TROYACADEMY
Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi

Araştırma
Research Paper

Troyacademy 5 (1), 135-148 , 2020
Geliş/Received: 27.10.2019 • Kabul / Accepted: 26.11.2019
doi: 10.31454 / usb.722094

Russian and Central Asian Views on China's Belt & Road Initiative

Ulaş Başar GEZGİN *

Abstract

In this article, we review and discuss Russian and Central Asian views on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI is considered to be a panacea for multiple problems of China such as the Xinjiang issue, economic slowdown, excess capacity etc. In this context, Chinese principle of non-interference is increasingly questioned as it is hard to separate economical, geopolitical and security dimensions. Russian influence over Central Asia is expected to wane due to BRI projects which may cause Sino-Russian conflicts. On the other hand, Russian isolation after the Ukrainian crisis makes Russia to consider BRI in amicable terms.

Central Asian official views on BRI are mostly positive, although local peoples' objections involving social and environmental impacts are noteworthy. Since the region is landlocked, the prospects are high. However, rather than earning transit revenues only, the regional states are in expectation of Chinese investments in other business areas. Central Asia is far from the goal of regional integration. Border disputes, water scarcity, intra-regional mistrust etc. are divisive enough to prevent the region to act in a coordinated manner with regard to BRI. China, on this occasion, appears to be the major force to integrate the region.

Keywords: China, Belt and Road Initiative, Sino-Russian relations, Central Asia, and geopolitics.
Jel Codes: R11, R42, R58

Çin'in Kuşak ve Yol İnisiyatifi'ne İlişkin Rus ve Orta Asyalı Görüşleri

Öz

Bu makalede Çin'in Kuşak ve Yol İnisiyatifi (KYİ) üstüne Rus ve Orta Asyalı görüşlerini gözden geçiriyor ve tartışıyoruz. KYİ, Çin'in Sincan meselesi, ekonomik yavaşlama, aşırı kapasite vd. gibi çeşitli sorunları için her derde deva bir ilaç olarak değerlendiriliyor. Bu bağlamda, Çin'in içişlerine karışmama ilkesi, ekonomik, jeopolitik ve güvenlik boyutlarını ayırmak zor olduğundan, gittiçe daha çok sorgulanıyor. Orta Asya üzerindeki Rus etkisinin KYİ projeleriyle zayıflayacağı düşünülüyor ki bu, bir Çin-Rusya çatışmasına yol açabilir. Öte yandan, Ukrayna krizi sonrasında Rusya'nın yalıtılmışlığı, Rusya'nın KYİ'ye daha arkadaşça yaklaşmasını getiriyor.

KYİ'ye ilişkin resmi Orta Asya görüşleri çoğunlukla olumlu; ancak yerel halkların toplumsal ve çevresel etkiler nedeniyle karşı çıkışları not edilmeli. Bölge, denize erişimsiz olduğundan, beklentiler

* Prof.Dr. Ulaş Başar Gezgin, Duy Tan University, 03 Quang Trung, Haichau, Danang, Vietnam,
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6075-3501 ulasbasar@gmail.com

yüksek. Ancak, bölge ülkeleri, yalnızca yol geçiş gelirleriyle yetinmek yerine, başka iş alanlarında da Çin yatırımları bekliyor. Orta Asya, bölgesel bütünleşme amacından uzak. Sınır anlaşmazlıkları, su kıtlığı, bölge içi güvensizlik vb., bölgenin KYİ'ye ilişkin olarak eşgüdümlü bir biçimde hareket etmesini engelleyecek kadar ara bozucu bir etkiye sahip. Çin'in, bu vesileyle, bölgeyi bütünleştirecek büyük bir güç olduğu ortaya çıkıyor.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Çin, Kuşak ve Yol İnisiyatifi, Çin-Rusya ilişkileri, Orta Asya ve jeo-politika.
Jel Kodları: R11, R42, R58

INTRODUCTION

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) appears to be a life buoy for China in the context of declining GDP growth rates. Sino-American trade war and decrease in export revenues make BRI indispensable for Chinese economy (Lukonin, Kanaev, & Efremova, 2019). Reeves (2018) considers BRI as a grand narrative, an 'influence multiplier', an organizational tool of international relations:

"Rather than constituting a new model for Central Asian international relations, the SREB's [Silk Road Economic Belt] real strategic value for China is as an organizational concept and as an influence multiplier. In recasting its Central Asian bilateral relations as part of the SREB engagement model, Beijing has overlaid a strategic-level concept to its otherwise disparate patterns of engagement" (Reeves, 2018: 502).

