

The Belt and Road Initiative and Its Implications for Communicating China–Europe Relations

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In the past five years, the Belt and Road Initiative has become a buzzword in the Chinese government's policymaking in a wide range of arenas, including trans-border trade relationships, international diplomacy, national branding, and external communication, which, together, arguably define a China-initiated alternative path towards a new world order. As a communicative process, the BRI has been vigorously promoted by both the government and the state-owned media system to increase China's global reach. Given the geopolitical dynamics that accompany the Belt and Road, it is necessary to theoretically rethink the complex communication relationship between China and different regions. China–EU relations have been chosen for the discussion in this article because of the connections via both the old and new Silk Roads. Firstly, we briefly lay out a historical trajectory of the BRI and the new connotations that are officially encapsulated in this terminology. Secondly, we examine the geopolitical dynamics in which the BRI was proposed by the Chinese government as an active response towards the US' Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy; meanwhile, the BRI also provides for mutual needs between China and Europe in terms of economic cooperation and mediated communication. Thirdly, Chinese and European media have a great potential to collaborate at multiple levels in order to both broaden organizational exchange and deepen mutual understanding.

Key Words: Belt and Road Initiative; China-Europe Relations; Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy; Media Cooperation



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Introduction

In the fall of 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered consecutive speeches in Kazakhstan and Indonesia in which he proposed to jointly build the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” in the 21st century. Subsequently, these two proposals were officially articulated together under the name of “The Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) as a new proposal underpinning a China-driven world development agenda. Since then, The Belt and Road Initiative has been repeatedly referenced in President Xi’s speeches as a keyword to define China’s vision for a prosperous and shared future for the world. Meanwhile, due to its motivation to expand international connections, the Belt and Road Initiative has also become the focus of the Chinese government’s external communication and cooperation, which has connotations for both global and regional levels.

Historical inheritance and new connotations of the BRI

As creator, China has the initial power to define and interpret BRI, notwithstanding the orientation and diversity of its global perceptions. President Xi conceptualized it as “China’s proposal to participate in globally open cooperation, improve global economic governance system, promote global common development and prosperity, and drive the building of a community of shared future.”¹

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On the one hand, we can observe the desire of the Chinese government to evoke historical linkages between ancient China and its trade partners in the naming of the initiative. By connecting BRI with the old Silk Road, the Chinese government attempted to recall those friendly memories of exchanges between China and foreign countries, especially with European countries. The Silk Road was first formulated in the Western Han Dynasty of China (202–8 bc). It has a history of more than 2,000 years and is an important passage from China to Europe. Since then, Sino-European exchanges alongside this trade route have been intermittent. By the time of the Tang Dynasty, the influence

¹ Chao, Z, Zhen, A. (2018) *Xi Jinping attended the fifth anniversary meeting of promoting ‘The Belt and Road Initiative’ and delivered a speech*, August 27, Available at: <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/xwzx/xgcdn/63963.htm> (Accessed: 27 October 2018).

of the Silk Road had reached its peak. It helped build close economic, cultural, and religious connections, and promoted the spread of technological innovations, particularly in agriculture, among China, Central Asia, and European countries. In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the importance of the Silk Road was gradually declining because of both the development of maritime transportation technologies as an alternative gateway to global trade and, later, due to the “closed door” policy implemented by the arrogant imperial power of the Qing Dynasty.

In 2013, Chinese President Xi revisited the concept of the Silk Road and endowed it with new connotations in the New Epoch (*xin shi dai*) that is rhetorically central to Xi’s presidency and China’s transformative development since 2012. Xi pointed out that the ancient Silk Road stretched for thousands of miles and lasted for thousands of years, consolidating the spiritual aspects of the Silk Road that included peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, mutual benefit, and win-win thinking. This is a precious legacy of human civilization.² Meanwhile, he emphasized that, under the international cooperation framework of “One Belt, One Road” (the former name of the BRI, still in use today), all parties should adhere to the principles of “mutual cooperation, co-construction and sharing, hand-in-hand to meet the challenges facing the world economy, create new opportunities for development, seek new development momentum, expand new development space, achieve complementary advantages, mutual benefit and win-win, and continue to move towards the building of a community of shared future.”³

On the other hand, the epochal background in which the BRI was proposed must also be taken into account. To some extent, the initiative could be regarded as an active response by the Chinese government towards the increasing pressure from the US’ “Pivot to Asia-Pacific” military strategy. Since the 2008 financial crisis, compared with economic fluctuations in Europe and the US, China, among many Asian countries, has maintained stable economic development with quite rapid economic growth. After the Cold War, the United States, which has always regarded China as a potential enemy, faced China’s rise and then proposed

2 Xinhua Net (2017) Xi Jinping’s Keynote Speech at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. Available at: <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/xwzx/xgcedt/13208.htm> (Accessed: 14 October 2018).

