

## THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY IMAGE

Yerlan MADIYEV

*Ph.D. Candidate, Shanghai Foreign Languages University  
(Shanghai, China)*

---

### ABSTRACT

**T**he article discusses the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a discursive intervention within which China in- | tends to create new subjective positions to improve its foreign policy image for the rest of the world. To a great extent, this initiative

---

can be considered a response to the still persisting negative assessments of China's fast development and its potential impact on the international community.

The paper is based on the analytical categories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's theory of discourse to demonstrate how discursive strategies used to promote the BRI relate to the "symbolic opposition"

built up on the priority tasks of economic development.

As a result, the Belt and Road discourse relies, to a great extent, not on the definition of what the Chinese initiative is, but on what it is not.

A wide range of texts related to the official and academic discourse in China was utilized.

**KEYWORDS:** *China, Belt and Road, discourse.*

## *Introduction*

Today, the increased impact of China on the international arena has become one of the most discussed subjects in Central Asia and the rest of the world. Konstantin Syroezhkin has pointed out that "today China leaves no one indifferent: some experts are overenthusiastic about its socioeconomic reforms, while others fear the threats stemming from the country's new role in the world."<sup>1</sup>

Pan Chengxin has written in this context that the assessments related to the way China is seen in the West belong to two "bifocal lenses," namely, China as a threat and China as a chance. These images have developed into normative paradigms of sorts that predetermine the nature of questions and answers related to China's successes on the international arena.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the international community often sees China within the context of certain expectations of the world power that it is set to become, rather than seeing it as it actually is. As a result, China had become a hostage of its "imagined state" image, within which it is examined from the point of view of future scenarios, rather than the present one.<sup>3</sup>

Hence the fairly frequent statements that come from the Chinese leaders and the academic community, stating that China should increase its "discourse power" (话语权) to create narratives of its elevation and its repercussions for the rest of the world.

This became one of the priorities of the Communist Party of China in 2012, when Xi Jinping came to power. On 23 October, 2013, in his address at the All-China Working Conference on Propaganda and Ideology, he pointed out that China's discourse power, an indispensable condition of the "realization of the Chinese dream and the great resurgence of the Chinese nation" should be increased.<sup>4</sup>

China's expert community shares an opinion that today the West determines the global discourse and infringes on the rights of the developing countries, China included.<sup>5</sup> This means that

<sup>1</sup> K. Syroezhkin, "China in Central Asia: From Trade to Strategic Partnership," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (45), 2007, pp. 40-51.

<sup>2</sup> See: P. Chengxin, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China's Rise*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2012, p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> See: S. Breslin, "Still Rising or Risen (or Both)? Why and How China Matters," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 30, Issue 6, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Thesis of Xi Jinping's speech at the All-China Working Conference on Propaganda and Ideology, 23 October, 2013, available at [<http://media.people.com.cn/n/2013/1023/c369229-23303171.html>], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See: Zhang Zhizhou, "On Certain Theoretical Issues of Forming the International Discourse Power," 27 February, 2017 (张志洲: 国际话语权建设中几大基础性理论问题), available at [<http://www.scio.gov.cn/zhzc/10/Document/1543300/1543300.htm>], 9 January, 2019.

China should consolidate its “right to speak” by being firmly convinced that its values are correct and increase the efficiency of their presentation to the foreign audience.<sup>6</sup> In the final analysis, discourse power is considered an important attribute of China’s increasing role on the international arena.<sup>7</sup>

This attitude makes the presentation of the BRI a means “of formulating a global agenda” in line with China’s priority of increasing its discourse power.<sup>8</sup>

A more positive interpretation of China’s rise should replace the discursive hegemony on the international arena within which China is perceived as a threat.

