China's One Belt and One Road: Implications of 'New Eurasian Land Bridge' on Global Power Play in the Region

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Abstract

China's 'One Belt and One Road Initiative' (OBOR) transliterated from Chinese 'Yi Dai Yi Lu' is the prime focus of international politics. No other development has gained so much importance after Global war on terrorism. This paper will focus on impact of OBOR on regional politics with narrowed down focus on New Eurasian land bridge. This analysis of Eurasian belt will lead to study of counter policies of international players like USA and Russia to counter Chinese influence in the region. This analytical and prognostic study will bring into focus the impact of OBOR on international power play especially on the regional peace in Eurasia. To analyze the importance of OBOR and regional complexity we need to understand the theoretical aspects of connectivity and cooperation. Inter- Regional integration theory proposed in the work of Luk Van Langenhov with major tenants of regional integration is the best description of China's initiative. Another important corridor will come under discussion given its role as 'zipper' in Belt and Road Initiative that is China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The last part of study will bring to attention international response of key players towards OBOR whose strategic and economic interest in this part of world are at stake which makes current global power play much more complex and uncertainty prevails. But in this age of economic interdependence, finding ways for peaceful co-existence is crucial as no one can afford otherwise.

Key Words

China, OBOR, Eurasia, foreign policy, USA, regional integration, CPEC, Pakistan

Introduction

'Sino-centric world', 'China's rise' and 'meeting China's challenge' are few of the major defining terms of past few years in international relations and geo-strategic studies. One of the major changes in global dynamics which define international order is the shifting position of China in global economic edifice. International discourse is flooded with change in world leadership, factors contributing to this change and ultimate consequences but one needs to study deeply the factors and policies that are determining this profound change in international politics. This study will focus on China's OBOR initiative, analysis of Chinese President Xi's global policies and impact on global peace in general with a narrowed down focus on impact on Eurasian

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strategic complex. This Eurasian aspect will narrow down on ‘New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor’; one of six projects that come under Belt Road Initiative (BRI). This premeditated analysis will definitely lead us towards the complexities of counter strategies poured from this corner of world primarily backed by U.S.A in one way or other. As Hillman (2018) has argued that BRI is such a far-reaching project which is neither constrained by geography nor gravity, and since its inception in 2013 has extended towards Arctic, cyber space and outer space as well. Chinese claims about the significance of BRI are not only due to the attractive financial advantages it promises for China’s inland and North Western underdeveloped region but also because it will re-establish the link to old silk route, the golden era of China’s economy during Tang Dynasty. It will guarantee China’s rejuvenation and achievement of ‘China’s Dream’ offered by President Xi. China, being the mastermind and the originator, will obviously have the key role in these initiatives in all stages starting from the conception to implementation. It would not then be surprising if it also eyes reaping the maximum benefits accruing from these great economic connectivity projects. Spanning some seventy countries and requiring investment approaching $4 trillion, the initiative is deliberately intended to reshape the global political and economic order. China's trade with countries along the Belt and Road rose 17.8 percent year-on-year in January 2018 (*ibid*, 2018). China’s belt and road initiative is the most significant development of China’s foreign policy in 21st century. It redefines the global order as well as regional dynamics. Eurasian land mass bridge is not only the most significant route within China’s ‘BELT’ in BRI but ultimately results in bringing out more significant players from whole Asian region well. The whole plan has forced the major powers like USA to revise their policies and bring out the plans based on connectivity and cooperation instead of more hard core plans of cold war i.e. based on ideological and military might.

