

### China's Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact on Human Rights Compliance: Report on a workshop held in Berlin on 16 May 2022

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VIKTORIA KAFFANKE  
UDO STEINBACH

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**China's Belt and Road Initiative  
and its Impact on Human Rights  
Compliance**

Report on a workshop held in Berlin on  
16 May 2022

EUROPA BOTTOM-UP NR. 28

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MÜNCHEN/ BERLIN

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**EUROPA BOTTOM-UP  
NR. 28/2022**

ARBEITSPAPIERE ZUR EUROPÄISCHEN ZIVILGESELLSCHAFT  
EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY WORKING PAPERS

**CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND ITS IMPACT ON HUMAN RIGHTS  
COMPLIANCE**

Report on a workshop held in Berlin on 16 May 2022

This report was written and published following the workshop organised by Dr Anja Mihr (HVGP, Berlin / OSCE Academy Bishkek), Dr Brigitte Weiffen (The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK & Chair of IPSA Research Committee 34 'Quality of Democracy') and Dr Udo Steinbach (MENA Study Centre, Maecenata Foundation).

The report follows the Chatham House Rule, except in relation to speakers mentioned in the programme.

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## Foreword

By Prof. Dr Udo Steinbach, Director, MENA Study Centre

The origins of the term ‘geopolitics’ date back to the 19th century. From the beginning, the concept of ‘Eurasia’ was very much at the forefront of the minds of theorists, geographers, and politicians who were fascinated by the vision that the continental area comprising all of Europe and Asia could be the globe’s heartland. Since geopolitics became an academic discipline, ‘Eurasia’ as a geopolitical concept was conceived within the context of powers struggling for global domination. Whether control over ‘Eurasia’ would be British (Halford J. Mackinder, 1861-1947), German (Karl Haushofer, 1869-1946), or American (Zbigniew Brzezinski, 1928-2017), it would almost automatically entail Africa’s subordination, rendering the Western Hemisphere and Oceania geopolitically peripheral to the world’s central continent.

In recent history, neither the Soviet Union nor the United States of America succeeded in making this theory a lasting reality. After the demise of the former and with the latter’s global power declining, another power has emerged on the threshold of world politics: the People’s Republic of China. Until the beginning of the 18th century, China had been a leading power, politically and economically. Since antiquity, Europeans have been eager to engage in trade and commerce with China, which, in many respects, has been more advanced than Europe, over a long period of time (vs. Frankopan 2015). It was only at the height of European colonialism that China became marginalised for over two centuries. With the end of the cultural revolution in 1976, Chinese leaders started laying the groundwork for a dramatic economic upsurge, which, in less than half a century, made the country a global player in what has become a multipolar international system.

The German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen was the first to name the trade routes which had connected Europe and Asia for millenia the ‘silk

roads' (*Seidenstrassen*) in 1877. The roads started somewhere in Western European cities, crossed the Middle East and Central Asia to finally end up in Beijing or other places in Eastern China. With China's fast-growing economy under pressure to take care of a population of around one and a half billion people, Chinese leaders had to look for markets and attract investment and technology, mostly from Western countries. Connectivity had to be improved and accelerated; stable and reliable lines of trade and communication had to be organised. China had to fully open up to the world. Responding to these challenges, the Chinese leadership started propagating a network of global economic interrelationship in 2013. Under the label of a 'New Silkroad' a network of trade and infrastructure between China and countries in Africa, Asia and Europe was to be established. In a more prosaic version, the venture is called 'One belt, one road' or the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). 'Geopolitics' seems to have made a comeback.

The Maecenata Foundation's conference, the results of which are reported in this publication, focused on the impact of the initiative on human rights compliance. It reflects the fact that the Chinese initiative not only aims to strengthen economic relationships in all aspects, but also has political implications. Economic dependencies between China and its partners (today 60 countries) are being established, which may give Beijing increasing leverage to interfere politically. Being a non-democratic regime itself, the Chinese government may favour nondemocratic ways of governance among its partners. It openly propagates a notion of human rights that differs from the one in the West.

In a way, the notion of Eurasia seems to have been politicised again. In fact, right from its beginning, the BRI was seen as competing with European interests in Central Asia. In 2007, the European Union (EU) had initiated the first Central Asia Strategy aiming to promote cooperation and exchanges of mutual interest, including supporting the implementation of democracy and

human rights compliance by local regimes. After demonstrating initial support for the BRI's economic gains, European leaders have become increasingly sceptical over China's real intentions behind the initiative. The BRI seems to lack economic reciprocity and transparency, as the benefits drawn from China's economic deals with its partner countries are solely in its own favour. Moreover, whilst political support is being extended to autocratic regimes, the Chinese notion of collective human rights is simultaneously being instrumentalised to support repression by rulers in the name of 'human rights.' The suppression of Uighurs in China is a significant example of this.

The BRI has thus become part of the global struggle between societal models. Open societies where human and civil rights are valued and respected and the rule of law and a vibrant civic space are maintained naturally view the effects of BRI with growing concern. On their part, European countries and the EU have established schemes of cooperation to counter the Chinese strategy. In 2015 the 'Three Seas Initiative' (3SI) was launched as a Central European project. It offers the US and Europe an alternative engagement model to the BRI. More importantly, the EU has been working on a comprehensive approach of cooperation, trade and connectivity with Central Asia and beyond since 2018. As a result, in August 2021, a paper was made public under the title 'Connecting Europe and Asia – the EU Strategy.' After a brief introduction, entitled 'Sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based connectivity will contribute to the enhanced prosperity, safety and resilience of people and societies in Europe and Asia,' it sets forth the strategy's four pillars: Transport, energy, digital, and human dimension, with the last pillar being understood as advanced cooperation in education, research, innovation, culture and tourism. Finally, in June 2022, the G7 decided to establish a 'Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment,' providing it with 600 billion US Dollars to close the global investment gap.



This means that the BRI is not the only initiative of its kind. Moreover, Russia's attack on Ukraine has dealt a heavy blow to China's global ambitions. The fact that Beijing not only failed to condemn Russia's attack but continues cooperating with Moscow has alienated many of China's Western partners in the BRI. In more concrete terms, with Russia being isolated and sanctioned, a crucial link on the chain of global connectivity has broken. In addition, new chains for trade and supply must be found for many countries to maintain their economy. In case the Russian invasion of Ukraine ends up creating a new iron curtain, this would mean the end of the BRI. As extracts from the conference papers summarised in this publication show, civil society and non-governmental organisations have a considerable role to play regarding global connectivity at large and within the framework of the BRI in particular. This aspect was of special interest for the Maecenata Foundation's MENA Study Centre and a strong motivation for co-organising the conference together with the International Political Science Association (IPSA RC 34), the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, and the Center on Governance through Human Rights of the Berlin Governance Platform. Special thanks go to Dr Anja Mihr for having taken the initiative and secured sufficient funding for this venture. We hope that in a post-Ukraine-war world efforts by the various actors may resume - not to compete with each other politically, but to benefit people around the globe.



## 1. Introduction

The workshop ‘The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its impact on Human Rights compliance along the ‘New Silk Road’ took place on 16 May 2022, at the Maecenata Foundation in Berlin and online. It followed a 3 day-long online workshop on China's BRI and Democracy organised by Dr Anja Mihr and Dr Brigitte Weiffen at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.<sup>1</sup> It was co-organised by the International Political Science Association (IPSA RC 34), the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, the Center on Governance through Human Rights and the Maecenata Foundation’s MENA Study Centre. Due to almost a decade having passed since the official launch of the BRI, the workshop strived to assess its political and social implications across the heartland of Eurasia between Europe and China and discuss the impact of the BRI on a wide range of human rights-related topics.