Lukonin, Kanaev, & Efremova (2019) propose that China considers South East Asia as a test ground for globalization with Chinese characteristics that has been materialized through BRI. The lessons from the region will be utilized for BRI's expansion in Eurasia and other regions. However, this method may be misleading as other regions are, generally speaking, more volatile and insecure compared to the case in the test ground, i.e. South East Asia. Jumadilova & Chaukerova (2018) propose that threats and challenges associated with BRI in Eurasia have not received the attention they deserve yet. These are "Islamic fundamentalism, and hypothetical options for the economic absorption of part of Eurasia by China, as well as possible conflicts of interests of key actors (Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan) during the implementation of the proposed conjugation" (Jumadilova & Chaukerova, 2018: 90).

For China, according to Pantucci (2019), security and economic prosperity are closely related. If people would get rich, they won't find extremism and related evils appealing (Martens, 2018; Pantucci, 2019). Furthermore, from a Chinese perspective, it is hard to demarcate politics, economics and security. As a result, China's well-known principle of non-interference is invalidated, as Chinese investments always have political and security dimensions (Pantucci, 2019). For instance, in some countries, Chinese funding determines the fate and reign of other governments. In times of political/economic crisis, Chinese financial support rescues the embattled politicians. Additionally, as in the cases of Djibouti and Pakistan, the fact that some of the BRI projects target restive regions characterized by civil war, war and terrorism leads to securitization of the projects sooner or later. The same may hold for some of the Central Asian states. Forced to confront anti-China sentiments in these restive regions, Chinese staff are sometimes targeted by terrorist organizations and criminal groups, as in the case of Bishkek attack in 2016 (Pantucci, 2019).

Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang and Jilin are Chinese border provinces to Russia. Heilongjiang is a landlocked province. It needs Russia's support to access the Pacific Ocean via Sea of Japan. With Russia's cooperation, Heilongjiang dreams of becoming a part of Maritime Silk Road project (Christoffersen, 2016). Inner Mongolia is also expected to benefit from an extension of BRI (Tumentsetseg, 2016). Silk Road Economic Belt's connectivity with Central Asian states will definitely make Xinjiang more prominent, even an energy hub (Sui & Xiaozhong, 2017). Currently, Xinjiang accounts for nearly 30% of Chinese-Central Asian trade (Imomnazar, 2018). China hopes to stabilize and pacify Xinjiang by the expected economic revival through BRI investments (Fiedler, 2018). BRI will also contribute to the economic development of China's Western regions in general (Lukonin, Kanaev, & Efremova, 2019).

Baichorov (2016) notes that for China-Europe trade, shipping is cheaper but slower than railroads. Furthermore, most of the Chinese exports heading for Europe are produced in Eastern and Southern provinces which make shipping more advantageous (Baichorov, 2016). That means, for efficiency of BRI projects in Central Asia, China should also move its production base towards its Western and Northern provinces. Moreover, the existing rail gauges in Central Asia are mostly Soviet style (Fiedler, 2018). They need to be dismantled and upgraded to the standard gauge.

1. RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVES ON BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

Due to the problems such as color 'revolution's and the Ukrainian crisis, Russia gets closer to China (Fels, 2018; Gabuev, 2016). However, a stronger China is not completely to the advantage of Russia as Chinese and Russian future projections of how Central Asia would look like are not necessarily identical or similar. BRI is expected to increase the Chinese influence over Central Asia which is considered to be the 'backyard' of Russia even before the Soviet era. On the other hand, Russia needs BRI infrastructure projects in Asian and especially Northeast Asian Russia to cope with the regional underdevelopment. Russian economy is full of structural problems, whereas China has been growing for consecutive decades notwithstanding the recent slowing down due to Sino-American trade war. Furthermore, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, on average, Russia registered a huge trade deficit with China (Erokhin, 2017); and the structure of Sino-Russian trade moved towards Russian exports of resources, and Chinese exports of hi-tech products (Fels, 2018) which resemble China's trade with low- and middle-income countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This pattern is not sustainable from a Russian point of view. Additionally, China-Central Asia trade relations are based on the same formula:

China imports resources and exports processed goods (Erokhin, 2017). The same holds for China's trade with Mongolia and North Korea, but not with Japan and South Korea as the latter two have highly developed economies (Erokhin, 2017).

Based on a media analysis, Ravitsky (2018) concludes that Russian media's portrayal of BRI is mostly positive focusing on mutual gains and alliance against the American influence in Eurasia. Converging with Ravitsky (2018), Wu & Zhao (2018) observe that Russian media usually discusses BRI with a positive light. Smirnova (2017), on the other hand identifies suspicion in addition to positive views in her analysis of Russia media with a coverage of not only mainstream news, but also those that appear on publications popular with Russian security and intelligence communities. E.g. "it is far from evident whether improved connectivity would help the Russian businesses maximize profits or, vice versa, only create more competition for the control over resources" (Smirnova, 2017: 114). In the same vein, Gabuev & Zuenko (2018) characterize the position of Russian public opinion vis-a-vis BRI as "from caution to euphoria to disappointment" (Gabuev & Zuenko, 2018: 142); and classifies the range of opinions in Russia into three: BRI "as a geopolitical reality, as an opportunity for the socioeconomic development of the country, and finally as a challenge" (Gabuev & Zuenko, 2018: 145).

