



Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe (Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej)

Publication details, including instructions for authors:
<http://www.iesw.lublin.pl/rocznik/index.php>

ISSN 1732-1395

The New Silk Road and Central Europe: Eurasian integration with Chinese characteristics

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Published online: 10 Dec 2018

To cite this article: Krzysztof Kozłowski, 'The New Silk Road and Central Europe: Eurasian integration with Chinese characteristics', *Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2018, pp. 131-146.

Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe (Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej) is a quarterly, published in Polish and in English, listed in the European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS), Central and Eastern European Online Library (CEEOL), BazEkon and IC Journal Master List (Index Copernicus International). In the most recent Ministry of Science and Higher Education ranking of journals published on the Polish market the Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe received one of the highest scores, i.e. 14 points.

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The New Silk Road and Central Europe: Eurasian integration with Chinese characteristics

Abstract: People's Republic of China's idea of Eurasian Integration, commonly dubbed Belt and Road initiative, is perceived as both an opportunity and a challenge for the East and Central Europe. While analyzing the execution of the Chinese regional integration policies one can identify the major motifs of Chinese rise and development, the bilateral and multilateral patterns of interaction with international actors, and the evolving Chinese attitude toward global Powers as well as toward developing states. At first, it was welcomed with open arms by many actors. However, as the time passes by, the disappointing inertia in relations between PRC and the region, as well as disturbing similarities in patterns of the Middle Kingdom relations with other parts of the World, provoke questions over the true nature of Chinese engagement with Eastern flank of EU. The paper aims to place the Chinese policies referring to Central Europe within a broader pattern of Chinese regional cooperation policies. Despite the rapid diversification of PRC regional engagement in different parts of the Globe, the scheme employed by the Middle Kingdom remains relatively similar in most of the cases, both in terms of opportunities and limitations.

Keywords: PRC, New Silk Road, 16+1, Belt and Road

Introduction

Since 1978 Chinese politics had become increasingly less ideologically and more pragmatically inclined. The ongoing liberalization of People's Republic of China economy made policies of the Middle Kingdom more diverse and complex on both domestic and international scene. China is interested in integration with the international economy and in becoming a modern global Power. The spectacular rise of

the Middle Kingdom confirms proves that it is be capable of achieving ambitious tasks.

The first steps in that respect were individual regional cooperation initiatives, especially in South-East Asia, Central Asia and Africa. Initially, People's Republic of China had chosen to adapt to the circumstances shaped by other global powers. This does not mean that it was passive, though. From the perspective of growing interconnections between the South-East Asia and China since Deng Xiaoping's reforms, over a quarter century of Chinese cooperation with Central Asian republics, almost two decades of multilateral relations with Africa the evaluation seems to be in favor of PRC. While respecting initial advantages of other powers, China managed to exploit the opportunities provided by the international post-Cold War environment. At the same time the burden of securing the stability of the regions China was interested was put on others shoulders allowing Beijing to concentrate on economic issues. Developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and concentrating on economic aspects of collaboration proved to be the most effective way to build and preserve strong economic position without additional political costs.

Today China seems to aspire to establish own rules of the game, though. The Belt and Road initiative, which is to encompass all the earlier regional cooperation initiatives, aims to put China at the center of the World stage. It also aspires to reach further than earlier Beijing's policies. From Polish perspective it's important to analyze what may the Chinese integration plans mean for Central Europe. The New Silk Road is perceived as both an opportunity and a challenge, the biggest of which is its vague character. However, based on the already existing regional cooperation patterns, the picture becomes a bit more clear. This does not mean promising, though.

While analyzing the execution of the Chinese regional integration policies one can identify the major motifs of Chinese rise and development, the bilateral and multilateral patterns of interaction with international actors, and the evolving Chinese attitude toward global Powers as well as toward developing states. The paper aims to place the Chinese policies referring to Central Europe within a broader pattern of Chinese regional cooperation policies. The overview of the regional cooperation patterns will allow to have a better look at the most recent integration strategy: the Belt and Road. On this basis Central

European 16+1 Initiative may be treated as a case study of Chinese integration mechanisms' effectiveness. Despite the rapid diversification of PRC regional engagement in different parts of the World, the scheme employed by the Middle Kingdom remains relatively similar in most of the cases, both in terms of opportunities and limitations.