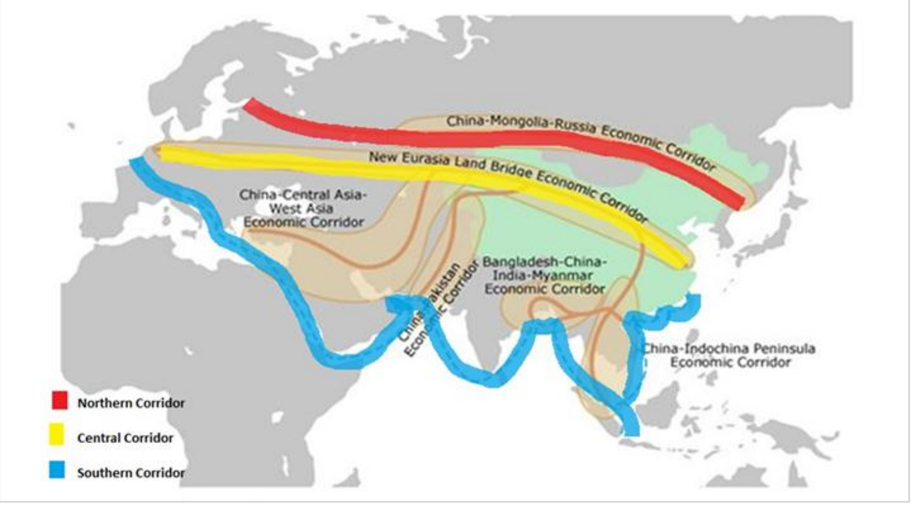
Understanding the Origin of BRI

Despite the fact that BRI is also called ‘New Silk Road’ it is much more broader in scope then the ‘Old Silk Road’ or ‘Go Out’ Plan introduced by Chinese government in 1999. The Silk Road term was first used in mid-1800s by a geologist of German origin named Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (Frankopan, 2016). It was combination of land and sea routes connecting Xi’an to Rome crossing southern corridor via Iran and Turkey. Being spread across some seventy countries, it includes almost two-thirds of world population and Chinese investment under this grand policy is believed to reach $4 trillion (Editor, 2016). It started with focus on Asia, Europe and Africa and will extend up to Arctic region through ‘Polar’ route. In this outgoing policy China is making an effort to strengthen the global connectivity through hard infrastructure i.e. roads, railways, telecommunications, energy pipelines and ports as well as through soft infrastructure with trade, transportation agreements as well as cultural ties on all fronts. Shared–destiny, harmony and win-win cooperation are stated as the basis of whole plan. The current economic strategy of China also reflects ‘Chinese Dream’ with targets set for 2049 (Johnson, 2014), when China would be celebrating 100 years of its independence. This is another key distinction from ancient silk route which arose primarily from unplanned trade route of China’s economic activity with trading partners whereas BRI is a planned grand strategy with a clearly defined vision.

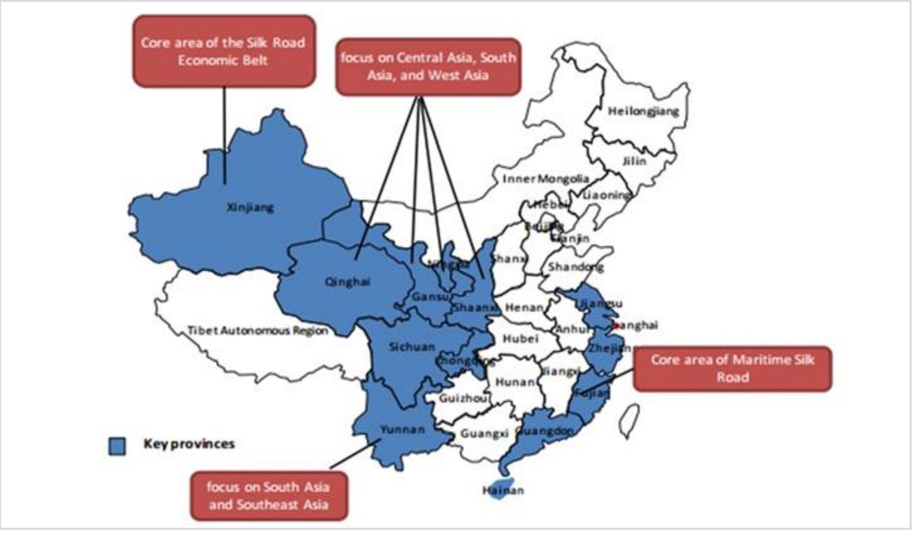
President Xi Jingping popularly known as the paramount leader, the first Chinese leadership to be called so after Deng Xiaoping, introduced this significant foreign policy on September 7, 2013 during his state visit to Nazarbayev University in

Kazakhstan. Initially known as 'OBOR' and now as BRI has two components: Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI). The land connectivity plan and the maritime connectivity includes, one Eurasian land bridge and five corridors; namely China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central-Asia-West Asia, China-Indochina Peninsula and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM).

