

NEW CHALLENGES IN CONNECTIVITY COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND EUROPE

Liu Zuokui and Branislav Đorđević, eds., *The Connectivity Cooperation Between China and Europe: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis*, Routledge, 2023, pp. 282.

Almost ten years ago, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic Belt Strategy, also known as “One Belt, One Road”, and today as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This geo-economic initiative represents an important way of connecting China and the European continent. Another form of cooperation that has been going on for a decade is the 14+1 (formerly known as 17+1) cooperation framework between China and 14 Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC).¹ Academics have focused particularly on the aforementioned forms of cooperation due to the significance and changes that these activities have on everyday life, including the construction of infrastructure, digital connectivity, unrestricted trade, and people-to-people connections. To fill this gap, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Institute of International Politics and Economics conducted detailed research on the connectivity between China and Europe, which resulted in an edited volume. This book, titled *The Connectivity Cooperation Between China and Europe: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis*, edited by Dr. Liu Zuokui, Deputy Director of the Institute of European Studies CASS, and Prof. Branislav Đorđević, Director of the Institute of International Politics and Economics, was published by Routledge in 2023 as a part of the Routledge *Series on China-Europe Relations*. It consists of 14 chapters authored by European and Chinese scholars. The first part provides an overview of connectivity cooperation between China and Europe. The second part gives an overview of different forms of connectivity, and the third part covers some specific cases of cooperation. Contributing authors are: Liu Zuokui, Ju Weiwei, Marek Hrubec, Branislav Đorđević, Nenad Stekić, Ivona Lađevac, Ana Jović-Lazić, Song Lilei, Nataša Stanojević, Jiagu Richter, Gu Hongfei, Bian Minjia, Zhang Haiyan, Lyu Fangyi, Xiong Xiao, Long Jing, Katarina Zakić, Jasna Plevnik, and Ardian Hackaj.

¹ Lithuania stepped out of this format in 2021. Estonia and Latvia got out in 2022.

The book commences with a review of the cooperation between China and Europe from the perspective of the CEE countries, from the aspects of embedded relationships, strategic sovereignty, China's Grand Strategy, and cooperation in the context of the pandemic. Looking at the cooperation between China and the CEE countries within the BRI, Liu Zuokui highlights the key features of this cooperation format, the achievements that have been accomplished so far, and gives detailed suggestions for further improvement of the relationship. In the second chapter, Ju Weiwei uses the theoretical framework of "embedded relationships" to analyse the connection between Europe and China. Observing this relationship from a historical perspective, the author concludes that the connection between Asia and Europe is "the inevitable result of the development of world history" (Weiwei 2023, 20). Considering that it is an embedded relationship made of economic and political elements, Ju especially emphasises that political disembedding should be prevented and gives an overview of concrete actions that should be taken. Marek Hrubec, the author of the third chapter, deploys the concept of strategic sovereignty to analyse the extent of connectivity between Europe and China in a global environment marked by the transformation of economic and political interaction. In the fourth chapter, which provides an innovative assessment matrix for researching grand strategies, Branislav Đorđević and Nenad Stekić apply the postulates of the Hegemonic Stability Theory to the formulation of China's Grand Strategy and provide a systematic set of factors and variables that link the concept of grand strategies to the connectivity agenda. They confirm China's aspiration for a global presence and orientation towards the Eurasian space, but also China's ability to connect the BRI countries in the field of security policy outside of traditional military alliances. Emphasising the process of globalisation as a context in which the cooperation of international actors takes place, Ivona Lađevac and Ana Jović-Lazić present an overview of the development of Sino-European relations as well as the contemporary challenges of this relationship, such as different perceptions of world politics, especially highlighting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the relationship between China and Europe. The authors conclude that this pandemic has led to a sharp break in cooperation plans and emphasise the importance of further collaboration between these two international actors in the post-COVID-19 period.

Regarding the forms of connectivity, Song Lilei examines the possibilities for soft connectivity between China and the EU in the area of sustainable development and potential challenges in their cooperation. In terms of challenges, the author emphasises the following issues: different models and values in the approach to sustainable development strategies; the fact that the BRI is often seen as a geopolitical strategy in the European Union; economic competition between China and Europe; and geostrategic games between

major powers. The author of the second paper, Nataša Stanojević, conducts a detailed assessment of the results of China's development strategies and examines the thesis that the "Dual Circulation" strategy is a feasible solution in line with Chinese development, which takes place in the context of declining international economic connectivity. Jiagu Richter analyses Chinese cultural diplomacy in the case study of overseas cultural centres and their role within the BRI, underscoring the influence that the way of implementing cultural diplomacy has on the soft power of a country. The author concludes that it is better to separate cultural diplomacy from building soft power and suggests focusing on localisation and implementing a country-specific strategy aligned with the people-to-people connectivity promoted by the BRI. The last chapter in this part, written by Gu Hongfei and Bian Minjia, attempts to answer the question of how China and Europe can cooperate in the field of the digital economy, what the advantages of this cooperation are, and what challenges the actors face. Based on the analysis, the authors take the position that there is a favourable institutional environment for the development of cooperation between these two actors in the field of the digital economy.

The last part of this book, dedicated to types of connectivity, pays special attention to the region of Southeast Europe and the Western Balkans. Zhang Haiyan, Lyu Fangyi, and Xiong Xiao are trying to answer the question of what the role of social entities is in attaining the connection between China and Europe, taking Zhejiang as a successful example and focusing on the cooperation between this province and Europe in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Long Jing analyses the Yangtze River Delta integration as part of China's economic development strategy, its connection to Europe, and the way it can influence Sino-European relations, referring in particular to the role of trade and investment in building the foundation for connectivity. Katarina Zakić takes a multilevel approach in trying to answer the question of whether the BRI has had a positive effect on the economic relationship between China and the WB5 (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia), and if so, in what ways. Examining the mentioned relationships within the WB5, the 17+1 cooperation framework, and the BRI, the author concludes that the economic connectivity between the WB5 and China has increased significantly after the introduction of the previously mentioned initiatives and that the greatest progress has been achieved in the investment field. In a study of connectivity between China and Southeast Europe, Jasna Plevnik pays special attention to the term "debt trap diplomacy", claiming that this term is not applicable in the given case. Analysing the concept of "five connectivity" in the case of cooperation between China and the SEE6, the author concludes that this relationship is moving in the direction of "transparent economic, academic, and cultural cooperation" (Plevnik 2023, 248). Ardian Hackaj focuses his paper

on the possibility of cooperation between the EU and China in the Western Balkans region, following the infrastructure project cycle from project identification and planning through public procurement to implementation. Hackaj highlights corruption, poor management, and incompetence as important characteristics of this region, concluding that the EU and China face the same problems when operating in the SEE6 countries.

Apart from the logical structure, in-depth analysis, and evident combination of practice and theory, the value of this edited volume is reflected in the selection of authors from both regions to which the topic of this collection refers. The authors, who are experts in their respective fields, have an advantage in researching the topic because they are more knowledgeable about their home countries than external actors. This adds value to the entire collection of papers. Owing to the different aspects of the same topic they cover, the findings of these papers and applied approaches could be meaningful to researchers in a wide range of fields, such as international relations, security, diplomacy, and economics. As regards the topic itself – the connectivity between China and Europe – given that the stakes are high due to the previous degree of connectivity, China and Europe should find ways to adapt their cooperation to the new circumstances (Anthony et al. 2021, vii). In addition to its importance to the scientific community, the edited volume *The Connectivity Cooperation between China and Europe: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis* also offers successful examples and practical suggestions for strengthening the above-mentioned cooperation.

References

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