This is especially important for the discussion of China’s presence in Central Asia that has caused various phobias. For instance, the 2016 protests in Kazakhstan caused by the changes in the Land Code demonstrated that the narrative about the Chinese threat could affect the sentiments and mobilize the masses. No wonder that Chinese experts write a lot about the negative impact of anti-Chinese sentiments on China’s position in the region.<sup>9</sup>

## The BRI: The Context and Motives

Xi Jinping officially presented the initiative during his visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013. Speaking at the Nazarbayev University he called on the Central Asian countries to join forces in building the Silk Road Economic Belt.<sup>10</sup>

In October of the same year, during his visit to Indonesia he presented the concept of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The basic notion of both initiatives was to unite China and foreign states in a network of trade and economic corridors.<sup>11</sup>

In October 2014, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with 21 countries with a founder status was officially established.<sup>12</sup>

In November of the same year Xi Jinping used the forum of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation held in Beijing to announce the establishment of the Silk Road Fund for the Belt and Road Initiative was with a \$40 billion-worth potential to be invested in infrastructure projects in Asia.<sup>13</sup>

During the first stage, the revived Silk Road initiative was an abstract concept with no official documents to postulate it. At the same time, the idea of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime

<sup>6</sup> See: Hu Zongshan, “On China’s International Discourse Power: Realistic Challenges and Ability’s Enhancement,” *Socialism Studies*, No. 5, 2014 (胡宗山, «中国国际话语权刍议: 现实挑战与能力提升», 社会主义研究, 2014年第5).

<sup>7</sup> See: Meng Xiangqing, Wang Xiao, “Increasing Discourse Power When Being Involved in Global Governance,” 15 October, 2015 (孟祥青,王啸: 在参与全球治理中提升国际话语权), available at [<http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2015/1015/c1003-27698965.html>], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> See: Zhao Lei, “The Belt and Road Initiative Demonstrates China’s Increased Discourse Power,” 23 December, 2016 (赵磊: “一带一路”是中国话语权的提升), available at [<http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1223/c1002-28973018.html>], 19 November, 2018; Guan Xueling, “Reform of the System of Global Governance and the Emergence of Belt and Road Discourse,” 1 September, 2018 (关雪凌: 全球治理体系变革与“一带一路”话语权构建), available at [[http://ex.cssn.cn/zx/201809/t20180901\\_4553365.shtml](http://ex.cssn.cn/zx/201809/t20180901_4553365.shtml)], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See: Sun Zhuangzhi, “Acute Problems in the Sphere of Regional Security in Central Asia and an Analysis of How the Situation Unfolds,” *Herald of the Xinjiang Pedagogical University*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2011 (孙壮志, 中亚地区安全的热点问题与走势分析, 《新疆师范大学学报》第32卷第2期2011年3月).

<sup>10</sup> See: Xi Jinping’s speech at the Nazarbayev University, 8 September, 2013, available at [[http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-09/08/c\\_117273079\\_2.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2013-09/08/c_117273079_2.htm)], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> See: “Xi in Call for Building of New ‘Maritime Silk Road’,” 4 October, 2013, available at [[http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-10/04/content\\_17008940.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-10/04/content_17008940.htm)], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> See: The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, 16 January, 2016, available at [<http://russian.people.com.cn/n3/2016/0116/c95181-9004994.html>], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> See: Xi Jinping: “China will Allocate \$40 Billion for the Silk Road Fund” (习近平: 中国将出400亿美元成立“丝路基金”), available at [<http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/1109/c1001-25998323.html>], 9 January, 2019.

Silk Road promptly became part of China's official foreign policy strategy and stirred up academic discussion both inside and outside the country.

By 2016, the information database (中国知网) included 1,241 articles entitled "The Silk Road Economic Belt" (丝绸之路经济带) and 725 articles on "The Maritime Economic Belt" (海上丝绸之路).

In the absence of clear official statements, the academic community of China interpreted the idea of a revived Silk Route either as an initiative (倡议), a strategy (战略) or a conception (构想).<sup>14</sup>

In March 2015, the initiative was finally detailed in the document entitled Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road that formulated the main aims of the BRI, its principles and the mechanisms of its realization.<sup>15</sup>

This is, first and foremost, an economic initiative, since the negative repercussions of the financial crisis made the stimulation of global economy an absolute must.

The economic land corridors: China-Central Asia-Russia-the Baltic, China-Central Asia-West Asia-the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, China-East Asia-South Asia-the Indian Ocean and maritime corridors South China Sea-the Indian Ocean-Europe and South China Sea-South Pacific serve as the initiative's backbone.