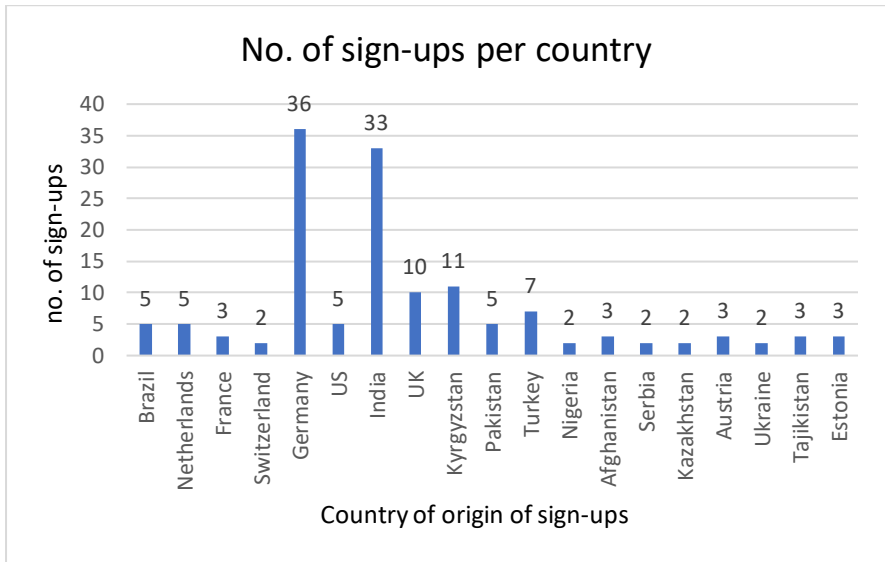
At the beginning of the workshop, Executive Director of the Maecenata Foundation, Dr Rupert Graf Strachwitz, Senior Lecturer at The Open University UK and IPSA RC 34, Dr Brigitte Weiffen, and Founder and Director of the Humboldt-Viadrina Governance Platform in Berlin and Associate Professor at the OSCE Academy Bishkek, Dr Anja Mihr, welcomed the participants and highlighted the importance of the topic of the conference.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on this first conference can be found here: <https://osce-academy.net/en/news/full/909.html>.

China's New Silk Road Initiative has been spinning its logistical and infrastructural web around the world since 2013 and consequently affected core public policy areas in over 100 countries in the world. The BRI is a central component of Chinese investment policies across the Eurasian continent, leading to more than 50 countries having seen massive infrastructural investments in the railways, roads and logistical centres as well as in the agricultural and energy sector. Consequently, these investments not only impact the infrastructure and economy of a country, but also human rights and governance along the New Silk Road. In these fields, the BRI has been seen to trigger social movements, even protests, as well as consolidating autocratic regimes and suppression. The panels touched on all these topics and the speakers were grouped into four sections that will also form the basis for this report: The BRI and Human Rights in Eurasia, Civil Society and the BRI, Impact on Europe, and Responses to the BRI.

There was substantial interest in these topics, with the event garnering 164 sign-ups from 41 countries across all continents. This graph shows the distribution of sign-ups between the countries, while countries with only one sign-up were filtered out of the graph for reasons of improved readability. The most interest was found in Germany and India, with 36 and 33 sign-ups respectively.





## **2. The BRI and Human Rights in Eurasia**

Dr Anja Mihr started the first panel by introducing the Human Rights (HR) compliance perspective and need for inclusion within the BRI, thus situating Kyrgyzstan and the OSCE Academy within the dialogue. For China's neighbours, the BRI is a useful tool for gaining Chinese investments, making China their most important trading partner. The EU is the second most important partner for countries in Central Asia in terms of trade and investment, due to the European Neighbourhood Policy. Kazakhstan is particularly important for Europe, as it is a main trading partner and transit country for goods from other countries. It has vast border crossings and handles large amounts of cargo every day. It has been closed to private crossings the last few years, due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The photographs of the region that Dr Mihr shared also conveyed its importance for world trade. One showed the city of Khorgos, China. It was built in the last 20 years and now functions as a major border town along the Kazakh border for cargo traffic to Europe. The contrast between the Kazakh and Chinese sides is enormous. On one latter side, there is a huge city with millions of inhabitants whilst on the other, there is nothing. However, the size of the city in the middle of the desert also means it is highly reliant on trade and supply chains that have been affected by the pandemic and now by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Other photographs showed one of the very long cargo trains transiting the region. The BRI has created a global infrastructure

network, exemplified by the huge train network intended for the region where Khorgos is situated.

Whilst infrastructure projects are one aspect of the BRI, China also intends to use it to promote cultural exchange, for example through the Confucius centres, policy coordination, connectivity, financial integration, and trade and investment. For a long time, the BRI and its activities received positive feedback and publicity around the world. However, past years have seen more criticism and the publication of reports about its negative impacts. The UN has consistently asked China to report on HR compliance in its projects, often receiving no reply. Nevertheless, over the last years thousands of HR offences have been reported. These come in a variety of forms and include environmental crimes, such as toxic waste and pollution, civil rights negligence, lack of participation of local workers and authorities, and violations in labour laws, especially in the mining and construction sector, and agricultural and cotton industries. Such reports exist in many countries and in the different regions that are part of the BRI. Thus, one can conclude that the BRI does not adhere to universal HR standards.

Meanwhile, other initiatives have been launched by other country networks in response to the BRI, namely the EU with its 'Global Gateway Initiative' and the G7 with 'Build back better.' In contrast to the BRI, the 'Global Gateway Initiative' is meant to focus on education and HR, whereas experts regard 'Build back better' as perpetuating a new Cold War rhetoric, perhaps influenced by the war of words between China and the US, in particular.



This brief aside into the use of words in politics functioned as a bridge to the input from the first panellist, Katja Drinhausen, Head of Program Politics and Society at the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) in Berlin, who focused on ‘China’s Human Rights Discourse and Policy Agenda along the BRI.’ Whilst stating that she is not a BRI specialist, most of Drinhausen’s research focuses on the many problems the BRI brings, especially its effects on the local level.

Drinhausen started by outlining some key questions regarding China and the BRI: What is Xi Jinping saying? What does China mean when it talks about HR? Concerning the first question, she claimed that Xi Jinping wants China to focus on exporting its values, similarly how the West has done so with HR and democracy following the Second World War and the Cold War. Consequently, he sees the need to strengthen China’s discourse power to be able to create powerful narratives that can change the world. The values meant to be shared are not always the same as those shared from other countries and the words used might be the same but contain a different meaning. This can be seen, for example, in the various HR discourses that exist in different parts of the world.

When one unpacks the HR discourse, one notices that there is a distinction to be made between collective and individual human rights. Whereas in the traditional Western world view HR means individual human rights as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), China sees human rights as a collective concept. It emphasises collective security instead of the

individual security provided by the social and political rights for individuals promoted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Society's right to development as such is seen as a more important right than individual civil and/or political rights. Consequently, policies for poverty eradication and such steps taken to support the economy are given priority. Not only does China see the right to development as integral to HR, but it also puts security at the heart of its HR policies, meaning that it sees civil and political liberties as potentially leading to civil unrests. It focuses on collective rights to ensure regime and society stability. Collective security is put above individual security.

Meanwhile, on the international stage, the UN lauded itself on including China in HR related documents in 2016. China, however, tries to include its own perspective, as laid out above, and critique of UN HR documents in international dialogues. This is always done with the pretext that the HR laid out in the UDHR and other UN documents are not universal and that different societies have a different understanding of what human rights ought to be. Due to this discrepancy in understanding, China remains hesitant to sign HR documents.

On the Chinese national stage, HR discussion focus solely on how HR are to be understood in relation to collective security, theoretically and practically. The practical discussions led to China utilising widespread surveillance and cyber technology to ensure that collective security and society stability are upheld, for example through the Shanghai Cooperation Initiative. These are

used to identify any internal unrest and put down the protests or classify such protestors as terrorists to justify the government's crackdown. This also includes China's handling of protests against the BRI.