It can be further categorized as northern, central and southern mega corridors. Northern corridor will connect two major regional powers i.e. Russia and China through web of infrastructure and energy sharing plan. The central mega corridor will connect China's eastern coastal cities to historically and geographically important Xi'an city to Europe while crossing Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland and finally Germany to Holland till Spain and UK. Within the central mega corridor two more connectivity plan exists that is CPEC and BCIM. Out of which CPEC has been described as not only a mega project but also a 'scenario changer' corridor given its economic and strategic importance for both China and Pakistan. It will connect important deep sea port of Gawader to China's North western province Xinjiang, hence connecting SREB and MSRI in Indian Ocean. Last but not the least the Southern mega corridor is the ultimate maritime connectivity corridor which will connect China's East to Europe while crossing all the strategically important choke points and ports ensuring the smooth maritime economic activity for China. (See Map 1 and 2).



Map 1: Northern, Central and Southern Mega-Corridors
Source: Gilani Research Foundation, China Trade Research



Map 2: Inland China – Eastern Flank/ Segment of Central Mega-Corridor
Source: Gilani Research Foundation, China Trade Research

An action plan laid down by Ministry of Foreign Affair China in March 2015, issued by National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) specifies the larger goal of BRI as follow (NDRC, 2015):

- To attain improvement in intergovernmental communication for better alignment in government economic policies and strategy for regional collaboration for development.
- To have better coordination of infrastructure plan to connect hard infrastructure devices like transportation network and power grids.
- To encourage the systematic expansion of soft infrastructure e.g. the signing of trade deals, aligning of regulatory standards, and improving financial integration.
- Encouraging people-to-people associations by cultivating student, expert, and cultural exchanges and tourism.

To achieve all these goal there are two financial engines: a multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with currently sixty four member states and twenty prospective members, and $ 40 Billion Silk Road fund. Apart from these two financial vehicles, Beijing has injected huge amount of capital through China State Administrative of Foreign Exchange (SAFE) in August 2015 in banks like Import Export Bank of China (EXIM) and China development Bank (CDB). Both banks have the benefit of the low borrowing cost as their bonds have this privilege of being treated as Chinese government debt with low interest rate and can lend from People's bank of China as well. This in turn allows them to lend cheaply to companies involved in BRI projects. This is the reason that vast bulk of funding so far has been through China big state owned banks. This funding is promised to be increased more. Silk Road Fund will provide more funds i.e. up to 100 billion Yuan, overseas capital will be increased to three hundreds billion Yuan by banks, CDB. EXIM plans to supply more cash as special loans in BRI projects that is up to 130 billion Yuan and 250 billion Yuan respectively. Overall president Xi has promised at least 780 billion

Yuan ($113 billion in US) to further facilitate the project and for smooth outcome (Hillman, 2018).

Domestic Compulsions

Before going into the details of Eurasian land bridge we need to understand the domestic and global needs which led China to adopt a project or foreign policy of such huge ambition. The world is changing, and one of the known realities of this changing dynamics is that China – in not very distant future – will be taking over the most powerful place in the global economic edifice. 'Going Global' strategy which was initiated by Chinese government in 2001, Chinese companies were stimulated to look for overseas opportunity. This was further encouraged in 2013 by adjusting the regular framework for outward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to facilitate Chinese firms to be more competitive in international markets (Dobbs, Leung, & Lund, 2013). As president Xi stressed at G-20 summit in Hangzhou, it would be naïve to expect that China would remain a spectator in global economic affairs and would not prepare and present itself as a dynamic key player (Li, 2016).

Ethnic issues, policy incoherence and internal sources struggle are few of obstacles that impede the successful development of BRI. China's comparatively less developed regions like Xinjiang and Yunnan are the key roads to develop regional geographical linkage. Xinjiang is the major connection in SREB to eight neighbouring central, west and South Asian countries. It is the main window of opportunity for China's underdeveloped North Western region. Same way Yunnan in South West China is the key area to South-East Asia. East Asian province Fujian is the key connection of 21st century maritime silk route to various South East Asian countries. But the capacity of local governments of these key areas is quite low to fulfil the efficiency and pro-activeness that is required for the success of BRI. Internal resources struggle among local governments is another constraint. Hence, internal regional integration is key compulsion for BRI, which can help achieve the China's equitable domestic development plan.