The five already formulated cooperation priorities—political coordination, greater infrastructural interaction, guaranteed free trade and movement of capitals and closer ties between peoples—have been identified as the shortest route towards the final goals. Despite the contradictory assessments (both positive and negative) of the BRI, the discussion concentrated on two "traditional" poles, wherein China was perceived in the context of the potential/threat dichotomy. This explains why outside China the BRI was frequently scrutinized through the prism of "geo-economic" and "geopolitical" factors.<sup>16</sup>

Song Ruichen deemed it necessary to point out that in the United States the initiative is interpreted, to a great extent, by the logic of a zero-sum game traditionally applied to China.<sup>17</sup>

This explains why from the very beginning China's discursive strategy was unfolding in a very specific context of explanations of what the BRI was not, rather than of what it was. This dynamics reveals what China offers the outside audience, as well as how it defines itself.<sup>18</sup>

## The Belt and Road Discourse: Prioritizing Economy and Development

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have pointed out that the subjective positions promoted by ideologies or political projects are based on the logic of equivalence and difference, within which

---

<sup>14</sup> See: Zhao Huirong, "Studies of the Belt and Road Initiative: The Current Situation, Problems and Prospects," *Studies of Russia and Eastern Europe*, No. 2, 2017 (赵会荣, «一带一路» 学术研究的现状、问题与展望», «俄罗斯东欧中亚研究», 2017年第2期).

<sup>15</sup> [[http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-03/28/c\\_1114793986.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-03/28/c_1114793986.htm)], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> See: Baogang He, "The Domestic Politics of the Belt and Road Initiative and its Implications," *Journal of Contemporary China*, September 2018.

<sup>17</sup> See: Song Ruichen, "Perception of the Belt and Road Initiative in the United States and China's Strategic Initiatives," *International Perspective*, No. 6, 2017 (宋瑞琛, «美国对“一带一路”倡议的认知及中国的策略选择», «国际展望», 2017年第6期).

<sup>18</sup> See: W. Callahan, "How to Understand China: The Dangers and Opportunities of Being a Rising Power," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2005.

symbols are arranged along two opposite lines. The dividing line connects the nodal points that add meaning to the system of symbols used in the discourse.<sup>19</sup>

China, likewise, is promoting a certain nodal point within the BRI discourse based on the “common development and flourishing” metaphor. It is expected that this “narrative of hope” will create new subjective positions and, therefore, a positive context within which foreign countries will be able to associate their future with China.<sup>20</sup>

The country proceeds from the primacy of economic development as a task of fundamental importance, the approach smacks of “developer mentality.” It is traditional for the strategic thinking of China’s Communist leaders<sup>21</sup> that spills over to China’s foreign policy.

This is closely connected with the so-called Chinese development model (中国模式) that relies on the principle of “pragmatism,” which states that the state should proceed from the priorities of economic development and welfare of its people, rather than indulge itself in ideological or political argumentation.<sup>22</sup>

These ideas form the part of China’s foreign policy discourse that invariably concentrates on the development and flourishing of all the countries of the world.<sup>23</sup>

The BRI central message remains within this tradition: promotion of communal flourishing and economic development.

An accent on pragmatism and economic development creates certain meanings for China’s discursive strategy.

Prioritized economic development presupposes not only a purely pragmatic approach to the external context; it ensures priority of economic over political considerations. The motives behind the BRI belong to the economic sphere dominated by commercial interests and sober-minded approaches, rather than to the geopolitical sphere, which presumes hegemony.

For example, according to Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi, the BRI is a platform of inclusive economic cooperation, rather than China’s geopolitical instrument, which excludes any comparisons with the Marshall Plan.<sup>24</sup>

The logic of economy requires openness between countries to be translated into the BRI’s open and inclusive nature. The Chinese leaders deem it necessary to point out that economic success is closely connected with the country’s active involvement in international economy and trade and that China is one of the main beneficiaries of globalization. Speaking at the 2015 Boao Forum for Asia, Xi Jinping pointed out that the BRI was not a solo for China, but a symphony played by all countries situated along its route.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See: E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> See: Ngai-Ling Sum, “The Intertwined Geopolitics and Geo-Economics of Hopes/Fears: China’s Triple Economic Bubbles and the ‘One Belt One Road’ Imaginary,” *Territory, Politics, Governance*, October 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Bei Cai, “Official Discourse of a ‘Well-off Society’: Constructing an Economic State and Political Legitimacy,” in: *Discourses of Cultural China in the Globalizing Age*, ed. by D. Wu, Hong Kong University Press, 2008; Dingxin Zhao, “The Mandate of Heaven and Performance Legitimation in Historical and Contemporary China,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> See: S. Breslin, “The ‘China Model’ and the Global Crisis: From Friedrich List to a Chinese Mode of Governance?” *International Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 6, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> See: “The White Book *China’s Peaceful Development* for 2011” (《中国的和平发展》白皮书2011), available at [<http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/1026/15598619.html>], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> See: Commentaries to the Speech of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the PRC at the press conference within the 12th session of The National People’s Congress of the PRC, available at [[http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-03/09/c\\_127561973.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-03/09/c_127561973.htm)], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> See: Xi Jinping’s Speech at the 2015 Boao Forum for Asia, available at [[http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-03/29/c\\_127632707.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-03/29/c_127632707.htm)], 9 January, 2019.