Looking towards the future, the international community will actively discuss Xi Jinping's proposal for a global security agenda. This includes topics and activities such as global public goods, and regional diplomacy for strengthening security. These activities and discussions include the training of local officials where necessary and therefore contribute to the presence of diverging human rights norms on the world stage. Moreover, China is increasing its efforts internally to build its expertise on security affairs. The future of HR in China and the region remains unclear, as there are multiple push and pull factors between the Chinese and other governments. Whilst China uses NGOs working in the BRI countries to play the role of watchdog and intermediary between the different sets of values, the world will be watching its next steps closely.

Dr Udo Steinbach from the Maecenata Foundation's MENA Study Centre was the second speaker on the panel, adding the perspective of Turkish Eurasianists and Panturkish nationalists on China's role in Central Asia to the discussion. Panturkism emerged after the First World War and describes Turkish efforts to exert the country's influence on other regions as a response to Pan Slavism. It has never been a goal and ideology of Turkey's elite as a whole, given that it was not supported by Atatürk. Panturkism became more widespread after the Second World War and more so after the fall of the

Soviet Union. Today, we can again observe the increasing impact of Neo-Eurasianism on Turkey's foreign policy.

The concept of 'Eurasia' was reintroduced by Russia and by public figures such as Alexander Dugin who promoted it through his work as a philosopher, journalist and political scientist propagating imperial phantasies of Russian influence between Dublin and Vladivostok. Once this had taken place, it was clear that the supporters of the Panturk ideology would respond. Meanwhile, Turkey had become a formidable economic power in Central Asia whose powers would increase further, after the conclusion of a deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan on the Zangezur corridor, which connects the Azerbaijani province Nachichevan with mainland Azerbaijan. This would give Turkey direct access to the Caspian Sea. This ideology also took hold in the Turkish press, with discussions over the 'Turkestan' and 'one nation-six states' concepts put forward by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. After having first turned his back on the West in 2013 and later on to the Arab states, he eventually sought new alliances in the East, such as with Russia and Turcic Central Asia.

He was strongly supported by a group of ultranationalists in these efforts. Playing a marginal role at the polls, the *ulusalcılar* group (as they are widely called) exerts considerable political influence through a network firmly established in the army as well as in the security services. At the core of the group's ideology is the unification of Turkish speaking people from the Balkans through to the Caucasus and Central Asia to the border of China. In

Turkey, the person that represents this ultranationalist strand, similar to Dugin in Russia, is Doğu Perinçek. Acting in Turkish politics as sort of grey eminence, he draws a lot of political inspiration from Neo-Eurasianism in Russia, with anti-Western sentiments being the strongest bond that brings the two sides together. Perinçek and his followers envisage a strong Turkish state and autocracy whilst being anti-modernisation, anti-US, anti-NATO and anti-EU and its political values. While focusing on (in principle) the same region and therefore having the potential to be considered political rivals, Russian and Turkish Eurasianists sweep these differences under the carpet, considering the West a common enemy. Alexander Dugin has repeatedly been invited to lecture in Turkey.

As a parallel development, China has become increasingly visible in Turkish media and politics and their bilateral relationship has been continuously strengthened. At the peak of the tensions between Erdoğan and the West, the Turkish President asked Russian President Putin to help him become a board member of a Shanghai cooperation organisation. China is becoming a viable alternative for Turkey in foreign politics in comparison to its traditional partners. Eurasianists and *ulusalcılar* even tend to ignore Chinese treatment of the Uighurs. Their argument is that China is combating its own PKK by making the Uighurs learn the Chinese language. The camps are, in their opinion, part of an American conspiracy to fight the Silk Road Initiative.

How can we assess the enhancement of Turkey's political power through the BRI and in terms of governance and human rights in Central Asia? In fact, the

influence of Eurasianists in Turkey's foreign policy must not be overstated. It is still a weak movement with few seats in parliament. Nevertheless, despite their respective lack of direct influence in terms of party politics, Perinçek and Dugin have a considerable ability to popularise ultranationalist views within Russian and Turkish society respectively. However, countries in Central Asia are undergoing internal changes and are becoming more open to the outside world, while Turkey might also change. There will be presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey in 2023. In case of electoral losses for the President and his party, Turkey may return to a parliamentary democracy, which would diminish the influence of Eurasianist circles. Nevertheless, such circles have laid the groundwork for the perception of close ties between Central Asia and Turkey. This could enhance Europe's influence in the region bilaterally with governments in the region and/or through Turkey.

This could have a major impact on events in Ukraine. Governments in Central Asia may feel motivated to align themselves more closely with Europe. The BRI may be considered useful from an economic perspective, but it would not necessarily be accompanied by spreading the Chinese way of governance to adjacent countries. On the contrary, human rights compliance may be strengthened along the Silk Road.

The discussion mainly focused on a macro-perspective of Turkish pragmatism regarding the repression of Uighurs in China, and the extent to which HR values are present in investment and development deals. The

question arose whether the West or other regions could request HR adherence in such fundamental development projects, such as in the development of the railways, when Europeans and the USA also did not need to adhere to them a hundred years ago. This was seen as making Chinese investment and cooperation viable for many states: China, whilst conducting a lot of research and discussion on Communist values and HR, does not attach conditions to its investments. It enables each country to choose how it spends the money, which is attractive for authoritarian regimes, indirectly influencing them to be more open towards China and towards its values, where possible.





### **3. Civil Society and the BRI**

The second panel, chaired by Dr Rupert Graf Strachwitz, focused on the topic of ‘Civil Society and the BRI.’ It started with input from Dr Anja Ketels, Senior China Consultant at Marianne Friese Consulting, who focused her talk on ‘Chinese NGOs in the Belt and Road Initiative: Between Humanitarian and Political Missions.’ She discussed the process of internationalisation of Chinese NGOs and the conditions in which they operate. She concluded that there is a wide typology of NGOs in China, but that their relationship with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in particular plays a role in their activities and effectiveness.

Similar to NGOs in other countries, Chinese NGOs exist and work on various topics and in different fields of action. As such, they also try to play a role in global governance. However, in comparison to NGOs in other countries, Chinese NGOs must always work in cooperation, collaboration or co-dependency with the state. Nowadays, China has over 900,000 officially registered NGOs, on top of a number of unofficial organisations. In 2019, it was estimated that around 100 Chinese NGOs are active abroad.

To understand the role of Chinese NGOs in the BRI, it is crucial to first look at how it developed politically. For the organisations that work abroad, they can be said to have undergone three phases of internationalisation. The first phase dates back to 2004 and consists of the “internationalisation of large foundations.” This started with China introducing the regulation on the

management of foundations in 2004, which formed the legal basis for Chinese foundations and NGOs working overseas. Phase two is characterised by the provision of humanitarian aid after natural disasters, for example the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004 and the earthquake in Nepal in 2015. Chinese NGOs were some of the first ones on site and initiated major projects, some of which are still active today. At present, Nepal is the country that receives the most donations from Chinese NGOs.

The third phase identified by Ketel connects to discourse on China's global governance and more specifically on NGOs' involvement within it. There is a lot of discussion on presenting China well to the world and how the BRI is a strategy for achieving this. China sees NGOs as important actors to help with this process. Concretely, the BRI has people-to-people bonds as one of its policy priorities and this is where NGOs can play a crucial part, as China needs these bonds to ensure public support in BRI countries. This priority opened a window for more Chinese NGOs to become active in this field. This process was also pushed by different political events, some of which were state organised, some by NGOs. One such event was the First Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network Forum which took place in 2017. In attendance were NGO representatives as well as governmental officials and a lot of media coverage, with Xi Jinping writing in a letter that NGOs are an important force for promoting economic and social development and participating in international cooperation and global governance. The Chinese government wants Chinese NGOs to connect with NGOs in BRI countries. This social

aspect is a political priority. Another example of political action was a 3-billion-dollar South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund in 2015, following the agreements on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is intended to be used to strengthen South-South cooperation and support developing countries and work towards the SDGs. In 2018, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) was founded, the first Chinese state agency focusing on international development cooperation. This agency is responsible for coordinating the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund and also for the international engagement of NGOs. So far, its activities have not been put into practice. After being established in 2018, the agency drafted strategic papers and is waiting for Chinese developmental aid laws to be drafted. Consequently, the agency and NGOs are in waiting-mode, with the NGOs particularly waiting for assistance. The pandemic also delayed any action. However, in 2021, a White Paper was issued on China's international development cooperation that emphasises that the capabilities of the CIDCA and the South-South Cooperation Assistance Fund should be used along the BRI to fund projects implemented by Chinese NGOs.