1 Chinese regional cooperation patterns

It's hard not to agree with M. Lanteigne, that "Beijing faces two unique barriers which prevent the country from taking the traditional paths of territorial expansion and political-economic domination in order develop as a great power. The first is US and its inherent military and economic strength; the second is existence of nuclear weapons, which makes direct great power conflict unacceptably costly"¹. Since the 1978, the Chinese answer to the challenge was to exploit the opportunities offered by the globalizing world to minimize costs of maintaining security and to channel the saved assets into modernization of the state. PRC bases its future position on developing economic potential and vast web of economic relations which would make a conflict with the Middle Kingdom too costly to even consider. PRC political rulers generally based their approach in foreign policy targeting specific World regions on two fundamental assumptions.

On one hand, in the short and medium run, China adapted itself to the existing balance of Power. In this respect the goal was to exploit the existing foreign involvement in maintaining regional security in different parts of the globe to minimize alternative costs of own involvement in issues regarding regional stability. For example, if PRC got involved in security issues in Post-Soviet Central Asia after 1991 it would mean confrontation with Washington or Moscow and relocation of large political and economic potential needed elsewhere, especially in booming Chinese economy. Another example would be: if China got involved in the South China Sea border disputes already in the Eighties, it would get entangled in complex security issues while

1 This is the main thesis of the book: M. Lanteigne, *China and International Institutions, Alternative Paths to Global Power*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

still not being able to project its economic and military power, which was just beginning to take the form known today.²

On the other hand, in the long run PRC tried to develop a tight web of economic interconnection, especially on bilateral basis, with regional partners. If it succeeded, the economic cooperation should positively influence stability of the given region, thus keeping the costs of local security low, as well as possibly erode other powers influence. To a large extent the assumptions turned out to be right. Before Xi Jinping took over power and the Chinese foreign policy started to change, Chinese cooperation with different regions of the World was generally smooth, peaceful and successful, especially in economic terms. For example, the already mentioned Post-Soviet Central Asia or the South China Sea basin countries were generally receptive to Chinese economic cooperation incentives, while the major part of the costs of providing regional security were never put on Chinese shoulders.

China was slowly but steadily developing the fundamentals for its future regional activity via two parallel routes.³ First, as conventionally accepted in international relations, PRC tailored its engagement with each of the states it was interested in cooperating with on bilateral basis. Second, PRC was aiming to broaden its foreign policy with growing activity within multilateral platforms of cooperation with different geographic regions. In many cases it had established cooperation with the already existing organizations. Chinese cooperation with ASEAN is probably the best example. However, the most interesting are the multilateral forums introduced by China itself. At the eve of the new century PRC introduced two important multilateral platforms. The first one was the Shanghai Five in 1996, which five years

- 2 This does not mean that China was abstaining from military cooperation, though. One of the most important examples was the growing Chinese cooperation with Russia and Post-Soviet Central Asian states. On October 11-12, 2002, China and Kyrgyzstan conducted the first joint military exercises. These were the first such military exercises conducted by People's Liberation Army. Scenario was based on countering a potential sudden terrorist attack. In August 2003 all member states of SCO took part in another joint military exercises. During these operations US troops were already present on Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan territory. However, US observers were not invited to take part in the exercises. Since then the SCO military exercises, within so called *Peace Mission* framework, take place more or less once per two years. 'China launches military exercise', *China Daily*, 25 September 2004, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-09/25/content_377777.htm [2018-06-30].
- 3 M. Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 150-153.

later became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).⁴ Almost parallelly, in 2000, the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was inaugurated.⁵ After a decade, in 2012 the 16+1 Forum for China and Central and Eastern European states Cooperation⁶ and in 2015 the Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC)⁷ have joined the list. In all cases, the strategy was based on promoting win-win scenarios and on non-interference in domestic affairs, while reassuring the partners that China harbors no hegemonic ambitions.