3 *Ibid.*

an “Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy” in order to curb China’s development and rebuild its global leadership. In November 2013, when referring to Asia, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton claimed that “the US is back to Asia.” She clearly stated that the United States will pay more attention to the Asia-Pacific region than in the past, particularly by increasing military investment. The future strategic focus of the United States will shift to Asia.

In this regard, Su Hao, professor with the Center for Strategic and Conflict Management Research of the China Foreign Affairs University, pointed out that the United States has bound its military allies and strategic partners with its own strategic interests, and therefore pushed them to the forefront in confronting American challengers. There are three benefits to the US from doing this: firstly, transforming the bilateral military alliance into a multilateral alliance network, thus strengthening a US-led security order; secondly, provoking China’s relations with neighboring countries, and delaying the process of regional integration in East Asia; and, thirdly, at the same time directly locking the space for China’s maritime power expansion while avoiding direct confrontation with China.⁴ In response, China proposed the “Belt and Road Initiative”, in which the “Silk Road Economic Belt” faces towards the West in order to strengthen cooperation and exchange among China, Central Asia, and Europe, while the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” faces towards the South, aiming to strengthen China’s relations with Southeast Asia and South Asia, breaking through the diplomatic pressure exerted by the United States.

Therefore, European countries have played an important role in the route map of the “Belt and Road” drawn by the Chinese government. Two of the three major routes of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” are directed to Europe as the destination. One of the two major routes of the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” will cross the South China Sea from China’s eastern coastal ports through the Straits of Malacca to the Indian Ocean, and extend to Europe. Moreover, based on data released by the Chinese government, five years after the proposal of the “Belt and Road Initiative,” the total trade volume between China and Europe has continued to grow. In 2008, China’s investment in

4 Hao, S. (2012) *Five questions for the US’ Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy: is the promise fulfilled?* Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2012-06/06/c_123238380_4.htm (Accessed: 6 October 2018).

Europe was less than \$1 billion. In 2017, however, only nine years later, China's foreign direct investment in Europe had increased sharply, reaching \$42 billion, with a total investment of \$318 billion. As a barometer of Sino-European trade exchanges, the number of Sino-European cargo trains is also growing. As of August 27, 2018, the number of Sino-European trains had reached 10,000.⁵ In addition, the Sino-Kazakhstan international logistics cooperation project is progressing smoothly, and has become an important window for Kazakhstan to carry out trade and cross-border transportation cooperation. The construction of the China-Kazakh Horgos International Border Cooperation Center has also progressed steadily. The port of Piraeus operates smoothly and contributes to the mutual benefit and win-win situation between China and Greece.

Opportunities and challenges of the BRI

Given the complexities of international political and economic relations, the implementation of the BRI has encountered many challenges.

First of all, geopolitical influence is always at stake. The countries alongside both the "Belt" and the "Road" are not monolithic and homogenous, but demonstrate various, even conflicting, national interests and developmental goals. When BRI gradually enters these areas, it is inevitable for China to build direct dialogue with those traditional geopolitical orders. For example, will China's cooperation with Central Asia be considered a challenge to Russia's vested interest in this region? The extension of the Belt and Road Initiative towards South Asia will encounter both suspicions and challenges from India, China's distant neighbor, without any doubt. These are all uncertainties that are incorporated into the practice of BRI.

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Second, given the distinctiveness of China's political system, there is still a long way for China to go in order to gain the trust of the mainstream media in the countries along the BRI. A two-fold story is central to the framing of China's image. Over a long period of time, while the rise of the economic power is widely recognized with a generally positive tone, China's political

⁵ Xinhua Net (2018) *The number of Sino-European cargo trains exceeded 10,000*. Available at: <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/xwzx/pdjdt/63765.htm> (Accessed: 27 October 2018).

system has been always under negative scrutiny. This puts a lot of pressure on how to tell the political story of the country that issued the “Belt and Road” invitation to an international audience, let alone the fact that China does not hold an advantage in international communication capacity in terms of media access and coverage. Furthermore, due to its intimate affiliation to the political system, China’s traditional media system, which is designated as a major carrier of China’s voice and storytelling towards global media and an international audience, has been caught in a series of critiques. However, it is worth mentioning that, in the past few years, private media – or, to be precise, internet companies – have been taking the lead in internationalizing China’s image. For example, WeChat succeed in penetrating

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into dozens of countries with different political and cultural systems by providing customized mobile online communication functions; meanwhile, TikTok, a mobile-based short-video application developed by a leading internet company ByteDance, ranked as the number one most downloaded application in Apple’s App Store in the first quarter of 2018. The influence of these new media platforms remains a phenomenon that is far from well-studied.