After having looked at the political background for NGOs work overseas, it is also interesting to look at the public discourse that shapes Chinese perspectives on the roles and functions of Chinese NGOs. From the political strategy perspective, Chinese NGOs are assigned the following roles in BRI countries:

- telling China's story well and putting it in a good light;
- engaging in people-to-people diplomacy;
- establishing China as a foreign aid provider;
- representing China's international responsibility;
- supporting China's economic going out strategy, for example helping with the Corporate Social Responsibility of Chinese firms;
- improving China's international cooperation and intercultural communication; and
- consolidating China's global position and influence.

Chinese NGOs are aware of these roles and functions, but they have different opinions on these subjects. The most prominent perspective from Chinese NGOs is that they see their priorities as solving global problems, working on the implementation of the SDGs, and acting as communicators and intermediaries. NGOs closer to the state also use terminology similar to Chinese officials concerning people-to-people democracy and supporting the BRI, but this is not representative of the sector as a whole.

These insights enabled Dr Ketels to develop a typology of Chinese NGOs working internationally to highlight that not all NGOs have the same roles and perspectives on Chinese activities. The first one group identified by Dr Ketels is the political collaboration type which supports China's foreign policy ambitions and close cooperates with the government and its policies.

One very prominent example for this is the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation. This organisation was initially established in 1989 by the Chinese government and only became independent from them (on paper) in 2004. Due to this history, it remains very close to the government and its discourse aims to advance China's foreign policy ambitions. Chinese officials, for example, help the foundation to select the countries where it will operate, which led to their activities focusing on BRI countries. A more minor example is their school bag 'Panda Pack Project,' which comes with the tagline that they are "Gifts from Panda Land" and hence, in addition to carrying books and pens, also convey a strong visual message that tells China's story well.

The second category is the selective responsibility type which has greater agency. Such organisations might enter into strategic cooperation with the Chinese government and adopt some of its official narratives to have more leeway to operate in China, but they are still more focused on their own activities and on taking responsibility for global issues than working towards Chinese foreign policy. Dr Ketels calls the third category the individual mission type. Organisations of this type are decoupled from official Chinese instructions and objectives. They tend to be smaller in size and are driven more by their own goals and missions, instead of Chinese foreign policy.

It is important to note that the field is not as clear cut as the typology might suggest and that Chinese NGOs can range from being an extreme example of a typology to the grey zones between different typologies. Chinese officials recognise the crucial role that NGOs can play and have implemented several

policies to support NGO efforts that promote Chinese goals. Whether Chinese NGOs are used to influence the world or improve it, remains a contested subject.

This deep dive into NGOs' role in China's foreign policy was followed by a talk from Dr Ralph Weber, Professor of European Global Studies at the University of Basel. He discussed 'The BRI and the Infrastructure of Our Heads,' conveying how the terminology used regarding the BRI by the Chinese resulted in the BRI not only providing infrastructure on the ground, but also in our minds. The structures in our heads are based on structures we see in the physical world. This is the case in Europe, but also in China. The BRI does not only further soft power, but the BRI itself is a powerful and successful idea, aside from its projects and investments. There is still a considerable gap in investments from China to other countries, so it is interesting to observe the BRI's apparent success.

Today, the BRI is not only a global project for foreign policy, as it also extends its reach to space and cyberspace. Consequently, there is a need for a discussion on what the 'BRI' still entails, or whether the label now lacks concrete meaning.

The BRI also lacks a relational perspective. A discussion was had about how other states and organisations reacted to it, for example the EU. However, the response and reaction of countries that had connection to the region before the Chinese did would also be an interesting discussion. There is a

long history of this in the USA and Europe, for example. So, when we think of the BRI, we automatically connect it with China, but the idea of connectivity in the area stems from other countries. There is, for example, a lot of Japanese infrastructure projects and similar terminology used in the region. These insights can help us relativise the BRI to some degree.

Regarding the BRI and its creation of infrastructure, Dr Weber had several points to make. Firstly, he spoke about the terminology of the BRI surrounding such projects. Talking about false equivalencies, we see that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become more and more authoritarian, leaving limited room and agency for civil society, to prevent it from acting as a counterforce for those in power. Extending this notion, one could say that there is a Chinese understanding of civil society and how NGOs function. However, Dr Weber believes that you cannot discount civil society. Habermas' conception of civil society does not fit with the Chinese case, indicating that definitions can vary, according to different social contexts. It is the same with the BRI. We know what infrastructure is, the same with trade. Weber did, however, argue that even though we might think we know what something is, more complex notions exist that can challenge our views. Politics is always intertwined with infrastructure and trade. Within the context of our panel discussion, this signifies that Chinese Human Rights are not identical to those outlined in the UDHR. The Chinese HR stem from a different rationale that shapes Chinese society: the collective above the individual. Democracy faces the same issue of being interpreted differently.

For example, when Xi Jinping came to Australia to talk about the centenary goals, he spoke about China becoming a democratic socialist republican state. The Australian Prime Minister acknowledged that this was the first time a Chinese leader had set the goal of becoming a democracy. The Australian ambassador to China, however, noticed immediately that a misunderstanding had taken place: Xi Jinping had meant democratic centralisation, which is a Leninist concept, from Article 3 of the Chinese Constitution, and not becoming a democracy. This demonstrates the necessity of discussion around the concepts and what they mean to different people, as there is a wide variety of views.

Discourse over democracy and HR is already taking place, but it is crucial to talk about changing the discourse, which is about more than using soft power. It is often defined as the ability to set and shape global narratives and to be more than the rule maker. For example, China does not have the best track record in rule making, but it has hugely changed the discourse in the last two decades.

China has had to increase its level of influence, in order to have such an impact on the discourse surrounding HR and democracy. On one hand, it increased its leverage by becoming a major economic power. On the other hand, its propaganda and the idea of the 'United Front' also helped increase its influence. The 'United Front' is a Leninist concept that the party needs to supervise external actors, which means co-opting those that are good at telling China's story. Not all these actors might know that they are co-opted,



but they are. So, we are not only discussing civil society and think tanks, but also the fact that many other actors are Chinese agents, which creates a complex net for analysis, but one needs to be careful to avoid spreading misconceptions, xenophobia, Cold War mentalities and similar rhetoric.

The BRI is an interesting subject to analyse as it evokes a wide range of imagery. It does not have a main symbol. Instead, one pictures bullet trains and other images of modernisation that underline the discourse about going into the future. Xi Jinping often talks about jumping on the train. It is not only the modernisation of infrastructure and the economy, but also a paradigm for following in China's footsteps, which the West has become quite critical of.

The focus on propaganda and the 'United Front' is just one aspect for consideration. One slogan that frequently occurs in Chinese is "to arm your head." Dr Weber highlighted the importance of understanding the phrase's alternative meaning, namely that our cognitive patterns are being altered. This is how we can understand the phrase 'infrastructure of the head.' The BRI is not only about the infrastructure on the ground, the trains, and ports, but is a lot about the discourse that shapes the infrastructure in our minds. The notions of civil society, trade, and infrastructure become depoliticised and ignore the complexities of the wider context. For a long time, we have seen the interaction between Western countries and the People's Republic of China (China) as non-political, talking about trade and what unites us rather than about what divides us politically. Depoliticisation can occur

when using the notions set out above but using them without the political aspect or in a more abstract way. Depoliticisation now comes paired with normalisation. This facilitates cooperation. For example, even though think tanks are known to be part of Chinese intelligence, they are treated as think tanks and collaborated with. Normalisation has changed gears recently. It has evolved from organisations working next to each other whilst disagreeing with the other's political ideas, to viewing one's own work and concept of democracy as better, which has become more widely practised in democracy.