Lack of and problems about connectivity is considered to be a major obstacle against the further development of Sino-Russian trade (Zhang, 2019). Thus, BRI is expected to foster closer ties between China and Russia. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is expected to support BRI through multilateralism (Na-Xi, Meng-Fang, & Shan-Bing, 2019; Xiaoding, 2019). SCO's economic functions are weak; the major agreements involve security issues (Pantucci, 2019). Thus, from the other way around, BRI has the potential to complement SCO (Gabuev, 2016; Na-Xi, Meng-Fang, & Shan-Bing, 2019).

China has the second longest border with Russia (the first is with Mongolia) (Gabuev, 2016). According to Manurung (2016), "Moscow's strategy for developing the Russian Far East complements Beijing's strategy for reviving the Chinese Northeast" (Manurung, 2016: 38). Russian Northeast is economically underdeveloped and suffer from low population (Lin, 2017). Since Russian Northeast Asia has very low population density, and financial returns are slower, Siberia and the nearby regions are not considered to be attractive sites for BRI infrastructure investments (Zhang & Serdar, 2017). It is also more difficult to build connectivity in the region due to technical obstacles in uninhabited wilderness (Zhang & Serdar, 2017).

From a Northeastern Russian perspective, the disproportionate overall and regional Sino-Russian demographic differential makes some of the Russians precautious. On the other hand, Tido (2018) considers the associated 'Chinese migration threat' idea not reasonable, considering the population density: "It is an emotional fear, as about 1,364 billion Chinese reside on 9,6 million square kilometres of land, and the 143,8 million of Russians are settled on 17,1 million square kilometres" (Tido, 2018: 41). However, this may clearly be a disadvantage for Russia, as the gigantic population of China can be overwhelming especially in border provinces of Russia.

For BRI to be successful, Moscow's cooperation is a must. BRI needs to be integrated with Russia's Eurasian Union (EEU) project (Christoffersen, 2016). BRI and the idea of Eurasian Union are not identical in their aims. Eurasian Union which consists of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan takes European Union as its model in regional economic integration (Zhou & Xie, 2017). EEU is considered to be Russia's attempt to create a buffer zone against the expansionism of EU and NATO (Fels, 2018). But it also aims to retain Russian influence in Central Asia. In that sense, depending on how Russian and Chinese actors respond to each other, EEU and BRI may clash or unite against American unipolar world order. Tido (2018), for instance, considers Russian and Chinese interests in Central Asia ultimately irreconcilable, whereas Gabuev (2016) is in favor of a more nuanced approach: Although China and Russia are adversaries in Central Asia, they need cooperation against other great powers. While optimists view BRI and EEU as complementary stressing the fact that the former is economic whereas the latter is political (e.g. Avcu, 2016), pessimists are more skeptical.

For Gabuev (2016), the problems associated with the integration and mutual support of BRI and EEU are "the top-down decision making process, low involvement of business community, and China's preference to deal with states on bilateral basis as opposed to the EEU" (Gabuev, 2016: 61). Gabuev (2016) notes weak coordination of relevant ministries, agencies and other authorities on both sides and lack of direct connections among Russian and Chinese business people and the heavy involvement of the governments rather than businesses from the both sides against BRI-EEU integration. Thirdly, China's BRI involvement with Central Asian states on a bilateral basis bypassing EEU and Russia is problematic (Gabuev, 2016). Security problems can also be added as a major risk (Gabuev, 2016). Factors of regional instability such as terrorism, civil wars, color 'revolution's etc. are deemed detrimental to both China and Russia (Gabuev, 2016). Additionally EEU membership (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) vs. non-membership (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) of Central Asian states is notable (Tolipov, 2018), as it may lead to future divisions in BRI projects.

Initially, Russian authorities were divided as a response to Ji Xinping's announcement of OBOR (One Belt One Road): Security authorities had considered it as a threat against Russian influence in Central Asia, while economics/trade authorities were more positive (Gabuev, 2016). Similar concerns had been expressed about whether BRI would undermine or support EEU. However, this divided response had changed in a short time to come up with an overall positive view (Gabuev, 2016). Other initial concerns were about whether BRI would weaken local industries in the region to the advantage of Chinese companies, and whether BRI rail route would eclipse, downgrade and trivialize Russia's Trans-Siberian railway which is at a northern line compared to the proposed BRI lines. Central Asian route is estimated to be cheaper, shorter and faster than Trans-Siberian Railway (13,000 km. vs. 10,300 km.) for China-EU trade (Pomfret, 2017). Trans-Siberian Railway is the most efficient to cut the distance and transportation costs for Russian trade (Gabuev, 2016); while that is not the case for China-EU trade. Russia is not considered to be a vital destination in BRI projects (Izimov & Muratalieva, 2018), although its cooperation due to its influence in Central Asia is needed. Thus, from a logistics perspective, it was feared that Russia as a transport destination would be less important by the implementation of BRI projects in Central Asia (Gabuev, 2016). From the other side, Central Asian states are more positive about BRI routes crossing over their territory (Gabuev, 2016). In that sense, the arrival of BRI leads to internal tensions within EEU. Additionally, it should be noted that as energy exporters to China and elsewhere, Russia and Central Asian states are in direct competition (Smirnova, 2017). For all these reasons, there is an expectation that BRI projects will weaken Russian influence on Central Asia and move Central Asian countries closer to China (Hongzhou & Guschin, 2015; Zhou, 2019).