If BRI is able to fulfil the promise being ensured by Chinese government, it will lay down the solid foundation in perceived scenario. Some of the particulars in this regard are following. First, to maintain the current level of development economically and to achieve higher targets, there is need to ensure sustainable and secure energy supply chain and BRI makes it possible. Secondly to make a positive use of abundant capital available to China, it has to come up with a productive strategy and BRI is answer to that quest. Global financial experts believe that China can play a vital role as global financial balancer being the world's largest saver. It is really vital in the wake of low returns on investment such as bonds. The infrastructure projects like roads, railways, bridges and many more ensures the investment of its large foreign currency reserves and consequently ensures the goodwill with its neighbours.

This strategy will also lead to the additional work for its state-owned and private enterprises. A noteworthy development in this regard is that the outflow of FDI from China has now reached to the FDI inflow into China (Dongmiao, 2017). The long term projects under BRI are therefore a golden opportunity to invest on a good rate of return and in a long term perspective. Over growing in some sectors and as well as the continuously growing demand of raw materials is another factor to move China in this direction. China has been facing shortage in eleven metals that are significant for gearing up its economy. Other similar issues include the increasing labour costs, increasing consumerism in wake of rising middle class, slowing of growth rate, domestic restructuring and need for regional re-balancing. BRI is the answer and has potential to play vital role in the majority of these areas.

New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB)

The NELB, a central BRI corridor is a mega plan to establish linkage between Atlantic and Pacific. It is different from Siberian land bridge (proposed by President Putin as center of his Asian diplomacy) which connects port of Vladivostok in Russia's east through Siberia to Moscow and finally to western European countries. Also known as the "second" bridge NELB will start from China's coastal cities of Lianyungang and Rizhao to Holland's Rotterdam and Belgium's Antwerp. The 11,800-kilometer-long rail link runs through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland and Germany, and serves more than thirty countries and three regions. China's state media has stated that this, ambitious yet possible plan, is going to connect China's North-eastern Lianyungang to Netherland's Rotterdam in Europe covering a distance of 11,870 km. See Map 3.

Map 3: New Eurasia Land Bridge (Edited by the author)

Until now various railway trade routes have become operational and have been included in BRI mainly due to the transcontinental connectivity, and consequent economic progress that they guarantee for involved countries. Some of the listed connectivity plans are as follow: the Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe Railway (reaching Germany's Duisburg via Poland), the Chengdu-Xinjiang-Europe Railway (reaching Poland), and the Yiwu-Xinjiang-Europe Railway (reaching Madrid). There is a steady progress in the construction of associated highways, power transmission lines, and ports (Wijeratne et al., 2017).

NELB is the 'leading edge' of China master plan of connectivity through BRI. It is to ease the connectivity for Eurasian trade. As one of the principal among six projects, it is also known as branch of China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor. All the western powers have named it the most crucial plan which aims to streamline the mutual trade by improving already present railway routes and linking China's underdeveloped western region with Europe. The Russian trans-Siberian railway, branching northwest from Urumqi, traversing Astana in Kazakhstan, and then linking up with the Russian rail network at Yekaterinburg is the proposed route. By circumventing the southern branch of the trans-Siberian railway in northeast China, trains will take a more direct route through Xinjiang. It will also branch out China's shipping away from seaborne routes that bottleneck at the Strait of Malacca (Wijeratne et al., 2017).