Consequently, one should consider how to bring HR and development together. There is an inherent connection between the two concepts. There is a fluidity between actions, especially in China, where government officials often take on multiple roles at the same time. Economic issues often have political dimensions and vice versa. Within the context of this conference, development is something that we must promote, also for security reasons., Xi Jinping likes to discuss development instead of governance. This is also a central theme within HR dialogue. From the Chinese perspective, there are two different philosophical arguments regarding this. One argument is about sovereignty and Chinese culture, a relativistic argument. Or, in symbolic terms, 'only the wearer of the shoe can say whether or not it fits.' The second one is built on development and argues that development is a better HR than other HRs. There are not always clear links between these concepts.

China is very active in this dialogue, as demonstrated by the books published by its government. One of which was written by the PRC's deputy head of the propaganda department and states that Xi promotes a people-centric philosophy, implying that enabling people to pursue a happy life is the best way to ensure HR adherence. The book's author insinuates that China adheres to the principles that all rights are dependable and inseparable, that development is a primary human right and as such there is a balance to be struck between development, economic, social and cultural rights, and civil and political rights.

Comparing these stated goals to the UN covenants on HR, China seems to attempt to focus on development and to try to link its goals to official HR language. However, in Weber's opinion, the Chinese interpretation of HR has little to do with the UN covenants. It is a pseudo-utilitarian argument. He argues that putting development first focuses on subsistence and that this subsistence is utilitarian, because it is not connected to values.

This is also translated into our societies. For example, some academics in Europe promote the idea of cultural relativism in line with Chinese actions and the BRI. Consequently, these discussions have also entered the UN and are visible in UN documents. It does not always come from the same people. However, if one person discusses development, and the next HR, we automatically link these concepts in our minds.

If we look at who writes about the BRI, we do not see a lot of publishing houses involved, and it is interesting to look at who funds them. Many of these are of questionable quality, yet they help to shape our discourse. Overall, all the discussions on and connections of the BRI also shape our minds. This impression is particularly strong if we compare the BRI's effect to that of the Indian connectivity projects. There is a huge discrepancy on how often these projects are discussed, predominantly favouring the BRI. Consequently, the BRI is not only successfully infrastructurally, but also in making China appear to be a 21<sup>st</sup> century superpower by changing discourse and thinking patterns.

Following these in-depth inputs, an interesting and lively discussion took place focusing on the narratives surrounding the BRI, the risks of depoliticising, and the shrinking space Chinese civil society faces. One particularly interesting point was made by Weber. He noted that in the West we focus more on pragmatism, on how to best engage with China and hence take more note of actions than of the language used in official documents. This disregards the wide array of Chinese literature on how to befriend foreigners and appear as liberal scholars. The PRC is more careful about language. Untruthful interactions take place and untrustworthy relationships are forged.

Moreover, the depoliticisation of the discourse and intense focus surrounding development was further explored. On one side, there is the PRC's propaganda, but there is also an entanglement with the European

side. The narratives used by the PRC were not imposed on the rest of the world but fell on ready and open ears in Europe. “Change through trade” has been part of the European mindset for a substantial time: first trade and then political change. However, once you are already trading, the process becomes depoliticised as you start having interest groups in your country that make it harder to push conditions and they are discouraged from doing so. The conditions attached to investments are political and are used by many states and international organisations. China was always against stipulating conditions; however, it seems to slowly realise that they can be a quite useful tool in shaping countries to become loyal and more equal-minded partners.



## **4. Impact on Europe**

The third panel was moderated by Dr Brigitte Weiffen and discussed the impact of the BRI on Europe. It started with insights from Dr Matt Ferchen, Senior Fellow at the Leiden Asia Centre and Lecturer at the Institute of Area Studies of Leiden University, on the topic of ‘Understanding and Managing Political and Economic Risk along the BRI: China’s Evolving Approach.’ He sees a lot of interest in China as an actor and investor, although China is a relatively new global actor in comparison to other states and international organisations (IOs). This means there is less institutional knowledge about how to cooperate with and invest in other countries. Consequently, China’s story in development and stability cooperation is still in progress.

It started from a domestic angle during the reform period of the 1970s, with China’s desire for internal development and stability. However, these goals did not always align, as they serve different internal and external needs. However, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was very happy to make this declaration and add it to China’s foreign policy.

A key year for China in terms of international involvement was 2011. Even though the CCP has been promoting Chinese companies to invest and expand abroad for decades, 2011 brought wider reflection and an official policy change, with events occurring in Libya and Myanmar. The change of regime in Libya, and the internal insecurity and genocide in Myanmar made China acutely aware of how Chinese money and citizens are connected to

other countries as they had to rescue about 35,000 Chinese citizens from these countries. These were shocks to the system and prompted reflection on why the Chinese government had not seen these events occurring. Consequently, due to the need for more anticipatory skills, the country started to conduct risk assessments and to track its citizens abroad. China had started supporting its firms in their international expansion in the 1990s; the BRI is an expansion of this. However, the shocks of 2011 revealed the connectivity of Chinese nationals and firms to global trends to the Chinese leadership and the need to explore China's role as a global actor, especially in Latin America and Africa. China found itself with a lack of institutionalised knowledge from universities, think tanks and government agencies on how to act globally and how to connect HR in its risk assessments.

China decided to explore risk assessment through efforts in development and stability internally and externally, which do not always go naturally together. This new focus was announced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as part of its foreign policy. What this meant was that the CCP would further explore potential definitions and goals that could have a destabilising effect on the Chinese population. The party got comfortable with the idea of promoting peaceful democracy in 2011 as it agreed on and published a paper on how development and security go together. This promoted the idea that development is good for enterprise, good for security and everyone involved. Even though the policy is now being implemented, this cross-over between domestic and foreign policy still raises a lot of questions. These are generally



seen as being brushed over by the CCP, which does not recognise all the difficulties accompanying such a policy.

More concretely, the implementation of this policy and paper plays out in the BRI. Here, development is narrowed down to infrastructure, such as roads, and aligns with the key narrative of the Chinese, the south-south alliance. However, it faces difficulties on the international level, such as, first and foremost, the effect of the BRI on China's reputation. The BRI is in a unique position, as it is the Chinese flagship project and maintains close ties to the CCP. Consequently, it is hard to separate BRI activities from the state and vice versa. Some actors, for example, use the BRI name but are less connected to the state, which means that many things are carried out under the BRI's umbrella, not all of which are good for China's reputation. This reputational risk is enhanced by the many informal non-state actors in the process. There have been cases in which, under the guise of being part of the BRI, illegal activities were conducted. Such cases, for example, took place in Myanmar and Cambodia where the opening of gambling parlours caused reputational issues for the CCP. The Chinese government had to make a public statement that these enterprises were not part of the BRI in order to limit the impact of these false activities. Nevertheless, these occurrences highlighted two key questions: Who is China and who represents her?

Risk assessments within the BRI have also gained traction as some investments were suspended or did not pay off for political reasons. Investments in infrastructure are key components in the BRI and commonly

focus on infrastructure in core regions that are characterised by containing high-risk environments and developing countries that face many challenges, both politically and economically. Such challenges made other organisations classify these regions and countries as high risk and refrain from investing in them. China learned this later than others. For example, they had invested in the building of a hydroelectric dam in Myanmar, which, following the regime change in 2011, was suspended by the new government due to its controversial nature.

The risk assessment also started to take into account other factors, such as debt sustainability, China's desire to expand its sphere of influence, and environmental factors such as the construction of coal plants, which often feature in BRI projects. The fear of other countries being seen as China's trojan horse by the wider international community and receiving push back from them is often seen internally in China as a 'conspiracy' of the West against China.