The economic development priority means that the interests of the countries involved are closely intertwined, the idea described in a nutshell by the 我中有你，你中有我 formula, one of the Chinese leaders' favorites, which literary means: You are in me while I am in you.

Very much in line with this logic, the Chinese leaders prefer the terms "universal," "joint," "mutually complementary" and "synergy" when talking about the BRI and avoid all terms hinting at "mercantile" interests. China's development is seen as closely connected with the development of other regions, the border zones in the first place.

In fact, the BRI serves as the framework of China's development concept that stems from the successful reforms realized in China, the so-called Chinese solution (中国方案) of global problems, one of the favorite formulas of the Chinese leaders and the Chinese academic community. Infrastructural development is seen as one of the priorities when it comes to global growth.

The road as a symbol is highly important for the Silk Road geopolitical imaginary narrative. From the outset of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has been actively using the symbol of a road as a one of development and flourishing through the reference to the Silk Route of antiquity. On the other hand, the symbol of roads was actively used in the so-called cartographic discourse to create an awareness of closeness between countries. From the very beginning, China has been actively promoting the BRI discourse through the visualization of routes based on maps and other forms of representation. This creation of meanings simplifies reality to create an image equally understandable to politicians, the media, academics, business community and regular people.<sup>26</sup>

The Silk Road Reborn narrative is of a highly special symbolic importance for the Central Asian countries in the historical context and in the context of the region's transit potential. From the very first days of independence, the leaders of Kazakhstan staked on the country's transit potential as a land bridge between Europe and Asia and a potential driver of the country's economic development.<sup>27</sup>

This makes the BRI a discursive anchor of sorts that adds very special meanings to the discursive system, within which the logically structured disjointed discursive elements become natural and objective. The BRI relies on this narrative to create its own version of a subjective position for the external world. What is repeatedly said about the unique nature of the BRI is of the key importance when it comes to building up a subjective position.

## The BRI Discourse as Symbolic Opposition to the West

The BRI discourse reveals how the above-mentioned "logic of equivalence and difference" is being established, within which all sorts of discursive elements are articulated based on the dominant nodal point that is consistently integrating the gradually growing number of the discursive elements. The gradually stretching meaningful content becomes extremely abstract, which requires a "symbolic Other" in the opposition to which various discursive elements will be articulated.<sup>28</sup>

In the Chinese discourse, the role of the "symbolic Other" belongs to the United States and the Western liberal order that it represents. This explains why the foreign policy discourse invariably stresses the unique nature of China, its fundamental difference from the West as highly important not

---

<sup>26</sup> See: Ngai-Ling Sum, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example: N. Nazarbayev, *Strategii stanovleniia i razvitiia Kazakhstana kak suverennogo gosudarstva*, RGZhD Dair, Almaty, 1992, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> See: E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, op. cit., p. 125.

only for China's positioning in the world, but also for the never-ending process of production and reproduction of its identity inside the country.<sup>29</sup>

The fact that at the official level of discourse China never openly opposes any other country and never directly refers to the United States and the West is especially important. References of this sort are concealed in abstract statements, hints or indirect comments.

Indeed, when Xi Jinping says that “the BRI will not develop into a small group that destroys stability” (不会形成破坏稳定的小集团) or deems it necessary to warn against “the growth of populism and isolationism in international relations,” the foreign audience is expected to “fill the meaningful voids.”

This is the process of interpellation of the subjects invited to occupy certain discursive positions through their interpretation on the basis of the existing context.<sup>30</sup> It surfaces in other spheres—the media and academic writings in the first place—which creates a certain system of knowledge and symbols that support the dominant nodal point.