BRI has the potential to bring out a 'Sinocentric Eurasia' which is detrimental to both Russian and American interests (Pietrobon, 2019). While US opposes it, Russia has no chance other than accepting it due to "the demographic winter, its structurally weak economy, the abysmal distance in financial capacities, and the constant military pressures coming from NATO and other neighbours" (Pietrobon, 2019: 27). Other than Central Asia, Russia is expected to be in conflict with China over the Arctic region which will be more accessible due to climate change (Pietrobon, 2019). China's extension of BRI in the region is called as 'Polar Silk Road' which will dramatically shorten the distance between Shanghai and Rotterdam (Pietrobon, 2019).

2. CENTRAL ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ON BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

The total population of Central Asian states is less than 70 million, which is far less than Chinese population size (Gao, 2016). While Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan each have a higher GDP per capita than China's, Central Asian average is lower than China's due to the figures for Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Gao, 2016). Central Asia is rich in natural resources. That is one of the reasons for BRI proposals in Central Asia. Through increased connectivity in the region, China will satisfy his hunger for energy (Mirzaev & Arynbek, 2016). Kazakhstan has "oil, gas, coal, uranium, [and] gold" (Gao, 2016: 2). Kyrgyzstan is known with "gold, antimony, copper, zinc, tungsten, [and] iron" (Gao, 2016: 2). Tajikistan takes advantage of its "uranium, lead, zinc, molybdenum, tungsten, antimony, strontium, gold, oil, gas, coal, [and] rock salt" (Gao, 2016: 2). Turkmenistan is attractive for "oil, gas, iodine, and other non-ferrous and rare metals" (Gao, 2016: 2). Finally, Uzbekistan's "oil, gas, coal, uranium, copper, tungsten, [and] non-metallic mineral resources" (Gao, 2016: 2) are to be noted.

The major trading partners of Central Asia as a whole is China, the European Union and Russia respectively (Gómez Martos, 2017). China became the top trader of the region only recently. The fact that Central Asia's exports are mostly based on natural resources make it vulnerable to world price fluctuations (Lee, 2018). In that sense, BRI perpetuates the same regional vulnerability through increasing Central Asian natural resource exports to China. Izimov & Muratalieva (2018), however, report that China's investments in Kazakhstan are no longer concentrated in transport and energy projects only. The resource dependency in China-Kazakh trade is upgraded to the next level with Chinese industries from various areas moving their activities to Kazakhstan (Izimov & Muratalieva, 2018; Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019). Economically speaking, the country is expected to proceed towards a 'post-energy era' through BRI investments (Baoyi, 2017). The Central Asian country with the most visible Chinese presence and influence is Kazakhstan (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019), while Turkmenistan is the least due to its neutrality and non-alignment policy. Turkmenistan's position is also reflected by the fact that it is the only Central Asian country without a Confucius Institute (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019). Albeit that, Turkmenistan's economy is considered to be highly dependent on China, as most of Turkmenistan's gas exports are for China, and these exports constitute the major revenue for the country. Kyrgyzstan on the other hand is considered to be less central for BRI projects in the region due to its geographic location and small market size (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019). Finally, Uzbekistan is the most populous Central Asian country which brings to mind market size considerations.

Due to geographical obstacles such as mountain ranges, deserts, steppes, the Caspian Sea etc., Central Asia is historically known as a landlocked region (Fiedler, 2018). Its weak connectivity is a consequence of these physical impediments as well as historical developments. This makes Central Asian transport costs higher than those of coastal areas (Fiedler, 2018). The Central Asian transport networks are usually aligned with South-North lines which reflects Imperial Russia's and Soviet Union's economic relationship with the region whereby resources and raw materials were transported to the core in exchange for processed goods to the periphery (i.e. Central Asia) (Fiedler, 2018). In that sense, BRI is expected to shift this configuration towards an East-West direction.