Nevertheless, China still pushed the idea that development is good for security purposes and has taken increased action to better understand the risk, for example through the Ministry of Commerce. Chinese banks, universities and think tanks have also started to look at how other governments and banks conduct risk assessment, resulting in an almost decade-long effort to institutionally understand the risk, reliant on best practices of other organisations and states. For example, Chinese officials and academics have studied and reflected on research on the changes in the

Malaysian government and its crackdown on corruption, to how such a process might work within the Chinese system. Many questions surround the effect of the breakdown of democracies in areas in which China has a lot of influence. Meanwhile, we also observe that trust levels within China and internationally towards China have been decreasing, and the rivalry between the US and China is at a high point.

All these trends have increased in recent years and decades. The Covid-19 pandemic and Ukraine crisis have created even more difficulties and consequently, the challenges have become greater. The breakdown in cooperation and decoupling has increased, and alternatives to the BRI are being presented to the world, for example, in the form of the European Commission's 'Global Gateway.' It is thought that China will continue with its rhetoric of development for security whilst pushing the BRI's digital aspects in all regions, after the need for this was exposed more than ever by the Covid-19 pandemic. For this, the Chinese must understand their own neighbourhood, the risks involved and how to foster trust, which is a big discussion point. Dr Ferchen finished by calling for an open discussion in China and the entire region to understand all of these issues and handle them accordingly.

The panel continued by exploring Europe's response to the BRI. Dr Birgit Wetzel, a journalist based in Berlin and an expert on the Caucasus, Central Asia and Energy, spoke about the logic of action of the EU and the German

Federal Foreign Office (FFO). She indicated that “changes need time to germinate,” as foreign policy works in long cycles.

Back in 2007, on its last day of its EU Presidency, Germany initiated the first Central Asia Strategy, with the aim being cooperation and exchanges of mutual interest. One sector was Central Asia’s gas and oil industry. The post-Soviet states of Central Asia were to use the earnings from the energy business to build up their states and their sovereignty. Consequently, the energy lines are very important in the entire region. They run through Russia or through the Caucasus to reach Europe. Since 2005 and 2006, oil and gas have been flowing from Baku, on the Caspian Sea, via Turkey to western markets and Caspian gas has even been flowing as far as southern Italy. Nowadays, 75% of Kazakh oil supplies go to Europe via Russia - and Kazakhstan is the 4th largest oil supplier to the EU! The other 25% arrive to Europe by ship via the Caucasus, through pipelines or by rail and ship. The question of energy supply from the Caucasus has gained even more importance since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and with Kazakhstan facing major political innovations.

However, the strategy was effective from 2005-2014 and provided the region with 650 million Euros in funds. It did not solely focus on energy, but also on knowledge of governance, water management, and education. Overall, it was seen to be moderate successful, as the EU did establish bilateral links. However, cooperation with the region was lacking. This was seen to be due to the competition between states being too great and the will to

cooperation being too weak. In recent years, the push for cooperation from within the region has become stronger, mostly due to the security that cooperation with EU is seen to give the region in response to Russian activities in Ukraine and the new leadership of Uzbekistan, which implemented initiatives for solving more regional conflicts and more cooperation with their neighbour states. The Uzbek's change in prioritisation led to hope and dynamism in the area and new cooperation of the countries and organisations in the region with the EU and to the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, announcing the second Central Asia strategy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in May 2019.

This second Central Asia strategy focused on civil society in the region, water management, the cotton industry, health care and education. Water management is crucial with the best example being the Aral Sea, which only holds 10% of its original water and size with around 1 million people experiencing changes in their living space as a consequence. International experts are developing solutions with the local populations to adapt to these challenges by finding new livelihoods, preventing sandstorms, cultivating new plants, and stopping the decline in water. One concrete activity undertaken has been the conversion of the cotton industry. This industry has learned to rely on less acreage whilst increasing their profits overall. Moreover, the ILO confirmed the eradication of forced and child labour in the field in this region.

Healthcare had been severely neglected following independence about 30 years ago. The Soviet Union's universal health care system ended, and fundamental provisions are lacking in the entire region today. One of these is the access to running water, the most common way of providing clean water to the population. This has been particularly felt during the Covid-19 pandemic when more attention is paid to good hygienic practices, the lack of which leads to a wider and faster spread of the virus.

Education is also a key focus. Today, Uzbekistan has three ministries of education working with international education experts: one ministry for preschool, one for grades 1-12, and one for universities, education, and training. As the country recognises new, international requirements on the labour market, it includes foreign language classes in the mainstream curriculum and allows for the establishment of international schools whilst trying to maintain and continue its national traditions. Other countries are initially focusing on the other educational struggles that they face. For example, Kyrgyzstan faces overcrowded classes, especially in cities. Schools with only 800 places have 3000 students. The reasons for this are the country's weak labour market, internal migration, rapid population growth, and immigration from southern countries, such as Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Reforms are difficult to implement and need time. This has caused social unrest, such as riots and demonstrations in Kazakhstan in January 2022, and

led to the government agreeing to a constitutional referendum for drastic amendments held on 5 June 2022.

Overall, changes in society and politics are occurring and they clearly reflect aspects of the EU Central Asia strategy, as the EU measures are aimed at strengthening civil society, health and education, participation, democracy and self-determination; changes are underway in all these fields. They are in fundamental contrast to the goals of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Both strategies target the new markets in Central Asia, but in very different ways and with different long-term goals. The hopes on the part of the EU are that European investors will find their way to Central Asia. The EU is cooperating with Central Asian countries to ensure beneficial and stable conditions are met. Consequently, the EU's Central Asian strategies are meant to be of interest to both regions. The full effect of the strategy is still unknown. The approaches may be seen as positive, even if the successes are not very visible at first glance. At second glance and over a longer time frame, they are visible and effective.





## 5. Responses to the BRI

The fourth panel, moderated by Dr Udo Steinbach, commenced with an online contribution by Dr Jorge Heine, Research Professor at the Frederick S. Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University, and former ambassador of Chile to China, India, and South Africa. His focus was on the global response to the BRI, and he reflected on his personal experiences in the Latin American response to the initiative and the great potential for development and alleviation of poverty it posed, which led to increased cooperation between Latin America and China.

Dr Heine experienced the BRI at the diplomatic level in different locations. The first was when he arrived in Beijing to be the ambassador to China in July 2013, a few months after the BRI had been launched. The second was during several workshops on the BRI taking place in May 2017 in which he represented Michelle Bachelet.

He remembered that he and his colleagues were quite sceptical of the BRI at first. The initiative promised such big projects, large investments, and long timeframes which raised questions on the practicality of it, such as funding. However, China meeting her commitments changed the minds of many.

Secondly, very early on in the process, observers became aware of the security aspect of the BRI. As China has many neighbour states, it is in its interest to have good relations with them to prevent any attempt to

destabilise China. Consequently, they wanted to rely on trade and networks to create strong links and a security net.

The main driver for BRI is a domestic one. The connectivity to neighbouring states that the BRI would bring was needed to develop the potential of China's Western regions to match the prowess of its China's Eastern regions, for example to match the income, economic development, and infrastructure.

What is particularly interesting about the BRI is that the first goal was to connect China to many regions of the world and recreate Eurasia through a re-creation of the previous Silk Road. However, this changed from connecting regions of the world into something more ambitious, a development proposal for the Global South. However, for this to work, it was not only a question of supply, but also of demand. From 2014-2015, Dr Heine and his colleagues realised the great opportunity the BRI presented to Global South countries, which would meet some of the region's specific needs. Latin America could also connect with China through the BRI. Consequently, in 2016, he and others submitted a project to China that intended to connect Valparaiso, Chile, with China using glass fibre cables. This laid the foundation for the first such connection between China and Latin America: a digital silk road. Today, six other Latin-American countries have joined the agency overseeing and profiting from this project.

