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BOOK REVIEW

Cheng, Y., **Song, L.** & **Huang, L.** (eds) (2018). *The Belt & Road Initiative in the Global Arena. Chinese and European Perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 266. ISBN 978-981-10-5920-9

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In the book *The Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Arena, Chinese and European perspectives* the integration between East and West is addressed in the frame of the New Silk Road – a connectivity megaproject that includes policymaking and infrastructure building, as well as the integration of people and commerce. It reflects on the increasing controversy involved in Chinese and European relations. This book is an edited volume from an international forum; it contains pieces of work on regional and economic cooperation, comprehension and communication, as well as the geopolitical challenges of the One-Belt-One-Road initiative.

In the first part a study is presented about the perception of different countries in relation to the project. The argument is that the success of Belt and Road depends generally on these countries' perceptions and their level of openness towards China. The results of the study suggest the existence of states that are alarmed about the related developments; therefore, communication should be improved. Further on, the importance of cooperation with the objective of increasing the chance of success is highlighted. More specifically, for China to lead in terms of infrastructure development and financing, it is necessary that China's partners are active participants. Lacking this, an image of China as the sole beneficiary may be generated – not projects based on partnership. In the fourth chapter, the authors seek to describe the importance of China's presence in Central and Eastern Europe. According to them, the East Asian country has a strategic interest in this region due to its increasing soft power, which is now aimed at decreasing the lack of trust or boosting positive perceptions about China in the region. Some elements are mentioned to sustain this argument, such as the creation of Chinese radio stations, cultural exhibitions and festivals. The author also notes the challenges of this cultural diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe, pointing out what China needs to do to improve its soft power.

In the second part the focus of the study is regional cooperation. The first chapter in this part notes the importance of the relations of China with Central and Eastern European countries, highlighting the investment flows that come from the Asian country towards the region and the establishment of a formal institution aimed at solidifying cooperation, the 16+1. The author also hypothesizes that China primarily seeks to utilize the region to access Western markets, with the potential to grow cooperation on both sides. The second chapter is primarily focused on the

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Polish perspective about China. Even though multiple authors note the related political risks in different countries, in this study the importance of Poland as a potential partner of China is stressed – primarily with respect to Poland's geographical position, but also because Poland is supposedly an historical ally of the US. The third chapter describes methodologies for approaching the Belt and Road initiative, rather than presenting a conventional geopolitical analysis. A further conclusion of the section is that the project might create a common identity, improving cooperation and integration.

In the third part of the book, the authors focus on economic cooperation. In the first chapter, an argument is put forward about an emerging new world order that includes China and other developing countries as alternative leaders to the U.S. The author reinforces this proposition by listing institutions that have either been created or led by China. Further on, the authors use quantitative analysis to support the claim of the benefits that China might bring to the region in terms of trade, transport, and infrastructure. Some observations in this study concern the political context, employing Chinese, Central Asian, Russian, US and European perspectives. Following this, another piece describes Poland in terms of its domestic affairs and includes debate about the effect of policy changes on the accommodation of foreign interests. The following discussion promotes the hypothesis that an open labor market can be of interest to skilled workers in China and Russia. The concluding chapter focuses on digital connectivity. The argument is that, aside from physical integration brought about by the movement of people, goods and the generation of services, the project will also connect information infrastructure networks: this concept is called the Digital Silk Road.

In the fourth part of the book, the authors focus on geopolitical challenges associated with the Belt and Road initiative. The first chapter raises the importance of the project for Central Asian countries as well as for China. The arguments are based on the related political challenges, economic benefits, and mutual cultural acknowledgment, but also acknowledge localized tension. The work includes remarks on Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Following this piece is a chapter about the importance of Afghanistan to the initiative and the potential benefits for that country. In terms of methodology, it utilizes Pakistan as a case study to trace a parallel between the two countries. The last chapter focuses on a sensitive area of concern for Western Europe – the presence of Chinese influence on European territory, specifically in the Balkans.

The book contains relevant debate concerning the Belt and Road initiative, with solid studies and compelling conclusions. Nonetheless, similar concepts or definitions tend to be repeated, giving the reader the sense of the same cases being covered more than once. For experienced scholars, one recommendation is to start by consulting the list of figures or investigating otherwise less well known or particularly interesting elements. For beginners interested in the subject, the book provides an opportunity to revisit concepts through different approaches and to absorb new information to some extent, despite the potential repetition. Examples of repetition include content about the Belt and Road's ancient origin leading up to its modern phase of development, the role of Chinese President Xi Jinping and his active participation in the project, and the rise of China as a global superpower. One disadvantage of including the contributions of multiple authors from different areas of expertise in the same book is that the distribution of work is sometimes non-standard. This situation materializes in terms of disparity regarding the quality of research in terms of the conclusions and topics that are addressed.

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Since this book was released, pieces with similar characteristics have been published. However, for researchers interested in returning to the basic principles about the Belt and Road initiative who seek to identify the relevant issues that are raised by important scholars, it may be relevant. It is recommended for a wide range of individuals – including those with an interest in the development of China (especially regarding the ancient and the new Silk Road); in policy making and coordination; in international relations; in infrastructure construction and operation; and in megaprojects and connectivity.

To conclude, regarding such a topic that is associated with complex attributes and multidimensional impacts it is advantageous to be able to access, in a single book, the arguments of different authors who employ both Eastern and Western perspectives about China. The book fulfils its primary objective: increasing comprehension and describing communication, cooperation, and geopolitical challenges associated with the Belt and Road Initiative.

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