According to Omonkulov & Baba (2019), both EEU and BRI and also American plans on the region are based on reproduction of power asymmetry to the disadvantage of Central Asian states. The trade-off is between economic development and political independence for Central Asian states (Omonkulov & Baba, 2019). In that sense, Buranelli (2018) reflects on the agency status of Central Asian states within BRI projects: "the Central Asian republics are more often than not regarded as a territory on which the project will be realized rather than active players in its realization" (Buranelli, 2018: 213). In this context, Gómez Martos (2017) reminds us that the great powers with an eye on Central Asia are not only Russia, China and the United States, but also the European Union, India, Japan, Turkey and Iran. This competition which is called as 'new Grand Game' is motivated by the immense energy reserves of the region (Gómez Martos, 2017). With a twist in politics, in fact, it is highly likely that BRI projects in Central Asia can also be expected to boost South Korean and Japanese exports to Europe, as the transport costs will be lower (Gao, 2016; Lee, 2018).

The most likely leader of Central Asia can be considered as Kazakhstan. According to Izimov & Muratalieva (2018), "choosing Kazakhstan [for BRI] was by no means accidental. According to Chinese authorities, Kazakhstan is the most stable republic in the region with both political and economic potential to become a full fledged partner of China in its new initiative" (Izimov & Muratalieva, 2018: 130). Logistically speaking, "Kazakhstan has strong transit capabilities because its vast territory allows implementation of various transport projects with access to Russia, the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus, Iran and the Persian Gulf, the Central Asian countries and India" (Izimov & Muratalieva, 2018: 130). Additionally, Kazakhstan, China believes, can be a mediator for China and Russia on the one hand, and Turkic speaking countries including Turkey on the other (Izimov & Muratalieva, 2018). However, Omonkulov & Baba (2019) note that "although Kazakhstan is the most successful country in the region in terms of economic and strategic position, its regional influence (due to its weaker military strength) is not strong" (Izimov & Muratalieva, 2018: 9). In that sense, BRI can support Central Asia's regional integration as an external force. China has already become the largest trading partner of Central Asian states (Omonkulov & Baba, 2019). The dragon country is either first or second largest trading partner of all Central Asian states except Tajikistan (Baoyi, 2017). Pomfret (2017) takes note of the fact that BRI helped Central Asia integration through infrastructure projects: Regional pipelines and railways that were matters of disagreement among Central Asian countries have been agreed upon through China's BRI negotiations.

On the other hand, we need to reflect on downsides of BRI projects in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan which have borders with China are noted as highly indebted Central Asian states within the context of BRI projects (Izimov & Muratalieva, 2018; Lee, 2018) which is behind the pro-China stance of Central Asian states in cases of Uighurs, Taiwan and South China/East Vietnam Sea (Omonkulov & Baba, 2019). What is found even more troublesome is land lease agreement and military cooperation (Izimov & Muratalieva, 2018). Chinese rise to leadership in the region will definitely move China into local conflicts within each Central Asian state and among them (Pantucci, 2019). Martens (2018) warns that similar to the case of the desiccation of Aral Sea, some of the irrigation projects in Xinjiang may draw Lake Balkhash of Kazakhstan into destruction through the weakening of the streams of Ili River. This warning makes sense particularly considering the disputes on BRI dam projects in Myanmar (Martens, 2018). Water scarcity which is a major problem in Central Asia can get worse if only Chinese interests would be considered in BRI projects (Martens, 2018). Even before the announcement of the BRI projects, Central Asian states had a set of conflicts with each other due to activities in the upstreams of rivers that dramatically affect the downstream regions (Birdişli & Ağır, 2016; Martens, 2018; Tolipov, 2018). The problem of border disputes among Central Asian states is another obstacle against BRI in the region (Birdişli & Ağır, 2016; Buranelli, 2018). Moreover, China had border conflicts with Tajikistan which were resolved by Tajikistan's disproportionate land loss in Pamir region in favor of China. These areas are considered to be rich in natural resources. Despite of this, anti-China sentiments are weak among Tajik people (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019). Through Chinese investments, Russian and Iranian influences on Tajikistan are weakening (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019).

Pro-China and anti-China positions are strong enough to divide governments and opposition as well as local people in Central Asia (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019). As is the case with many other popular terms involving phobia such as homophobia (Gezgin, 2018), the notion of sinophobia is a misnomer as the characterizing feelings do not involve fear but hatred, anger and animosity. Thus, a better term would be 'misosiny' which is linguistically analogous to misoginy, 'the dislike of women'. Often, the local people are full of misosiny which makes sense as long as social and environmental impacts of BRI projects are not taken into account. The public opinion feeling is that the ruling elites are benefiting from Chinese investments, but not the local people that are at the bottom of the economic and political hierarchy. If one of the reasons for misosiny is the material realities in real life, the other is due to lack of transparency and information disclosure about the Chinese-Central Asian BRI deals.

Li (2019) takes note of the major problems that lead to uncertainty for BRI projects in Central Asia including "problems such as weak economic foundation, insufficient legal system and single domestic economic structure, and high political risk due to complicated geopolitics and frequent regime change" (Li, 2019: 903). Likewise, employment of Chinese staff excluding local labor force is considered to be a challenge for BRI projects in Central Asia (Imomnazar, 2018), as elsewhere. In the future, this may change, as the wage rates in China are increasing which makes employing local labor even more profitable for enterprises.