These assumptions concerning regional PRC policies were nothing else but an emanation of broader Chinese political strategy on the international arena. Generally China tended to concentrate its attention on economic growth and modernization. International cooperation was mostly treated as an opportunity to minimize own spending on issues concerning security. Thus, China was generally aiming to be a free rider as far as the security issues were concerned while at the same time slowly but steadily and consistently expanding in the field of regional economics. As far as the period of going-out strategy was concerned, if one takes into account that PRC moved from the poor developing country to the second largest economy in the World status in less than 40 years, despite political incidents and occasional disputes it's hard to argue that the approach, especially in terms of economy, was successful.

The evaluation of Chinese political strategy should not be one dimensional though. On one hand, the Western scholars have noted that Beijing has demonstrated a willingness to play by international rules and even to be socialized into accepting the security norms em-

4 For the trajectory of development of the Shanghai Five and SCO: K. Kozłowski, *Państwo Środka a Nowy Jedwabny Szlak. Poradziecka Azja Centralna i Xinjiang w polityce CHRL*, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2011.

5 I. Taylor, *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012.

6 B. Kowalski, 'China's Foreign Policy towards Central and Eastern Europe: The "16+1" Format in the South-South Cooperation Perspective. Cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary', *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 1, 2017.

7 For more on Chinese-Latin American relations: G. Fornes and A. Mendes, *The China-Latin America Axis: Emerging Markets and their Role in an Increasingly Globalized World*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

bodied in major international treaties and regimes.⁸ In this context, PRC regional politics could be treated as a case study of Chinese international politics. The complexity of the situation in each individual region made the Chinese authorities employ a vast array of political instruments offered by the Post-Cold War globalizing reality of international relations. This leads to a conclusion, that the Chinese rapid rise in 20 and during the first decade of 21 century did not mean a fundamental geopolitical shift in international relations. Since the end of the Cold War China had not created nor aspired to create an alternative world order to the American dominated. Actually, in political terms all the time China was actually exploiting the existing international infrastructure to advance it's international agenda. In economic terms also the West was the most important partner for China. At the same moment the Beijing's cooperation with other foreign partners was never even close to replacing Chinese cooperation with the EU or US. Even the Belt and Road transportation infrastructure in principal is to link the Middle Kingdom with Europe. Thus, the directions of Chinese economic cooperation, even at the eve of Donald Trump's American withdrawal from the position of the leader of globalization, did not change significantly.

On the other hand, one of the unforeseen results is the fact that Beijing has a considerable and growing stake in multilateral cooperation success, which, in turn, leads it to play up its bilateral accomplishments as the success of the multilateral initiatives. As a result, even in cases in which Chinese multilateral platforms, in particular SCO and FOCAC, have not advanced a common policy or just included earlier Beijing's proposals based on bilateral relations with individual member states, PRC has continued to refer to its bilateral engagements as SCO or FOCAC success.⁹ Such labeling causes confusion in terms of attribution of Chinese accomplishments to the regional mechanisms. Especially in case of SCO, this "credit attribution" of bilateral agreements to the SCO has been a recurring theme in the organization's public

8 The core argument in: A. Kent, *Beyond Compliance: China, International Organizations and Global Security*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

9 N. Kassenova, 'China as an emerging donor in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan', *IFRI Russia*, 22 January 2009, <http://www.ifri.org/en/publications/enotes/russieneivisions/china-emerging-donor-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan> [2018-06-30].

image and promotion.¹⁰ Thus, while the Chinese rise may have been seen as political and economic success, Chinese regional multilateral cooperation should be treated rather as its function than an effective instrument of achieving it. In practice it seems to remain a façade for bilateral engagement rather than a real tool of international politics.