This means that within the BRI discourse its elements refer to the nodal point and acquire their meanings from it. Thanks to the BRI, integration becomes “open” and “multisided,” the institutions “inclusive” and “fair” while globalization, “balanced” and “lucrative.” This is opposed to the traditional integration forms and institutions set up in the world dominated by the United States and the West: they are “closed,” “unfair,” “excessively politicized” and “inefficient.”

## **The BRI in the Chinese Academic Discourse**

The above logic is clearly seen in the academic discourse unfolding in China in which various aspects of international relations—cooperation, integration, international institutes, globalization, global governance—acquire their unique meanings.

### ***Integration and Institutions within the BRI***

Chinese academics point to the cooperation model, its openness, its theoretical foundation and strategic aims as the unique features of integration within the BRI that determine the very specific “means and methods” of its realization.<sup>31</sup>

Li Xiangyang has noted, for example, that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the BRI are two different and mutually exclusive forms of a regional Free Trade Agreement. While TPP relies on strict standards as a sine qua non of TPP membership, which agrees, to a great extent, with Western philosophy, the BRI as an Eastern open and varied version of economic cooperation oriented towards intertwined development. The author has arrived at a conclusion that the BRI is a social boon that China offers to the world, the developing countries in the first place.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See: W. Callahan, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> See: N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, Longman Group UK Limited, Harlow, 1995, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Huan Xiao, Qin Fangming, “Building the Economic Corridor China-Central Asia-West Asia,” *Reform and Strategy*, No. 2, 2018 (黄晓燕, 秦放鸣, 中国—中亚—西亚经济走廊建设: 基础、挑战与路径, 《改革与战略》, 2018年02期).

<sup>32</sup> See: Li Xiangyang, “Comparative Analysis of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Belt and Road Initiative,” *World Economics and Politics*, No. 9, 2016 (李向阳, 跨太平洋伙伴关系协定与“一带一路”之比较, 《世界经济与政治》, 2016年第9期).

The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank that function on the basis of the Western liberal order are discussed in the same vein.

This gave Lu Feng reason to conclude that the United States preferred to keep away from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to preserve domination of the Western financial institutions and prevent the restructuring of the global financial system.<sup>33</sup>

The Western financial institutions are highly politicized and ideologized: their aid is “rigidly conditioned” by their interference in domestic affairs of the recipient countries. The financial institutions within the BRI, on the other hand, are more egalitarian, fairer and less ideologized.<sup>34</sup>

Xue Ling and Zhu Mingxia, in their turn, have written that such international institutions as the WTO, WB and the IMF set up in the wake of World War II no longer fit the current realities. They have pointed out, in particular, that the WTO has certain systemic problems, one country-one voice voting system that makes it much harder to reach a consensus being one of them. It concentrates on the traditional form of commodity trade, while ignoring trade in services and the liberalization of the investment regime, labor standards, etc.

The West-dominated integrative structures (such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) are described as “closed, inefficient, outdated models of regional cooperation” that infringe on the interests of the developing countries. As distinct from the approaches practiced in the West, integration within the BRI relies on the principles of openness, inclusiveness and mutually advantageous cooperation through international corridors.<sup>35</sup>

Zheng Dongchao is of a similar opinion: compared with other financial institutions, the AIIB and the Silk Road Fund are more pragmatic, they rely on innovational forms of governance and standards and are geared towards the requirements of the developing countries.<sup>36</sup>

Du Debin and Ma Yahua deemed it necessary to point out that the international Bretton Wood institutions were based on the hegemony of the West and power politics, while the BRI relies on peaceful development, openness, tolerance, mutual interest and mutual gains.<sup>37</sup>

Zhao Lei has paid particular attention to the development of infrastructure; the BRI functions according to the logic of “decentralization” and reproduces the principles of equality, tolerance and “de-polarization” in international relations. This explains why the initiative has been successful and why the global community demonstrates a strong interest, something that has not happened during the preceding attempts to revive the Silk Road made by the U.S., Japan, Russia, Turkey and the EU.<sup>38</sup>

## ***Globalization, Global Governance and Development***

The Chinese academic community is fully aware of the ways in which the Western neo-liberal globalization differs from the more inclusive globalization (包容性全球化) offered by the BRI.