If compared with other economic corridors under BRI, the NELB is relatively straightforward as it traverses only three countries on the way to Europe, it focuses on goods transportation with already present infrastructure at well premeditated points, although it needs up gradation and modernization at some crucial points. The main concern of investment on this route is to improve the already existing infrastructure which will ultimately result in faster transportation of trade good between China and Europe and make it better option than seaborne and airborne freight operations. As of now containers containing trade goods are taken from Chinese to Kazakh rail cars at a small town in Almaty region of Kazakhstan and China (Xinjiang) border on truck-mounted cranes. This port entry serves as backbone of Eurasian Land Bridge. The same procedure is repeated at a small Polish town of Siemianowkaw at Belarus-Poland border on entering Europe. This time and resources consuming process is only due the break-of-gauge between standard gauge in China and the Russian gauge used in former Soviet Republic states like CARs. China is still using the narrow gauge system installed by foreign companies mostly of European origin with standard West European railway gauge of 1,435mm whereas Russian installed railway gauge is of 1,522mm (Duhalde, Arranz, Hernandez, & Long, 2018). With Chinese and European trade infrastructure already intact, it leaves only Russia and Kazakhstan segments in need of more financial investments to have more beneficiary and thriving trade routes via train. A $2.7 billion plan has already been launched by Kazakhstan to upgrade about 724 km of this ancient track along the new Silk Road route (Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017). Russia in its quest to improve its continuously deteriorating economy and develop new regional collaborations has also been upgrading the trans-Siberian railroad through the 2000s, and is even thought to be mulling a western extension to the Japanese island of Hokkaido (The Siberian Times Reporter, 2016).

Caspian Sea is another geostrategic pivotal point as all the freight trade from China will eventually pass through north of Caspian Sea via Russia. An alternative option being considered is turning southwards from Kazakhstan to Turkmenistan, Iran and Turkey; known as the Iron Silk Road (Koçtaş Çotur & Onur Uysal, 2015). However, due to limited infrastructure and multiple border crossings this route has been sparsely used. This requires more transportation infrastructure to be operational. Some projects are already under construction. Caucasian states provide another viable option in this regard. Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project will reduce the journey to Europe across Caspian bypassing Iran. An alternative option being considered in this regard is through Turkey and Bulgaria while considering that any route passing though south of Caspian Sea will must cross Iran.

Complementing the vast railway infrastructure development is a huge 'energy connectivity' plan. China, Central Asia and Russia have invested in very well planned oil and gas pipelines which also serve the energy starved Chinese economy. China-Turkmenistan gas pipeline is worth mentioning here as Turkmenistan energy sector received much need boost by being introduced in market though China-Central Asia gas pipeline.

Russia as a key player in NELB enjoys a unique status. Almost 30 percent of territory of Eurasia is occupied by Russia with a well-equipped transportation network in all segments such as rail tracks, sea routes, air, and road infrastructure.

China has successfully paved its way to attain new level of cooperation with Belarus and Poland as well. Being the third largest trading partner of Belarus after Russia and EU, they have increased the cooperation in various sectors like agriculture and food industry etc. It became the first CIS country to export beef and poultry to China in 2017. Pertaining to BRI, there is a lot of room for cooperation in different sectors along with infrastructure development as Belarus is also looking towards more public-private partnerships to successfully implement such projects. The China-Belarus Great Stone Park-China's largest offshore industrial park is one of the prominent indications of inroads that China is trying to achieve through BRI in Europe (Chan, 2018).

To analyze the overall regional complexity we need to take into consideration the theoretical aspects of geo-strategic connectivity and cooperation. It is explained through inter-regional integration Theory. This theory proposed in the work of Luk van Langenhove explains the inter-state collaboration and cooperation in appropriate manner. His narrative of eight important factors to ensure regional integration is best depicted through China's OBOR initiative. According to Langenhove the crucial factors that contribute to regional integration and peace development include: 1. the strengthening of trade integration in the region, 2. the creation of an appropriate enabling environment for private sector development, 3. the development of infrastructure programs in support of economic growth and regional integration, 4. the development of strong public sector institutions and good governance, 5. the reduction of social exclusion and the development of an inclusive civil society, 6. contribution to peace and security in the regions, 7. the building of environment programs at the regional level and the strengthening of the region's interaction with other regions of the world (Söderbaum & van Langenhove, 2005). If one analyzes the progress on BRI, so far, there is a lot left to be desired. China's policy makers are claiming repeatedly that the purpose of reviving old Silk Road is to re-gain that regional connectivity to revive the economic prosperity. But the world realities are more complex and heterogeneous. Cold war legacies and interest and presence of USA at crucial strategic point have made the situation much more complex. How China is planning to face all these challenges within Eurasian region which is ultimately going make the dream of regional connectivity come true is a big question.