2. The Belt and Road

However, as the second decade of the 21 century slowly comes to an end, the Chinese politics seems to change significantly. The impression is strengthened by the fact that the Chinese rise seems to coincide with weakening of American, European Union or Russian Federation power. As Beijing grows stronger in economic and security dimensions, its international status rises. These changes make it less and less receptive to political preferences of external actors. China has become more assertive and may start to think about developing regional plans alternative to nowadays balance of power. Already now the Beijing's place in international economic relations make PRC more resistant to traditional forms of American or European political pressure while Russia's status of PRC Big Brother became history long ago.

In particular the One Belt One Road initiative foretells Chinese ambitions to expand and project influence via the Indian Ocean and the Post-Soviet Space. Bold plans of economic reanimation of the ancient Silk Road based on win-win strategies are designed to become a fundament of China's rise across Eurasia. Although still on paper, they slowly seem to rise as much expectations as concerns. The bumpy beginnings of the Chinese new norm and rising concerns about Chinese neo-colonial aspirations cast shadows over long term economic sustainability of the ambitious project. Together with growing social fears of Chinese expansion this may prove to be as challenging obstacle for the PRC as the Great Powers competition in the international scene.

Nevertheless, the idea of the New Silk Road does not lose its impetus. To the contrary it gains momentum with every new, and regard-

¹⁰ The perception of SCO as a critically important factor in resolving border issues remains at the foundational core of the organization and its official history. But as Central Asians caution it would not be accurate to one dimensionally ascribe the security cooperation to SCO. G. Gavrilis, *The Dynamics of Interstate Boundaries*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 123.

less how vague, declaration of PRC President Xi Jinping.¹¹ Although its details vary by map to map and proposal to proposal, generally, the overland road, comprising transport, energy and telecommunication infrastructure is designed to link China, Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe. The maritime belt would stretch from China's coasts through the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. The initiative will be co-funded by AIIB, the New Silk Road Fund and the New Development Bank initiative between BRICS nations. China's leader calculated that the initiative will concern 4.4 billion people in more than 65 countries, and that annual trade with participant nations may climb to \$2.5 trillion within next decade.¹² If successful, the ambitious program would make China a principal economic and probably political force in Eurasian integration as it calls for increased diplomatic coordination, standardized and linked trade facilities, free trade zones and other trade facilitation policies, financial integration promoting the renminbi, and people-to-people cultural education programs throughout nations in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Some have characterized it as China's Marshall Plan, but Chinese leaders reject the comparison. However, most of the commentators call it the most significant and far-reaching project the nation has ever put forward.¹³

The problem is that in terms of the Chinese advance in global political and economic hierarchy the spectacular impression made by the Belt and Road does not translate into any significant change of instruments in use by Chinese decision-makers. As far as the political and economic logic, the initiative is a continuation of earlier approaches rather than a genuine innovation. The New Silk Road still treats international environment, including the Post-Soviet space, the South China Sea, Africa or Central Europe as a function of several domestic goals China plans to advance. Of course, considering the *raison d'état*, this should not be surprising nor criticized. First, the strategy

11 Chinese President Xi Jinping officially announced the "belt" in a September 2013 speech in Kazakhstan and the "road" in his speech in Indonesia, one month later.

12 S. Tiezzi, 'China's "New Silk Road" Vision Revealed', *The Diplomat*, 9 May 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/05/chinas-new-silk-road-vision-revealed/> [2018-06-30].

13 J. Stokes, 'China's Road Rules', *Foreign Affairs*, 19 April 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2015-04-19/chinas-road-rules> [2018-06-30].

is supporting the Chinese economy by providing an outlet for excess industrial capacity. As the new Chinese norm of slowing GDP growth gets introduced, PRC authorities need to cool down the overheated infrastructure sector. One Belt One Road plans involve channeling investment-led growth beyond PRC borders, while assisting the relatively underdeveloped western and southern Chinese regions. Second, the energy cooperation within One Belt One Road framework should secure supplies needed by the Middle Kingdom as China's energy demand still continues to rise. Additionally, the land-based energy infrastructure can help to diversify energy import patterns, supplementing the sea lanes from oil and gas rich overseas. Finally, China will benefit from trade and currency swaps and reinforce the international power of the renminbi as a global trade currency. Deepening relationships with neighbors, expanding ties to major developing countries and building support for a reshaped international system all help PRC to build a network of non-Western interdependencies with PRC in the center of the picture.