Labor conflicts involving Chinese enterprises and workers are common in Central Asia, as well as anti-China protests due to the claims of corruption, secret deals, 'selling the country', fear of Chinese invasion etc. (Pantucci & Lain, 2016). Wage inequalities among Chinese vs. local staff are another source of labor unrest (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019). Nevertheless, Central Asian governments are mostly positive about BRI projects. Chinese approach to forming relations with governments and businesses only need to change, to evolve into establishing rapport with other actors of public opinion in Central Asia (Li, 2019). Gómez Martos (2017) notes that Chinese are overrepresented and Central Asian states are underrepresented in Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Even European Union members are disproportionately represented in the bank, in comparison to their share of GDP (Gómez Martos, 2017). This is another limiting factor for the promotion of Central Asian interests in BRI funding decisions.

On the other hand, from a positive point of view, for Baoyi (2017), the notion of common destiny of China and Central Asia makes perfect sense as the two share a border of more than 3,000 kilometers and many of the vital energy corridors for China have already passed through Central Asia. In that sense, BRI, like globalization is not a force to be avoided. It is the geo-political reality of the 21st century. Furthermore, Central Asia's economic dependence on Russia makes the region even more vulnerable after globally Western sanctions against Russia in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis (Baoyi, 2017). As Russian-Western relations are not expected to get better, it is highly likely that Central Asian economies will suffer due to the weakening of Russian economic performance (Baoyi, 2017). This makes China, a continuously developing economy, a better option for future prospects of Central Asia. China can also be useful as a balancing power in the region against Russia in a political and strategic sense.

The Confucius Institutes and Central Asian students with degrees from China, numbers of which are increasing every year can be instrumental to build positive images of China and BRI, but Vakulchuk & Overland (2019) conclude that their effects will be visible in the long term and that Central Asian perceptions of China did not change dramatically by the start of BRI projects. Baichorov (2016) proposes that in a positive scenario, Russian-Chinese conflict in Central Asia can lead to division of work whereby Central Asian energy goes to China, and labor goes to Russia. Time will tell which scenario (cooperative, conflictual or mixed) will be applicable.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we presented and reflected on Russian and Central Asian views concerning China's Belt and Road Initiative. The project is characterized with a number of risks that need to be taken into account for successful implementation. Considering various forms of conflicts in BRI routes, it is highly likely that economic dimensions will transform into geopolitical and security considerations. In the long run, geopolitically speaking, China may replace or surpass Russia as the big gamer in Central Asia. BRI is expected to benefit especially Western China, but this needs geographical restructuring of Chinese industries which are mostly located in the coastal Chinese cities due to maritime connections. BRI is expected to intensify Sino-Russian relations, but whether this would be cooperative or conflictual will depend on various factors including globally Western sanctions against Russia. Central Asian connectivity will definitely improve with BRI projects, which will support Central Asian economic development and regional integration. However, downsides of these projects such as environmental and social impacts need to be evaluated carefully. The Chinese influence in the region will be more visible. This needs to be aptly managed considering cultural, historical and social factors. This is a test for BRI's principle of people-to-people connectivity (cf. Chunsheng, 2018; Fan, 2019). The roads should not only connect markets, but people.

REFERENCES

Avcu, S. A. (2016). Overlapping integration processes in Central Asia: Eurasian Economic Union and Silk Road Economic Belt. IV ЕВРАЗИЯ ГУМАНИТАРДЫК ИЛИМДЕР ФОРУМУ «Байыртан бери «Жибек Жолу» тҥшҥнҥгҥ: Көз караштар жана жаңы изденҥҥлөр» Бишкек, 21-22 апрель 2016, 122-124.

Baichorov, A. M. (2016). China strategy in Central Asia in the belt and road initiative context. Міжнародний науковий журнал, 6 (3), 76-78.

Baoyi (2017). Central Asian Countries and the Silk Road Economic Belt. In China's Belt and Road Initiatives and Its Neighboring Diplomacy (203-219). Retrieved from

https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/abs/10.1142/9789813140219_0010

Birdişli, F. & Ağır, O. (2016). Security problems of the Silk Road Belt in the context of Kırghız and Uzbek Dispute. IV ЕВРАЗИЯ ГУМАНИТАРДЫК ИЛИМДЕР ФОРУМУ «Байыртан бери «Жибек Жолу» тҥшҥнҥгҥ: Көз караштар жана жаңы изденҥҥлөр» Бишкек, 21-22 апрель 2016, 183-191.