So far, it is quite easy to observe that the BRI is to a large extent driven by economic collaboration, while the state is the major player. If we remove the rhetorical jacket of the BRI, the initiative is more like an economic cooperation project led and promoted by the state of China. Such cooperation is mainly in terms of infrastructure, transportation, trade, and financial relationships. Media reports surrounding the BRI also focus on cooperation on such projects. However, these reports have found difficulty in informing the people in countries alongside the routes of the projects, let alone engaging their recognition and participation. Although the Chinese government has emphasized the “people-to-people-bond” as a core element of the BRI, which stretches to many fields including culture, tourism, education, science, and technology, there are many difficulties in realizing this.

This is a challenge, but also an opportunity. We believe that the BRI is not a unilateral demand of China: around the world, international trade has been facing increasing pressure for protectionism while trade disputes have intensified, especially since Trump was elected as US President. Every country has its

own version of the BRI that fulfills its specific needs to develop in this new era, although their perspectives are different. Therefore, a consensus on the formation of BRI is possible – and necessary.

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However, as mentioned previously, if BRI participation is limited to economic cooperation, with each country only conditionally and selectively participating in the BRI for immediate benefit, meanwhile ignoring cultural exchanges and connectivity, this cooperation will be unsustainable and ineffective. The Chinese government has a clear understanding of this situation. Therefore, they define the principle of the “Belt and Road Initiative” as “the principle of achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration,”⁶ emphasizing the participation and cooperation of all countries alongside the “Belt and Road.”

From the Chinese side, we can see the efforts made by the Chinese government. In order to further promote the construction of the “Belt and Road,” the Chinese government has established a leading group to promote the construction of the “Belt and Road,” chaired by Han Zheng, member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee and Vice Premier of the State Council. As of June 2018, meeting every six months, this group had held eight meetings to promote the construction of the “Belt and Road.” The agenda of each meeting includes both a summary of the first half of the year and planning for the second half. From May 14 to 15, 2017, the Chinese government held the first “Belt and Road” International Cooperation Summit Forum in Beijing. Participating in the Forum were 29 international heads of state or heads of government, and heads of three important international organizations including the UN Secretary-General and the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross.⁷

From the European side, after the 2008 financial crisis, many European countries fell into the mud of economic recession, the unemployment rate continued to rise, and social conflicts intensified. After the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2010, a large number of refugees flooded into Europe, further stressing the

⁶ Jinping, X. (2017) *Opening up a new starting point for cooperation and seeking new development momentum*, Available at: <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/xwzx/xgcd/13629.htm> (Accessed: 15 October 2018).

⁷ Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (2017) *Xi Jinping attended the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation and delivered a keynote speech*. Available at: <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/n100/2017/0514/c24-397.html> (Accessed: 14 October 2018).

social burden on European countries. How to seek a new impetus for economic development and solve the current pressing problems is something that many European countries need to consider. Should Europe pick up the “Olive Branch” sent by China through the BRI, and if so, how? How to match the BRI to the developmental goals of a European country’s economy and diplomacy, and not simply to be understood as wishful thinking on the part of China, is particularly important.

Communicating China-EU relations via media cooperation

We argue that media can play a key role in this process if some important principles, outlined below, can be incorporated. First, all countries’ media, including China’s, should be encouraged to rethink the framework of international coverage and how to practice professional journalism internationally. Chinese media should develop an intercultural capacity to build dialogical relationships with different voices in the world. Thinking about the audience and international/intercultural differences should be prioritized before presenting any story for international communication. Given the fact that the BRI is a globally collaborative initiative driven largely by economic motives, international reporting by Chinese media should not only propagate the initiative one-dimensionally, but also help the global audience to understand why the BRI matters for China first and for other countries as well. Furthermore, will the BRI generate any negative outcomes as possibly side effects of economic development, such as an environmental crisis or economic instability? It would be better if answers were communicated first in Chinese media, rather than media from other countries. For media and journalists in European countries, giving objective, neutral, and – mostly importantly – investigative reports on the BRI based on first-hand materials is expected. This requires media and journalists to rid themselves of the concept of the BRI as the “other” and turn to a BRI that belongs to the “self,” from the perspective of their own national needs and goals. Besides, a Cold War mindset and orientalist framework are insufficient to capture the dynamics of the ongoing encounter between China and Europe. A new dialogical relationship is expected to occur.