The road to the bright future may become bumpy, though. The success of One Belt, One Road, especially in Post-Soviet space and in the Middle East, will depend on the cooperation of regional and local leaders and political elites who are experienced in playing foreign powers off one another to gain personal political and financial advantage. It will also require Beijing to manage great power competition with Russia and the United States within Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. In Post-Soviet space particularly Russia's efforts to create an Eurasian Union and linking former Soviet states through economic cooperation, poses direct competition to China's own integration strategy. And despite the US troops withdrawing from Afghanistan and the United States' diminishing involvement in Central Asia, Chinese activities across Eurasia will test Beijing's ability to balance competition with cooperation with both close neighbors and global political powers. This may put Chinese rhetoric of win – win outcomes and avoiding interference to a test. If Chinese actions go beyond the basic protection of its investments into broader geopolitical actions, international perception of China's future foreign interventions could give credence to suspicions of Beijing's imperialistic desires.

A critical function of a regional leader has been to, first, provide public goods and, second, to play a stabilizing role in times of crisis.

Being a free-rider allows to treat the international environment as a mean to achieve own goals. However, being a leader translates into treating international environment as a responsibility. The problem is that, as China was concentrated on economic development it lacks the potential for strategic political engagement with a rapidly growing number of foreign actors it is planning to engage. China's rise eroded other powers' influence not because Beijing had the appetite for a high-profile geopolitical battle, but because, at the ground level, China was providing short-term crisis lending, development assistance and concessionary infrastructure financing.¹⁴ China's entry as an investor and donor undercut other donors and lending mechanisms in Asia or in Africa. On the global scale, until very recently Russia and Western actors exclusively discharged these public goods functions. With alternative potential sources for aid, assistance and investment, the political leverage that derived from controlling the purse strings will continue to be diminished. Developing states in need of external funding when provided with Chinese alternative will have more economic and political options, and will exercise them with greater frequency. However, PRC does not seem to notice, that moving from predominantly one dimensional, economic and bilateral activity to more versatile multilateral political interactions requires new instruments, that China still did not show, nor practiced. It also requires cooperation with those, who China has replaced.

The Post-Soviet space seems to signal first problems already. China's meteoric rise has hit the wall of the Post-Soviet local political patterns. All of the Central Asian states have already raised concerns about the structure of economic relationship with the Middle Kingdom, especially in terms of trade. They are a market for Chinese manufactured and consumer goods while their exports are overwhelmingly raw materials and energy. This is coupled with growing fears about Chinese economic intentions and expansion undermining traditional markets and distribution patterns.¹⁵ The impression is strengthened by the nature of non-assimilating Chinese migration, common violations of lo-

14 E.C. Economy and M. Levi, *By All Means Necessary: How China's Resource Quest Is Changing the World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 138-164.

15 'Go West, Young Chinaman: China and Central Asia', *The Economist*, 6 January 2007.

cal regulations, especially concerning labor, as well as by the lack of respect for natural environment.¹⁶ Taking into consideration that Post-Soviet reality has already entangled and reshaped the plans of other international players, the progress of Chinese initiatives in the region may be a proving ground for their future success. The Chinese growing entanglement in South China Sea disputes or less and less positive perception in Africa seem to confirm the observation, that the free rider strategy may be effective for an aspiring power, but too little to be called a responsible leader. This requires treating other political stakeholders not only as means to own ends. It seems that China has the potential to be the major power, but has not yet decided to take the full responsibility for doing so.