Latin America is interested in the opportunities that China offers, because the BRI does not only offer more infrastructure, and physical and digital connectivity. It also presents a model of development different from the traditional neoliberal approach of the West and the Bretton Woods institutions. China shows that it is capable of developing regions and combatting poverty, as it was able to connect its entire territory through infrastructure (e. g. bullet trains, airports, mobile phones), and become a developed state. China communicates this ability to Latin-American countries struggling with their development and offers such countries the willingness to cooperate and invest through financing and the provision of construction companies. This support is crucial for the Latin American region, as investment in critical infrastructure is starkly lacking, which hinders economic development in particular. Chinese involvement in providing infrastructure was very significant.

He and colleagues from Argentina and Brazil recreated the ABC group which had existed in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for their own purposes. They met regularly and provided opportunities for investments and projects in infrastructure and the energy sector in Latin America for Chinese companies to build there, which was met with a lot of interest and really put the countries on the map in China. Hence, the extension of the BRI to Latin America was a coproduction between Latin-American countries and China.

It is important to understand that the BRI offers resources, ideas and projects that are opportune for Latin America. Latin-America is fighting severe

poverty and is trying to escape a vicious circle of lacking development, evidenced by the lost decades. The BRI offers a way out by offering more investments, trade, and helping overcome the infrastructural challenges in the region.

The second point he wanted to make was how HR and democracy are connected to the BRI in the Global South. Currently, there exists a cleavage in the world between democracy and autocracy, which we currently see at play with the war in Ukraine. Latin Americans are more critical of this perspective and see it as the wrong way to frame the issue. This, for example, is evidenced by the little support the economic sanctions on Russia receive from Latin American countries and other countries in the Global South. They believe such sanctions would only exacerbate the difficulties the region is already facing, for example more deaths attributed to famine. The cleavage today, thus, has shifted from being between democracies to autocracies to being between the Global North and the Global South, including India and Indonesia.

There is also a misperception of Chinese society. Commonly, it is seen as a closed society. If one looks at the number of mobile phones used today, one would see it is as anything but that. There is connectivity physically and digitally.

Dr Heine also underlined the importance of accepting that different countries may have different political systems. Western countries have

difficulties in accepting that. Every country has the right to its own system and beliefs, and in extension, to defend and spread them as it deems best. There is also a difference between democracy and human rights. Severe HR violations are a concern to everyone. Latin-American countries are mostly HR compliant and are not interested in following China in its authoritarian style. They want to work with China and with Europe to make the most of the development projects open to them. It needs to be noted that China has not properly responded to accusations of HR violations in the Jinjiang province, which is a serious issue. The occurrences there are not acceptable, international pressure should be upheld, and China needs to come up with a solution.

That being said, HR should not only be limited to political and civic rights but should also include social and economic rights. There needs to be a broader discussion on the world stage about what HR should be, to come to terms with the different definitions and foci. Meanwhile, the BRI activities should not be stopped but supported, as the BRI has provided public goods to Latin America in the past eight years in a way that the West has been unable or unwilling to provide.

Following this recount, Dr Viktoria Akchurina, Senior Lecturer at the OSCE Academy Bishkek, gave Central Asia's perspective on the BRI. Her talk started by highlighting the fact that there are many different types of silk roads, for example to Russia, Turkey, China, Japan, and the USA. There have also been many investors in the region, such as the World Bank, which have tried to

bring development cooperation into the region over the years. Especially nowadays, they have been more investments in the area due to the BRI, while trade with China has always been strong within the Central Asian region. However, there has been a lack of “institutionalisation” and, if it does take place, the Chinese ensure they are in a lead position.

In Central Asia, there are a lot of trust issues at societal and elite levels. At the societal level, there is social protest, especially regarding land, territories, statehood, and money, whilst at the elite level, people are more concerned with sovereignty. This is a relatively sensitive subject, with Central Asian states being quite newly sovereign following the fall of the Soviet Union. The right to self-determination is very important to them. This is crucial to highlight, as there are increasing Chinese domestic narratives about Central Asians aspiring to return to China, which would mean they lose their own sovereignty in favour of becoming a Chinese region. On reflection, Central Asians fear that the BRI is more hegemonic than initially communicated.

Whilst this reflection can cause strife between Central Asian countries and China, the BRI also includes projects that create structural contradictions, as conditions may generate violence. There are three mutually undermining processes: industrialisation, globalisation, and localisation (or glocalisation).

On the one hand, the BRI provides legitimacy for developmental processes, such as industrialisation. Global historians, however, might argue that

building up traditional industry today does not yield the comparative advantages it did in the past and consequently, it is too late to profit from such activities. The niches that exist have already been taken by countries that have already undergone industrialisation, making it near impossible for developing countries to find one to fill. Whilst Central Asian states might not need industrialisation as tourism has become a big sector in the region, it is still too late to claim that industrialisation would help these states take on a more powerful economic role. Moreover, Central Asian states are fragile, if not failing states and thus, instead of improving governance and life quality, industrialisation strengthens authoritarian governance by strengthening the ruling elites. This in turn increases the schisms between the state and society.

Modernisation is used to rationalise all these projects and in practice is often implemented in these countries as increased surveillance and authoritarian urban planning.

The institutionalisation suggested for the region is different from the frameworks of other international organisations. They support the ruling class as they are drafting contracts and making decisions and give more decision-making power to Chinese banks and companies. Another consequence is that the power in the countries is shifted slightly away from the rulers of the respective countries towards the newly created institutions as they control some contracts and funding. Many questions arise concerning this process and its effects, as all of this is relatively new and

current. Such questions might be: What is the meaning of statehood if the centres of power become more decentralised? What are the accountability mechanisms? Who has agency? Consequently, we have a complex web of private, public, commercial, international, domestic, local and other actors. This can be difficult to map, alongside power dynamics and accountability. Looking at these organisations, we see that they are mainly dominated by Chinese nationals which in turn, makes locals feel betrayed.

This brings us to Henri Lefebvre's concept of the 'architecture of force,' which refers to infrastructure being a disruption of social organisation and reconstructing of social space. In terms of Central Asia, particularly the hubs in which many of the BRI routes cross, there are special social spaces which are routinely disrupted, in particular the local community's relationship with these spaces. The question is whether new forms of economic sufficiency (with a centre beyond Central Asia), or new kind of interdependencies are being created? Whom would this sufficiency economy serve? These questions go hand in hand with connectivity. As Europe and the US are very far away, the interdependency is more likely to form between neighbouring regions, or intraregional.

Digital connectivity and advances have been made with major contracts in two countries in the region. One big project these tools are applied to is the project on safe cities. This project falls in the category of authoritarian urban planning. Traditionally in the city of Osh, locals lived in Uzbek Mahallas. These are indigenous communities of trust which were dismantled after the



second revolution. Chinese skyscrapers were built in their stead, limiting traditional social relations within the local community, alienating its members from one another, and allowing for more surveillance of the indigenous group through the ordered architecture.

BRI initiatives bring some benefits to the region. However, they can also bring societal consequences and risks. The first one is that industrialisation can lead to more authoritarianism, especially if the state is already struggling with democracy. Chinese tacit bilateralism increases informality, in a region that is already very informal. This also links to criminality and corruption. A UN report indicates that the increased infrastructure leads to drug and human trafficking along borders. Furthermore, the Uighur question is very much on the table. Central Asians sympathise with the Uighurs based on shared religious beliefs and traditions. However, it has been found that some Central Asian countries sent Uighurs back to China as these states do not have a lot of leverage to go against China on such a critical topic. These conflict points lead to regular protests being held in different sectors, with most of them taking place in mining, especially as this mirrors past exploitation of the countries solely for their material goods.

The following discussion focused on topics such as Russia's and Turkey's role in the area in comparison to China and the credibility, or lack thereof, of the different actors there.

Turkey is generally seen by Central Asians to be a trustworthy country, whether that is in business, or in educational and language policies. This seems to stem from the fact that Turkey is culturally and historically closer to the region than other states in the area. Turkey is a more convenient partner, and it does not pose a threat to sovereignty.