Great Power Play Game

Kazakhstan is an the crucial player in this grandeur strategy to achieve Eurasian integration but domestic governance issues and consequent foreign policy choices are the major concerns for China and Russia both. President Nursultan Nazarbayev's high level visit to US and meeting with President Trump in January 2018 is one of the consequent developments of efforts made by US to counter China's dominance in its neighbouring states. US state department has praised flourishing US-Kazak trade relations by giving a press release stating that their mutual trade reached $1.9 billion in 2016. All the efforts made by US state department and the meeting arranged with current Kazak ambassador to US by high level think tank like Atlantic council to persuade Kazakhstan, reflects on how seriously and vigorously USA is trying to counter China's neighbouring regions. Their mutual cooperation includes growing military ties as well as cooperation on nuclear energy front. Provision of two crucial ports (Aktau and Kuryk) to US by Kazakhstan to establish an alternate route to Afghanistan bypassing Russia is significant strategic development in first half of this year. Presence of more than 25,000 Kazakh students in USA is also an indication of such collaboration on soft integration front.

Despite this very constructive cooperation mechanism between US and Kazakhstan, Eurasian land bridge is an excellent depiction of how geography shapes the foreign policy preference of global powers like China, Russia and USA as well as of small regional powers like Kazakhstan. Its geographical location made it almost impracticable foreign policy option. Kazakhstan is very important part of Shanghai Cooperation organization. It is a central loop in China's significant Eurasian land bridge and for this purpose Chinese company is also constructing a colossal dry port Khorgos gateway in Kazakhstan. This world largest dry port will connect 'Khorgos gateway' in Kazakhstan to 'Khorgas' a Chinese city in Xinjiang. The problem here again on both sides of border is different gauge system as mentioned earlier. According to a World Bank report in 2014 titled 'The Eurasian Connection' (Rastogi & Arvis, 2014) it was claimed that in terms of speed and cost per kilometer, the Chinese proposed rail route though BRI offers matchless value. The first part of this plan is already functional as 293 km long track from Khorgos to Kazakhstan's Zhetygen terminal was completed in December 2011. In December 2012 track from both sides of borders were connected and now sixty five trains carrying 6200 TEU (Twenty foot equivalent unit) of cargo passes Khorgos every month. This crucial railway crossing between China and Kazakhstan is expected to handle 15 million tonnes of freight every year with a more buoyant situation of 30 million tonnes per year after the opening up of second Europe China rail link (Duhalde et al., 2018). This bona fide connectivity will help Kazakhstan achieves more prominent position in global trade.

Hence it is inevitable choice for states like Russia and Kazakhstan to be part of this grand strategy as they were already looking forward to the economic opportunities. The immense benefits through BRI provided trade routes can be gauged through 'Yiwu-London' freight train started on 3rd January, 2017 which carried forty-four containers of goods in just eighteen days whereas through shipping it takes forty days. Whereas, 'London-Yiwu' train which started on 10th of April, 2017 brought back eighty-eight containers of trade goods in just 20 days. It takes 40-50 days to transport Chinese goods to recipient European markets but it takes half time if transported through central Asia train routes (Wijeratne et al., 2017). Seaborne trade routes cost ten times, much more time and financial costs of airborne routes are unfeasible in this matter. These beneficiary economic activities cannot be overlooked by any major regional or global power. However at the same time there are fears of being misused in the hands of a rising 'great power' particularly due to cold war legacies of exploitation of natural sources (as one of energy rich country) and fears of aggressiveness posed by dominating power.

Fallon (2017), though hugely doubtful about the greater benefits of BRI, admitted that improving rail routes and interconnectivity can bring greater benefits for the region as Chinese investment in transportation has been explicit as compared to previously present very low speed train route facility but still there is apprehension among the inhabitants of Central Asia that Chinese product might just pass through states towards Europe without giving any real benefit to Central Asian struggling economies.

Successful completion of dry port is adding up to the challenges posed to Russian aspirations in the region. Start of an oil pipeline in 2009 between China and Kazakhstan broke the monopoly of Russian state owned pipeline company Transneft in the region (Amighini, 2017). It seems that rise of China in this region is a greater challenge for US as compared to Russia, because consequently it is challenging USA dominance regionally and globally. Russia on the other hand seems to willingly collaborate with China to gain larger economic benefits especially in the context of renewed NATO and US diplomatic aggression towards Russia after Ukraine crisis. Russia seems to accept Chinese dominance in the region and wants to maximize its benefit by being part of this 'project of century' i.e. BRI as depicted by high level participation by President Putin in 2017, B&R forum. Though, some western analyst called Russia's acceptance of BRI as 'axis of convenience' or define their relationship as 'Frenemies'. Statistic shows that as of April 2018, Russia has increased its oil sale to China to 43 percent, whereas 19 percent less oil is exported to Europe as China has become a more preferable oil trade partner for Russia (Longley & Lehane, 2018).