There is an opinion that the neo-liberal form of globalization has done nothing to develop the sizeable group of developing countries, it merely pushed them deeper into poverty and social inequal-

---

<sup>33</sup> See: Lu Feng, “Harbingers of a Fairer Global Financial System,” 2015, available at [[http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-04/18/content\\_20466038.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-04/18/content_20466038.htm)], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> See: Zhao Lei, “Projects Promote Fairness as Supreme Value,” 2015, available at [[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-04/25/content\\_20538070.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2015-04/25/content_20538070.htm)], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> See: Xue Ling, Zhu Mingxia, “Belt and Road Initiative: Possibilities and Challenges,” 2015 (雪凌, 祝明侠: «一带一路»: 机遇与挑战), available at [[http://www.qstheory.cn/lqikan/2015-06/27/c\\_1115741343.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/lqikan/2015-06/27/c_1115741343.htm)], 9 January, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> See: Zheng Dongchao, “Belt and Road Offers the World Four Social Goods,” 2017 («一带一路»为世界提供四大公共产品), available at [<http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0516/c1002-29279199.html>], 10 January, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> See: Du Debin, Ma Yahua, “Belt and Road Offers a New Model of Global Governance,” 2017 (杜德斌, 马亚华: 一带一路——开启全球治理新模式), available at [[http://ex.cssn.cn/zxx/201706/t20170601\\_3535811.shtml](http://ex.cssn.cn/zxx/201706/t20170601_3535811.shtml)], 10 January, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> See: Zhao Lei, op. cit.



ity. It widened the private sector, expanded market freedom and intensified competition that allowed the global North to develop at the expense of the global South. The resultant imbalance between the North and the South is the main driver of worldwide instability.<sup>39</sup>

Quan Heng, in turn, has stated that the main problems of contemporary globalization stem from the “structural imbalance and inadequate governance,” which explains why the BRI stimulates the movement of the global economy towards a fairer, more inclusive, mutually advantageous, equal and open development.<sup>40</sup>

Globalization within the BRI does not play down the decisive role of the market; it merely promotes more inclusive development and mutually advantageous cooperation by stressing the importance of infrastructural development that creates new growth points in the developed and developing countries. On the other hand, as an inclusive project, the BRI is open not only to the countries along the Silk Road, but also to all regions of the world. It is founded on respect for all cultures and all political and social systems.<sup>41</sup>

This is precisely what Li Yunlong meant when he acknowledged the three main characteristics of globalization promoted by the BRI that distinguish it from the globalization “led by the developed countries of the West.”

- First of all, this is globalization initiated by a non-Western country, which takes into account the interests of all countries along the BRI route.
- Secondly, BRI globalization is geared towards the interests of the developing countries, the interests and requirements of the countries along its route, rather than the interests of outside investors.
- Thirdly, it relies on China’s successful experience of economic reforms that have already demonstrated their efficiency.<sup>42</sup>

Chi Fulin has written that the BRI offers a new concept of globalization based on the principles of openness, tolerance, reciprocity and equality as opposed to the gradually rising isolationism and protectionism in the West. The author points out that BRI-style integration is highly flexible and relies on differentiated approaches to the countries according to their development level. This means that more advanced countries can be involved in free trade, while less developed are free to liberalize their trade regimes through their involvement in infrastructure projects.<sup>43</sup>

The subject of globalization is closely connected with two other aspects of international relations, namely, global governance and global development. The BRI is associated with the reforms of the present system of global governance, which has so far been dominated by the developed countries of the West.

Su Ge claims that today the global governance system is confronted by the problems of “three lows” (low growth, low inflation, low demand) and “three highs” (high unemployment, high debts and

<sup>39</sup> See: Tian Wenlin, “Belt and Road: The Chinese Concept of Global Development and Several Related Problems,” 2017 (田文林: “一带一路”: 全球发展的中国构想及其难点), available at [[http://www.globalview.cn/html/global/info\\_18348.html](http://www.globalview.cn/html/global/info_18348.html)], 10 January, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> See: Quan Heng, “Practical Problems of Economic Globalization and Belt and Road as a New Development Engine,” *Studies of World Economy*, No. 2, 2017 (权衡, 经济全球化的实践困境与“一带一路”建设的新引擎, 《世界经济研究》2017年第12期).