Buranelli, F. C. (2018). One belt, one road and Central Asia: challenges and opportunities. In Y. Cheng, L. Song, & L. Huang (Eds.). The Belt & Road Initiative in the Global Arena (207-230). Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Christoffersen, G. (2016). The Russian Far East and Heilongjiang in China's Silk Road Economic Belt. China Policy Institute: Analysis, April, 25. Retrieved from

http://www.academia.edu/download/45735542/Christoffersen_-Russ_Far_East___Heilongjiang_in_Chinas_SREB_-april_2016.pdf

Chunsheng, L. (2018). People to people bond: A booster to the Construction of BRI. CGTN, September 6 2018. Retrieved from

https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414d3241444d7a457a6333566d54/share_p.html

Ерохин, В. Л. (2017). Trade between China and the countries of Central and North Asia: Dynamics, structure, and major tendencies. In Сотрудничество Китая и России в рамках инициативы «Один пояс, один путь» (114-129). Retrieved from

https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=29881439

Fan, L. (2019). Understanding the BRI through 'five connectivities'. CGTN, April 20 2019. Retrieved from https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d674d334d544d34457a6333566d54/index.html

Fels, E. (2018). The Geopolitical Significance of Sino-Russian Cooperation in Central Asia for the Belt and Road Initiative. In Rethinking the Silk Road (247-267). Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fiedler, R. (2018). Central Asia on the way of One Belt, One Road-implications for the European Union. Rocznik Integracji Europejskiej, 12, 255-266.

Gabuev, A. (2016). Crouching bear, hidden dragon:"One Belt one Road" and Chinese-Russian jostling for power in Central Asia. Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies, 5(2), 61-78.

Gabuev, A., & Zuenko, I. The "Belt and Road" in Russia: Evolution of Expert Discourse. doi: 10.31278/1810-6374-2018-16-4-142-163. Retrieved from https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/media/pdf/19915.pdf

Gao, L. (2016). The Belt and Road Implementation and Effects of Logistics on Japan. Retrieved from http://reposit.sun.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/10561/1191/1/v8p201_gao.pdf

Gezgin, U.B. (2018). Psychology and Human Rights: Codes of Conduct and Common Themes. Eurasian Journal of Anthropology, 9(1), 18-28.

Gómez Martos, F. (2017). China's "One Belt, One Road Initiative": challenges and requirements for its successful implementation in Central Asia. doi: 10.14746/pp.2017.22.3.10

Retrieved from

http://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl:8080/bitstream/10593/22094/1/Francisco%20Gomez%20Martos%2C%20China%E2%80%99s%20%E2%80%9COne%20Belt%2C%20One%20Road%20Initiative%E2%80%9D.pdf

Hongzhou, Z., & Guschin, A. (2015). China's Silk Road Economic Belt: Geopolitical Challenges in Central Asia. RSIS Commentary, 99, 1-3.

Imomnazar, I. (2018). Impact of «One Belt, One Road» initiatives to the economy of Central Asian countries. International Journal of Business and Economic Development (IJBED), 6(2), 29-36.

Izimov, R., & Muratalieva, Z. (2018). The Central Asian Track of the One Belt One Road Initiative: Opportunities and risks. International Organisations Research Journal, 13(3), 128-142.

Lee, E. (2018). The Belt and Road Initiative: Impact on Trade Patterns Between China and Central Asia. East Asian Community Review, 1(3-4), 185-198.

Li, J. (2019, September). Research on the Risk of China's Direct Investment in Five Central Asian Countries Against the Background of" the Belt and Road Initiative". In The 4th International Conference on Economy, Judicature, Administration and Humanitarian Projects (JAHP 2019). Atlantis Press. Retrieved from

https://download.atlantis-press.com/article/125917573.pdf

Lin, L. (2018, January). The Construction of China-Russia-Mongolia Free Trade Area Under'the Belt and Road'—Studies Based on SWOT Analysis. In 2017 7th International Conference on Social science and Education Research (SSER2017). Atlantis Press. Retrieved from

https://download.atlantis-press.com/article/25889229.pdf

Lukonin, S., Kanaev, E., & Efremova, A. (2019). Southeast Asia as a Prospective Area of China-Russia Cooperation: the Belt and Road Initiative Opportunity. Россия и АТР, (3 (105)). Retrieved from

https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/southeast-asia-as-a-prospective-area-of-china-russia-cooperation-the-belt-and-road-initiative-opportunity

Manurung, H. (2019). Russia-China strategic partnership in the Indo-Pacific region: Synergizing greater Eurasia with Belt and Road Initiative, 2016-2018. Jurnal Asia Pacific Studies, 3(1), 25-42.

Martens, P. (2018). The political economy of water insecurity in Central Asia given the Belt and Road initiative. Central Asian Journal of Water Research (CAJWR) Центральноазиатский журнал исследований водных ресурсов, 4(1), 79-94.

Mirzaev, D. & Arynbek, A. (2016). The Great Silk Road as an instrument of integration: Historical retrospective and its contemporary construction. IV ЕВРАЗИЯ ГУМАНИТАРДЫК ИЛИМДЕР ФОРУМУ «Байыртан бери «Жибек Жолу» түшүнүгү: Көз караштар жана жаңы изденүүлөр» Бишкек, 21-22 апрель 2016, 192-197.

