

China's Belt and Road Initiative: Geopolitical and Geo-economic Implications for the OSCE

Stefan Wolff
Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security
University of Birmingham

Since its inception in late 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including its maritime component, has been extended to 67 countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe. By 2017, around \$120bn in loans have financed a large number of infrastructure projects across these countries.

While the primary focus of the BRI may be enhancing economic connectivity and boosting domestic growth in China and in the countries involved in the initiative, it also has clear social, political, environmental, and potentially military implications. These have been analysed for a variety of individual countries and regional and sub-regional organisations, but to date there is no assessment of the impact that the BRI will likely have on the OSCE. This is particularly surprising as 27 of the OSCE's participating states are part of the BRI (as part of the New Eurasian Land Bridge, the China—Mongolia—Russia, and the China—Central Asia—West Asia corridors). Moreover, the BRI, and the new connectivities it creates will potentially rival the OSCE region's two other economic (and political) integration projects, the EU and the EEU. An increased Chinese presence, finally, will also likely compete for influence across BRI countries with Russia and the West, particularly in contested spaces like Central Asia, the South Caucasus, the Western CIS, and the Western Balkans.

Many of these (sub-) regions' problems have so far eluded any sustainable solutions, but they have rather been managed, in some instances quite successfully, by the OSCE and a number of other actors—be they individual states or regional and international organisations. The entry, and enhanced presence, of China in the OSCE region adds further complexity to this.

Understanding the implications of China's BRI for the OSCE region and the problems within it is therefore of some significance for the Organisation's and its participating states' ability to continue working towards sustainable solutions. To contribute to such an understanding is primary aim of this project.

Against this background, the initial objectives of this project include:

1. Mapping the presence of China across Central Asia, the South Caucasus, the Western CIS, and the Western Balkans over time;
2. Identifying the implications that this presence has had in terms of economic, environmental, social, political, and military security in the OSCE area;
3. Compiling and presenting a report on the basis of (1) and (2) to inform OSCE institutions and participating states' governments.

The main outcome of the proposed project (for which funding is sought at this stage) will be an OSCE NETWORK REPORT on the geopolitical and geo-economic implications for the OSCE, with a particular focus on the 'contested' countries and sub-regions along the New Eurasian Land Bridge (Central Asia: Kazakhstan; South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia; Western CIS: Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine; Western Balkans: Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia) and the China—Central Asia—West Asia corridor (Central Asia: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan).

The report will map the BRI based on a wide range of available secondary sources and workshop papers (see below), and, based on a synthesis of this information, examine the BRI's implications for economic, environmental, social, political, and military security in the OSCE area. This will enable

participating States and their delegations to gain a better empirical, comparative, and conceptual understanding of the BRI and its present and likely future implications.

This outcome will be achieved by commissioning 15-20 working papers from appropriate experts within the OSCE Network and engaging experts in the OSCE institutions and field missions. Two workshops would be conducted to discuss working papers and prepare a report on this basis. The first workshop would bring together authors of working papers at a relatively early stage and could be held in either Hamburg or Vienna in late spring or early summer 2020. The second one would be a drafting workshop for a smaller group of key contributors to assist the project leader/main drafter in producing a final report. Building on a successful track record with two similar initiatives in 2017 ([OSCE Confidence Building in the Economic and Environmental Dimension: Current Opportunities and Constraints](#)) and 2018 ([Economic Connectivity and Diplomacy: What Role for the OSCE?](#)), this second workshop would be co-funded by the project leader's institution (University of Birmingham).

Building on the outcome envisaged above, it is conceivable to expand the proposed project, focussing on

1. Establishing the perceptions by governments of the countries affected and their policy responses;
2. Understanding how other significant regional and global stakeholders understand, and respond to, the BRI and its implications in the OSCE region;
3. Compiling and presenting a report that determines BRI effects on the OSCE to date, how the OSCE has responded, and what the likely future trajectories and implications of the BRI are for the OSCE.

Such an additional, separate, and subsequent expansion would analyze perceptions of security implications of the BRI in selected states based on commissioned research papers, as well as interviews and focus groups with government officials, think tankers, and civil society. The benefit for participating States and their delegations would be to achieve an empirically richer understanding of the main trends and trajectories in how the BRI is perceived across the OSCE area which, in turn, would be essential to consider what options are available for the OSCE as a whole to engage with the BRI.