<sup>41</sup> See: Weidong Liu, M. Dunford, “Inclusive Globalization: Unpacking China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Area Development and Policy*, Vol. 1, Issue 3, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> See: Li Yunlong, “Belt and Road: China’s Answer to Globalization,” 2017 (李云龙: “一带一路”: 中国的全球化方案), available at [[http://cn.chinagate.cn/news/2017-05/13/content\\_40805137.htm](http://cn.chinagate.cn/news/2017-05/13/content_40805137.htm)], 10 January, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> See: Chi Fulin, “Belt and Road: Promoting New Economic Globalization,” 2017 (迟福林: “一带一路”: 引领新的经济全球化), available at [<http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0519/c40531-29286106.html>], 10 January, 2019.

the high level of financial bubbles). In this context, closer attention to infrastructural development within the BRI can push the global governance agenda towards the everyday requirements of the international community.<sup>44</sup>

Gao Qiqi has written that as a bridge between the developed and developing world China tries to reform the global governance system as we know it today through the BRI and the G-20 mechanism. It stimulates free movement of labor, capital, investments and technologies across state borders. This greatly differs from the position of the United States and certain Western countries that promote isolationism and hoists anti-globalist slogans to call on the world to close the borders for migrants and trade.<sup>45</sup>

On the whole, Chinese authors associate the BRI with the movement towards more sustainable global development.<sup>46</sup> They point out, in particular, that there is a close connection between the BRI priorities and the documents of global development, of which the U.N.-devised Sustainable Development Goals 2030 is one.<sup>47</sup>

In this respect, Ling Jin has pointed out that the greatest amount of economic aid extended by the West and the previous program of global development, namely, The Millennium Development Goals 2000, disregarded the ideas held by the developing and poorer countries development goals and extended their aid according to a donor-recipient scheme. The BRI and the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 are targeted at the interests of the developing countries. As distinct from the previous programs, they concentrate not on “policy prescriptions,” but on the economic infrastructure of the developing countries. They have gone beyond extending economic aid as the main instrument designed to stimulate economic development of the poor countries to rely on sets of development instruments: stimulated trade, financial integration, technological transfer and developed infrastructure.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

The BRI discourse has integrated a great amount of discursive elements of secondary importance: international cooperation, integration, global development, etc., which have thus acquired certain additional meanings based on the “nodal point” of the priority of economic development. This integration is rooted in the clearly realized opposition to the symbolic Other, represented by the United States and the West as a whole.

At the same time, while embracing the vast amount of symbolic elements, the nodal point is stretched to lose its initial meaning which makes the discourse highly abstract. On the one hand, it can integrate even more elements and, on the other, gives the external audience what Slavoj Žižek called “a breathing space.” The abstract nature of the discourse allows very different subjects to fill it with their meanings in the process of the never-ending identification.<sup>49</sup>

As a result, other states can correlate themselves with the discourse; the connectivity between the BRI and Kazakhstan’s Nurlı Zhol program being one of the pertinent examples. This process includes both material and purely symbolic components.

---

<sup>44</sup> See: Su Ge, “Belt and Road: A Glance from the Globalization Point of View,” *Studies of the Problems of International Relations*, No. 2, 2016 (苏格, 全球视野之“一带一路”, 《国际问题研究》2016年第2期).

<sup>45</sup> See: See: Gao Qiqi, “Global Governance, Moving People and the Community of Shared Destiny of Mankind,” 2017 (高奇琦, 全球治理、人的流动与人类命运共同体, 《世界经济与政治》2017年01期).

<sup>46</sup> See: Han Xiao, “Building Belt and Road in the Context of Global Governance,” *International Survey*, No. 3, 2018 (韩笑, 全球发展治理视域下的“一带一路”建设, 《国际观察》2018年03期).

<sup>47</sup> See: See: Cao Jiahua, “Connectivity of Belt and Road and Sustainable Development Goals 2030,” *International Perspective*, No. 3, 2016 (曹嘉涵, “一带一路”倡议与2030年可持续发展议程的对接, 《国际展望》, 2016年第3期).

<sup>48</sup> See: Ling Jin, “Synergies between the Belt and Road Initiative and the 2030 SDGs: From the Perspective of Development,” *Economic and Political Studies*, Vol. 6, Issue 3, 2018.

<sup>49</sup> See: S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 122.

In this regard, China has offered the external audience a certain subjective position that concentrates on economic development and, in the final analysis, pragmatic, de-politicized and de-ideologized cooperation. Ultimately, this will improve China's image by shifting the global discussion of its strategic rise away from a discourse of threats and risks towards a discourse of possibilities.

---