3. The New Silk Road and 16+1 as a case study

The Chinese initiatives addressing the Central European states may act as a case study of Chinese regional cooperation model. They also confirm the general earlier observations. The 16+1 Forum and bilateral relations between Beijing and regional actors fit well into the general pattern of PRC regional cooperation. They also share its limitations: tendency to act as a free-rider and to treat its partners as means of achieving economic success. However, the limitations were visible from the very beginning. As this particular formula addresses states with access to EU structural funds, the Chinese propositions from the very beginning were less interesting for local partners than for African or Latin American states provided with similar incentives.

Since its beginnings, the 16+1 format became a topic of hot discussion both in the “New” and “Old” EU. The first impressions were mixed. The dominant arguments are far from positive. Most often, the analysts point to the possible threat of PRC employing the “divide et impera” strategy to weaken the European integrity by addressing younger and economically less advanced EU member states. For example, as the Chinese economic cooperation is often accused of being a vehicle of political interests of Beijing, it’s no surprise that the Hungarian opposition to criticizing Chinese reaction to the Hague

¹⁶ Kassenova, *op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

Tribunal Verdict in South China Sea case in 2016, was interpreted as a price for Chinese economic support.¹⁷ The accusations echo Western critique of China's scramble for Africa, or supporting Central Asian authoritarian regimes.¹⁸

The Chinese model of cooperation with the Central Europe is to a large extent a copy of Chinese approach to developing countries with limited access to foreign capital. The Chinese offer for Central or South-East Asia, to Africa or Latin America and to Central Europe are quite similar. The support is provided by the Chinese Policy Banks, up to 85% of investment input but under a condition of providing the sovereign guarantees and ownership rights for Chinese enterprises. The credit lines provide financing for strongly needed infrastructural projects. The realization of the projects is practically limited to Chinese contractors and suppliers, though. On one hand, this guarantees the access to the broad know-how of the Chinese enterprises in providing comprehensive projects. On the other hand, it also makes it a perfect tool for China to deal with the overheated infrastructure sector at home. Such an approach might be interesting for regions with limited access to foreign capital. Lack of official political expectations of Beijing make it attractive for authoritarian regimes conflicted with the West. However in the long run, the capital provided for the projects, as it ends in Chinese entrepreneurs purse, does not stimulate the local economies and threatens their trade balance with PRC. Thus it's no surprise, that the Central European UE members with access to EU structural funds and market may find it disappointing.

Just like in other cases of regional cooperation with China, the first problem is the ambiguity of information concerning the actual Chinese engagement in Central Europe, both in terms of financial support and of actual project development. The optimistic declarations during the consecutive 16+1 summits and individual meetings of Chinese and regional decision-makers stay in sharp contrast with unprecise information concerning the reality of cooperation. The comparison of dec-

17 E. Graham, 'The Hague Tribunal's South China Sea Ruling: Empty Provocation or Slow-Burning Influence?', *Council on Foreign Affairs*, 18 August 2016, https://www.cfr.org/councilofcouncils/global_memos/p38227 [2018-06-30].

18 For example: C.L. Currier and M. Dorraj (eds.), *China's Energy Relations with the Developing World*, Continuum, New York and London: Continuum, 2011.

larations and of practical implementation of 16+1 initiatives leads to a conclusion, that the former overshadow lack of the latter. This leads to “overestimating the Chinese capital involvement in Central and Eastern Europe, and, consecutively, Chinese influence on the regional politics”.¹⁹ In effect, “despite intensive political contacts with China, the dynamics of infrastructural cooperation is close to none”.²⁰ It should not be forgotten, that the multilateral offer within 16+1 framework was coupled with declarations of bilateral cooperation between China and individual states of Central Europe, especially in agricultural sector. However, also in this case PRC aimed rather to concentrate on the short term development of home market rather than at establishing long-term stable economic relations. The Chinese expectations of establishing official channels of communication between government authorities first and managing the entrepreneurial contacts late make it less attractive venue than the European open market.