Na-Xi, L., Meng-Fang, H., & Shan-Bing, L. (2019). How the Belt and Road Initiative Can Help Strengthen the Role of the SCO and Deepen China's Cooperation with Russia and the Countries of Central Asia. India Quarterly, 75(1), 56-68.

Omonkulov, O., & Baba, G. (2019). Regional integration via major powers: Russian Eurasian Economic Union versus Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt versus American New Silk Road project. COMU International Journal of Social Sciences, 4(1), 1-28.

Pantucci, R. (2019). China in Central Asia: The First Strand of the Silk Road Economic Belt. Asian Affairs, 50(2), 202-2015. doi: 10.1080/03068374.2019.1622930

Pantucci, R. & Lain, S. (2016). IV. Perception Problems of the Belt and Road Initiative from Central Asia, Whitehall Papers, 88(1), 47-55. doi: 10.1080/02681307.2016.1274608

Pietrobon, E. (2019). The Belt and Road Initiative and the Xi Jinping's dream for a Chinese-centered Eurasia: a perspective from the United States and Russia. Geopolitical Report, 25. Retrieved from

http://www.asrie.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Geopolitical-Report-Volume-1_2019-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf

Pomfret, R. (2017). Central Asia, Global Value Chains, And China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative. In J.-P. Larçon (ed.). The New Silk Road: China meets Europe in the Baltic Sea Region (133-156). Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company.

Ravitsky, M. (2018). Jumping onto the Train? How Russian Media Cover China's Belt and Road Initiative. Asian Politics & Policy, 10(3), 564-570.

Reeves, J. (2018). China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative: Network and Influence Formation in Central Asia. Journal of Contemporary China, 27(112), 502-518.

Smirnova, L. (2017). Perception of China's "One Belt, One Road" in Russia:"united Eurasia" dream or "iron circle" of containment?. 21st Century, 1(20), 106-125.

Sui, G., & Xiaozhong, Y. (2017). Strategy of Xinjiang-Central Asia Energy Cooperation in Silk Road Economic Belt. China Oil and Gas, 24(4), 29-33.

Tido, A. (2018). One Belt, One Road initiative and China-Russia relations–deep partnership or tactical alliance?. Polish Journal of Political Science, 4(1), 31-46.

Tolipov, F. (2018). One belt, one road in Central Asia: Progress, challenges, and implications. In A. Arduino & X. Gong (ed.). Securing the Belt and Road Initiative Risk Assessment, Private Security and Special Insurances Along the New Wave of Chinese Outbound Investments (181-195). Singapore: Palgrave.

Tumentsetseg, T. (2016). Inner Mongolia should take the opportunity of "One Belt and One Road" strategy to boost the construction of China-Mongolia thoroughfare. Public Administration & Regional Studies, 18(2), 101-110.

Vakulchuk, R., & Overland, I. (2019). China's Belt and Road Initiative through the lens of Central Asia. In F. M. Cheung and Y. Hong (eds.). Regional Connection under the Belt and Road Initiative: The Prospects for Economic and Financial Cooperation (115-133). London: Routledge.

Wu, R., & Zhao, X. Appraisal Analysis of Attitude Resources in Russian "Belt and Road Initiative" News. International Journal of Liberal Arts and Social Science, 6(5), 1-7.

Xiaoding, C. (2019). Approaches Forward for Shanghai Cooperation Organiza-tion's Participation in the Silk Road Economic Belt1. Geopolitical Report, 39. Retrieved from

http://www.asrie.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Geopolitical-Report-Volume-1_2019-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf

Zhang X. (2019) Facilities connectivity in eastern regions of China and Russia and the "Belt and Road" initiative. R-economy, 5(3), 144–150. doi: 10.15826/recon.2019.5.3.015

Zhang, X., & Serdar, M. (2017). Analysis of Oil and Gas Cooperation between China and Russia in the Belt and Road. In SHS Web of Conferences (Vol. 39, 01034). EDP Sciences. Retrieved from

https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2017/07/shsconf_ies2017_01034.pdf

Zhou, Y., & Xie, H. (2017, December). Sino-Russian Economic and Trade Cooperation under" the Belt and Road Initiative". In 3rd International Conference on Economics, Management, Law and Education (EMLE 2017). Atlantis Press. Retrieved from

https://download.atlantis-press.com/article/25888283.pdf

Zhou, Y. (2019, April). Discussion on the Development of Sino-Russian Economic and Trade Cooperation Against the Background of" the Belt and Road Initiative". In 3rd International Conference on Culture, Education and Economic Development of Modern Society (ICCESE 2019). Atlantis Press. Retrieved from https://download.atlantis-press.com/article/55916007.pdf