Andrew Higgins opined that expanding Sino-Kazakhstan ties are optimum indication of eroding of overwhelmingly dominant position of Russia in the region, although Astana has always tried to be on cordial terms with Russia in the wake of USSR's disintegration and its independence in 1991 (Higgins, 2018). It remains a reality that Kazakhstan cannot avoid having affable relationship with Moscow despite its growing economic collaborations with China. An analyst of Russian foreign policy, Samuel Ramani, argues that Astana does not have any choice in this matter as it will put it into Crimea like calamity by Russia (Ramani). Same kind of propositions was made by American Enterprise Institute (AEI) through a report (Gorenburg, 2018) released at same time President Nazarbayev visited US in January 2018 to meet his counterpart.

In the Eurasian Land Bridge: the 'New Silk Road-Locomotive for worldwide economic development', the author talked about the Eurasian connectivity through infrastructure development as a 'locomotive engine' of economic progress despite the socio-political chaos in the region. The report criticized that Anglo-American geo-politician such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, tend to focus and highlight Eurasian continent for massive destabilization targeting the most vulnerable points like South-Central Asia, near east, Caucuses and Balkans. Given the circumstances such allegations were made some 20 years ago against the well know policy advisor in US is an indication of 'geo-strategic and economic' importance of Eurasian land bridge for US policy makers (Tannenbaum, 1997). As President Xi outlined in his Belt and Road International Forum address in 2017 (Yamei, 2017, n.d.):

> History is the best teacher. The history (of the ancient Silk Road) showed us that we can move along with mutual respect and development and towards the future of happiness, peace and harmony if we bravely walk the first step…The countries along the ancient Silk Road were once placed with milk and honey, but now are full of turbulence, conflicts, and crisis. Such conditions must be addressed. We must have mutual cooperation, and a sustainable security outlook, try to tackle hot issues and insist on a political resolution.

Bruno Macaes in his 2018 book *Dawn of Eurasia* argued that the age of reconciliation in post-cold war dynamics brought Europe back together, although, not in a perfect way. The opening of China to global economic system happened in same decade in which a unified Germany appeared on world map. Both digital (software) and physical (hardware) infrastructure combined with deep chain values led to a valuable combination for effective development i.e. beginning of neo-globalization. China through BRI, strive to be firmly in control in post-cold-war era new economic linkages started to develop and old ideological battles lost their importance in shaping international politics. Eurasia has emerged as new geographic entity. The revival of old silk route has been regarded as the return of old age but Bruno argues that it is dawn of new age (Macaes, 2018).

The most important spill over effect of this new age is for Russia-a renewed importance-as core of Eurasian super connectivity can redefine its regional and global status in power dynamics. Looking at Asia as centre of Russia's larger regional and global goals is rather a new development instead of looking at it as backyard of world. Although Russia has outlined some counter plans like European Economic Union (EEU) but till now it has not been able to create the same impact as BRI. Given the circumstances it seems quite viable, that Russia can maintain its powerful position by being a major player in China's BRI particularly through NELB.

In this era of Eurasian integration, primarily being materialized through BRI, it is vital to observe the nature of integration. All the states involved in NELB might be at different stage of development. But they tend to integrate on common goals. Statements from Chinese leadership depict a trend which tends to master modern technology and society without adhering to western politico-economic and social systems.

US, UK, Russia, India and Japan will have to redefine their roles in global power play on the basis of rules set by China through BRI. The smaller beneficiary states like CARs, East Asian states and Pakistan will truly bear the fruit of win-win cooperation if they act vigilantly. Significant input in research department by US policy makers is yet another indication of how seriously US is taking BRI, although there is continuous denial of China's success and rise on international platform. Centre of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is one such example, which is producing a very organized research through its project 'Reconnecting Asia' and 'China Power' about how China's BRI is re-shaping the world and what should be the policy choices of competing powers. It is collaborating with other institutions too like top universities of UK to sponsor projects like 'Across Eurasia in 60 days- A new Silk Road' in which group of academic researchers will travel from London-Yiwu touching all important nodes in NELB (Stevens, 2018).