And again, just like in case of other regional cooperation patterns, a quick look at 16+1 formula six years after its inauguration leads to a conclusion that it's hard to perceive it as anything else but a multilateral façade for Chinese search for economic opportunities in a very broadly defined region. However, these opportunities seem to be a function of Chinese problems at home rather than of a search for sustainable cooperation. As far as 16+1 is concerned, China does not seem to be ready to transform from a straightforward credit provider into an sustainable investor. It lacks the flexibility to abandon the free-rider pattern: aiming to exploit the recent advance of Central European economies provided by European integration for its own use. Despite the apparently growing Chinese aspirations in Central Europe, PRC wasn't able to develop an offer interesting to the regional actors. The model used: declarations of political non-involvement in internal politics combined with credit lines, infrastructure investment and favoring the Chinese contractors, while proved to be successful in investment thirsty Post-Soviet Central Asia or Africa, turned out to be

19 M. Kaczmarek and J. Jakóbcowski, 'Nietrafiona oferta Pekinu: „16+1” a chińska polityka wobec Unii Europejskiej', *Komentarze OSW*, no. 250, 15 September 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2017-09-15/nietrafiona-oferta-pekinu-161-a-chinska-polityka-wobec-unii> [2018-06-30].

20 Ibid.

detached from the regional characteristics of the Central Europe. As long as the regional states will be able to continue their growth within EU development framework, the Chinese offer in today's form will continue to be off the mark.²¹ In effect the 16+1 success, or failure, will remain the function of European integration rather than Beijing and regional leaders' endeavors.

Conclusion

The Chinese New Silk Road is one of the most hotly debated international projects in the second decade of the 21 century. Ambitious, bold and transformative – these are the adjectives most often used to describe it. If successful it may reorganize the economic and political reality far beyond Eurasia, with no exception of Central Europe.

However, as the time goes by, it is hard not to ask questions how the plans actually work in reality. With Beijing's declarations of providing funding and political backup the Chinese authorities seem to be confident of success. After a closer look at Chinese regional cooperation patterns it's harder than expected to find its sustainable proofs. The Chinese strategy throughout the first three decades since 1978 was based on limiting own political ambitions for the sake of economic development. Staying the second in the line in regional games was paying off. China did not have to bear the burden of managing the often complicated security issues while it was able to establish economic links, that benefited its rise and development. Like a typical free rider, by skillfully maneuvering between other powers interests in Central Asia, Africa and Latin America it was able to develop economic potential without paying the costs of maintaining the political and economic infrastructure. The Belt and Road strategy was to open a new chapter in Chinese regional integration plans. For now the only difference is of scale of declarations and plans.

The mechanisms of regional cooperation did not change significantly, though. Central Europe is a good example. The Chinese decision – makers approached the region via 16+1 format in similar fashion

21 J. Szczudlik, 'Perspektywy formatu Chiny – Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia (16+1)', *Biuletyn PISM*, no. 78, 18 November 2016, <http://www.pism.pl/publikacje/biuletyn/nr-78-1428> [2018-06-30].

as Africa via FOCAC, or Latin America via CELAC Forums. Similar patterns may also be found in Post-Soviet Central Asia. The formula based on credit lines and infrastructure development by Chinese contractors enjoying regional sovereign guarantees, while was initially successful in capital thirsty developing countries, gave almost zero effects in European states with the access to EU structural funds. At the same time, all the limitations, like objectifying the partners by the Chinese contractors, became almost instantly visible. As all of the forums mentioned are to make up the footholds for Belt And Road strategy in regions they concern, these observations may tell a lot about the future of Chinese bold integration plans.

Taking lead requires new instruments and innovative approaches. Most importantly it requires sustainability in actions and in developing political and economic relations. Instead, the Belt and Road Strategy seems to base on a simple increase of economic presence. Despite ambitious statements, this may be too little to transform the relations between China and Central Europe. Translating the New Silk Road initiative from an ambitious cartographic blueprint into a working economic and geopolitical strategy will test China's capabilities across all aspects of foreign policy. However, at least for the time being the success of the Middle Kingdom in Central Europe is a function of EU structural policies performance rather than of genuine Chinese efforts.

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