This is different with China. China establishes many projects and invests in the area. However, there is a deep-rooted fear in Central Asia of losing sovereignty over the land, especially with China being a heavily armed country. Moreover, some central Asians are kept in Chinese camps, which puts an additional strain on the relationship.

The perspective on the EU is also mixed. Generally, the EU is seen as being very powerful, particularly in activities that have clear goals. It was suggested that such clarity is essential for the success of EU efforts, whether they are related to HR or economic matters, as this would build trust. This trust is necessary, particularly as other concepts and policies imported by the West did not have a clean track record and thus, have eroded trust in the past. This was the case with democracy. Following the fall of the USSR, countries in the Central Asia region changed their governing style and policies to become more democratic. However, disenchantment soon followed as the living standards in the countries did not improve as much as they had hoped.

Russia is also very present in the area. So much so, that many Central Asian states conduct joint military training and capacity building in border regions.

India is also a country in the area but plays less of a role in general discourse, even though it also has implemented projects in the region. Internationally, India seems to position itself similarly to China, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the creation of a new common bank have demonstrated. Nevertheless, India and China are in competition with one another. Moreover, in BRI countries, Russian and Chinese ambitions are seen as being more clearly played out in comparison to potential Indian ambitions, perhaps partially due to Pakistan being at the heart of the BRI, with which India has a strained relationship.



## 6. Summary

The day-long workshop discussed many topics, which led to recurring themes, Chinese narratives, and the difference between individual and collective HR among them.

More specifically, the first panel highlighted the difference in understanding the term Human Rights. Whereas the West sees the term as focusing on individual rights and development, China emphasises the collective right to development and security. Turkey, however, due to its shared history and culture with Central Asia, has a profound interest in the activities in the region, with Panturkish nationalists pushing for more influence in the region as the result of alienation by other states, such as the US, the EU and Arab states. The discussion concentrated on a macro-perspective of Turkish pragmatism regarding the repression of Uighurs in China, and the extent to which values are present in investment and development deals.

The second panel discussed the process of internationalisation of Chinese NGOs and the conditions in which they operate, concluding that there is a wide typology of NGOs in China, and that their relationship with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) plays a role in their activities and effectiveness. Adding to this notion of the influence of the CCP on civil society and on individuals, the terminology used regarding the BRI by the Chinese resulted in the BRI not only providing infrastructure on the ground but also in our minds. The discussion focused on topics, such as the narratives surrounding

the BRI, the risks of depoliticising, and the shrinking space Chinese civil society faces.

The third panel dealt with the impact of BRI on Europe. It started with insights on the development of risk assessment and management of China regarding their international investments, finding that difficulties within the countries and some failed cooperation have made China more cautious of investing, leading to more thorough risk assessments and some conditionality, partially informed by such activities of other states and actors, such as the World Bank. The EU has also been involved in the region for decades. Its involvement is outlined in the first and second Central Asia Strategy of the EU. These strategies do not focus as much on infrastructure as the BRI does, and more on health management and education as factors leading to democratisation in the area, which can be seen more in some states than in others. The discussion critically examined whether the EU's involvement had an impact or rather fuelled the elites and authoritarian leadership.

The fourth panel commenced with the global response to the BRI, with a particular focus on the Latin American response to the initiative and the great potential for development and alleviation of poverty it posed. This led to increased cooperation between Latin America and China. The Central Asian perspective on the BRI is characterised by fundamental trust issues that exist on a societal level, as seen in the population's dissatisfaction and protest regarding China's projects, as well as at the elite level regarding the

threat to their sovereignty. China poses as a strong military force with new rhetoric on how Central Asian countries aspire to return to China. The following discussion focused on topics, such as Russia's and Turkey's role in the area in comparison to China and the credibility, or lack thereof, that different actors in the region possess.

At the end, it was felt that the workshop has highlighted a number of crucial and diverse aspects of the BRI initiative that will serve to better understand the implications on the values and principles of European and other societies. The workshop contributed to existing discourses and helped to assess new perspectives on the human rights compliance issues involved in BRI projects.

## PROGRAMME OF THE WORKSHOP

MAECENATA STIFTUNG

OSCE ACADEMY  
in Bishkek

IPSA AISP



Center on Governance  
through Human Rights

# The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its impact on Human Rights compliance along the 'New Silk Road'

Monday **16 May 2022**, Berlin, Germany

Venue: Maecenata Foundation

Rungestraße 17, Berlin <https://www.maecenata.eu>

& **Public Webinar Zoom Link**

### **Organizers:**

Dr Anja Mihr, HVGP, Berlin/ OSCE Academy Bishkek

Dr Brigitte Weiffen, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK &

Chair of IPSA Research Committee 34 “Quality of Democracy”

Dr Udo Steinbach, MENA Study Centre, Maecenata Foundation



## **Draft Programme**

- 09:00-9:15 **Welcome and Introduction to the Workshop**
- Dr Rupert Graf Strachwitz, Executive Director of the Maecenata Foundation
- Dr Brigitte Weiffen, The Open University UK, & IPSA RC 34
- Dr Anja Mihr, Humboldt Viadrina Governance Platform & OSCE Academy Bishkek
- 09:15-11:00 **Session I – The BRI and Human Rights in Eurasia**  
Moderator: Dr Anja Mihr
- China's Human Rights Discourse and Policy Agenda along the BRI***  
Katja Drinhausen, Head of Program Politics and Society, Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), Berlin
- China`s role in Central Asia - viewed by Turkish Eurasianists and Panturkish Nationalists (ulusalcılar)***  
Dr Udo Steinbach, MENA Study Centre, Maecenata Foundation
- 11:00-11:15 *Coffee Break*
- 11:15-12:30 **Session II - Civil Society and the BRI**  
Moderator: Dr Rupert Graf Strachwitz
- Chinese NGOs in the Belt and Road Initiative: Between Humanitarian and Political Missions***  
Dr des. Anja Ketels, Senior China Consultant, Marianne Friese Consulting / Institute of Political Science, University of Münster
- The BRI and the Infrastructure of Our Heads***  
Dr Ralph Weber, Professor of European Global Studies, University of Basel
- 12:30-13:30 *Lunch Break*
- 13:30-15:00 **Session III – Impact on Europe**  
Moderator: Dr Brigitte Weiffen
- Understanding and Managing Political and Economic Risk Along the BRI: China's Evolving Approach***  
Dr Matt Ferchen, Senior Fellow, LeidenAsiaCentre and Lecturer, Institute of Area Studies, Leiden University
- Europe's response to BRI***  
Dr Birgit Wetzel, Journalist, Expert for Caucasus, Central Asia and Energy topics, Berlin

15:00-15:30 *Coffee Break*

15:30-17:00 **Session IV - Responses to the BRI**

Moderator: Dr Udo Steinbach

***Global Response to BRI***

Dr Jorge Heine, School of Global Studies, Stanford University, USA

***Central Asia's response to BRI***

Dr Viktoria Akchurina, Senior Lecturer, OSCE Academy Bishkek

17:00 *End of Conference*

## **SPEAKERS AND PANELISTS**

- Dr Viktoria Akchurina, Senior Lecturer, OSCE Academy Bishkek
- Katja Drinhausen, Head of Program Politics and Society, Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), Berlin
- Dr Matt Ferchen, Senior Fellow, LeidenAsiaCentre and Lecturer, Institute of Area Studies, Leiden University
- Dr Jorge Heine, School of Global Studies, Stanford University, USA
- Dr des. Anja Ketels, Senior China Consultant, Marianne Friese Consulting / Institute of Political Science, University of Münster
- Dr Anja Mihr, Humboldt Viadrina Governance Platform & OSCE Academy Bishkek
- Dr Udo Steinbach, MENA Study Centre, Maecenata Foundation
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- Dr Birgit Wetzels, Journalist, Expert for Caucasus, Central Asia and Energy topics, Berlin



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