The intellectual discourse on China's BRI from every part of world signifies the success of China's plan as indication of how readily the seventy involved countries have embraced the opportunity of economic integration. The policy makers, advisors to policy makers, think tanks, academia, business sector and many other stakeholders are writing and discussing the different facets of BRI. As in the current circumstances, US withdrawal from Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) under Trump administration and major changes in trade, environment and immigration policies at domestic level, concerns exist about the credibility of US global leadership role. At the same time China has clearly expressed the intention to take on more proactive global role during the new era of globalization to boost economic and social connectivity among states to support multilateralism. As Chinese state media stated unanimously in January 2018, that President Xi can take full credit in shaping the theme of world Economic Forum in Davos in 2018 i.e. 'creating a shared future in fractured world'. Seeking the partnership with Europe seems a logical decision in this matter, as its domestic compulsions do not allow it to lead the world single-handedly. It is an opportunity to create a common platform, not only for China and Europe but others as well from Africa to Scandinavian states, to integrate their individual development strategies with that of China. Central Asia which is also called the 'fulcrum of New Silk Road' is going to receive the most valuable impact.

Shambugh (2014), argued in his book *China Goes Global*, that BRI is one of the most significant global development of recent times though he too is of view that certain domestic and international factors are hindering the China's way to be global power. Andrew Small has also argued in that OBOR is Chinese plan to hail its strategic goals through it economic might. He asserts that through its plan of railroads, pipelines, ports will expand commercially as well as link whole Eurasia with extensive infrastructure plan and hence will lay down the basis of Sino-Centric World. He also clarified that within the whole Eurasian belt 'South Asia' is the most promising region to attain its target and the most important one for China as well as CPEC is the ultimate connection between belt and road in BRI (Small, 2018). It is worth mentioning here that a Russian analyst also look towards this corridor as 'zipper' of pan-Eurasian integration (Korybko, 2015).

Conclusion

At the centre of China's economic diplomacy, BRI tends to achieve deeper integration of China in global economy while staying intact to its traditional politico-social system. When we say deeper, it is more than trade flow and investment tactics. It is the combination of commercial and cultural integration. Although named as initiative, it is a grand strategy to accommodate the changing international and domestic dynamics of China. To achieve global integration, one has to achieve the regional integration, and China is attaining that well, through all corridors under BRI which will ultimately lead to 'Greater Eurasia'. In this study, focus is on NELB but one cannot deny the importance of other regions like Middle East and Africa (MENA region) as prominent player in greater quest of global peace and integration. Europe as final destination of both SREB and MSRI is crucial political and economic partner. This vital strategic partnership emerged on global geo-political map when there was a lot of uncertainty towards multilateral cooperation mechanism mainly due to the policy re-orientation of major powers like US and UK. At the same time intra-regional geo-strategic conflict among many Asian and Middle Eastern states are also of great concern.

As President Xi remarked in Davos, "As long as we keep to the goal of building a community of shared future for mankind and work hand in hand to fulfil our responsibilities and overcome difficulties, we will be able to create a better world and deliver better lives for our peoples" (Yamei, 2017, n.d.).

The concept of shared future and shared growth will be prevalent in China led world but it is up to other players too, how they determine their rightful share in this growth. Vigilant and proactive policies are needed and synergy in policy making apparatuses is required. Because despite the well-defined BRI plan, it is still a realist world where every state has to maximize its own interests, just like China is paving its way for its own global and domestic goals. Geography has and will continue to play the crucial role in foreign policy choices of states and it is up to the efficient leadership of CARS especially in case of NELB. Russia, Poland and Belarus are already making their mark in this project to get maximum benefits from geo-strategic opportunity that has come to their way. So in this new integration era where China is trying to re-draw regional and international boundaries, countries like Russia, India, Iran, Turkey and Japan are trying to promote their own visions of regional integration. The positive outcome is contrasting the post 9/11 world where the choices were to cooperate and collaborate for military operations, world is now cooperating and collaborating for shared growth and shared prosperity.

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