Second, both Chinese and European media should strengthen cooperation and intensify exchange of information, perspectives,

and people. As is universally understood, Europe and China are different from each other in terms of political systems, religions, cultural traditions, and many other aspects. Therefore, in the process of promoting the BRI, it is inevitable that cultural barriers will be encountered. At this moment, media from both sides should position themselves in the changing geopolitics and carry objective reports in order to help enhance cooperation and communication, and promote mutual understanding, instead of maliciously hyping related events and even inciting domestic nationalism in order to attract the attention of the audience, which can exaggerate small problems and intensify minor contradictions.

Third, Chinese media should also pay attention to the internal differences and regional diversities among European media in the process of seeking cooperation. Although there are many similarities among European countries in terms of geopolitics, they are certainly not homogeneous, nor is their diverse and regionally integrated media system. State media, public service media, and commercial media co-exist but with different gravity in different regions. As demonstrated by Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini⁸ in their seminal work, three models of media and politics are formulated, namely the liberal model, the democratic corporatist model, and the polarized pluralist model. Therefore, under the framework of the BRI, how to cooperate with different media systems in different European countries, and how to overcome the obstacles that may arise in cooperation, are also problems. It is argued that the Chinese media system is much more similar to the polarized pluralist model which prevails mostly in France and Mediterranean countries. Therefore, Chinese media may take advantage of this similarity to cooperate with media systems in those countries initially, and then find collaborators in other regions.

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Fourth, for both Chinese and European media, attention should be paid not only to inter-governmental exchanges, but also to strengthening the link between the BRI and civil society. The BRI is not just a developmental agenda, a “game” between governments, but involves the participation of multiple actors including companies, social organizations, and individuals. The

8 Hallin, D.C. & Paolo Mancini, P. (2004), *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, p. 11.

BRI is thus an opportunity for both government and civil society. In other words, the international or intercultural communication of the BRI between China and Europe is bifurcated. A multi-dimensional pattern of storytelling should be considered.

Last but not least, the media environment is constantly changing. We have entered into an era dominated by various forms of new media. Therefore, the media landscape of the “Belt and Road” is not just composed of legacy media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. New media – incorporating fast-developing Internet and mobile phones – should occupy an important position in communicating the BRI between China and Europe. Compared with institutionalized legacy media, such new media can build a direct information flow and dialogical channels with the people, greatly mobilize enthusiasm among the audience, and enhance participation. Calling for people’s online participation, rather than the mere manufacture of stories by the government and its affiliated media, is arguably more important for a better mutual understanding, at least for China. Therefore, how to organically integrate the BRI into the new media agenda is the next step for the media to break through.

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Conclusion

Although the Chinese government proposed the BRI, we believe that it can become a common ground between China and Europe in the quest for economic collaboration, cultural exchange, and shared prosperity for the future. In other words, Europe needs to find a new development impetus in the face of economic recession, the refugee crisis, and intensifying social unrest. Given the pressure caused by the US “Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy,” China also needs to expand its global reach to potential partners, economically and geopolitically. Therefore, the BRI plays an important role in the future development of China–EU relations and the fulfillment of their respective needs. What needs to be pointed out is that China is expected to universalize the connotations of the BRI beyond an ego-centric mindset for shared understanding from different countries, while it will be necessary for European countries to localize the BRI and build connections with their own developmental agendas.

From the perspective of media cooperation, we explored the possibilities for achieving this goal and offered our recommendations. Firstly, media in China and Europe need to strengthen cooperation and communication to overcome the stereotyping caused by differences in political systems, cultural traditions, and communication systems. Secondly, media need to report the relevant news of the BRI objectively and fairly, and to shape the image of the BRI from a constructive perspective. Moreover, the BRI is not an inter-governmental game, but a more inclusive amalgam of enterprises, social organizations, and individuals. This should be the focus of media coverage in the future. Finally, not only traditional media, but also new media, for instance, mobile and social media, should be considered as important platforms to communicate the BRI globally, and as sites of new patterns of international cooperation and intercultural dialogue.