'Road and Belt Initiative' as China's new geopolitical strategy.

However, if successfully implemented, it could enhance China's geopolitical interests and consequently not only increase its sphere of influence, but also reshape in its favour a considerable part of its foreign relations within its periphery. As such it does carry critical geopolitical implications for China's regional and global position.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Christian Ploberger is an independent researcher, with research interests on international relations, regional integration and non-traditional security subjects, especially related to environmental and climate change-related risks. The geographical focus in all of my research centres on China and East Asia.

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