

Chapter 3

China's Belt and Road: An Evolving Network



3.1 A 'New Silk Road' Emerges

2017–2018 was a seminal period for Beijing's BRI vision. In October 2017, the CPC's 19th Congress, 'following the principle of achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration and pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative', incorporated Xi Jinping's 2013 blueprint into the CPC constitution. This transformed BRI, an economic/commercial/transportation/communications and infrastructure-building endeavour, into a central tenet of China's national policy.¹ That decision formalised BRI's locus within the Xi regime's worldview, which the inaugural BRF had underscored in May. Parallel events throughout 2017, fashioning a palimpsest of economic/commercial, transportation/communications, energy and infrastructure, industrial, financial and regulatory convergences, some evolving over decades, began bearing fruit.

Six weeks before the 2017 BRF, Beijing launched seven free-trade zones (FTZ) in Chongqing, Henan, Hubei, Liaoning, Shaanxi, Sichuan and Zhejiang, adding to older FTZs in Shanghai, Fujian, Guangdong and Tianjin.² Five of the new FTZs, lying within China's Western Development Strategy catchment area, directly contributed to overland trade along BRI alignments. A month before the BRF, the 1454 km Kazakh–China gas pipeline, linking southern Kazakh gas fields with Chinese consumers, became operational. With an installed capacity of six billion cubic metres (bcm), the pipeline would annually transfer 5bcm to China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), the joint venture's Chinese partner. This was a 'significant' section of the longer Central Asia China gas pipeline, which began at Gedaim on the Turkmen–Uzbek border, crossed Central Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan before reaching the Khorgos 'dry-port' rising astride the Kazakh–Chinese border, to enter China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.³

¹Ying (2017).

²Report (2017c) and Bureau of Economic & Business Affairs (2017).

³Zheng (2017).

This new source of gas complemented oil pipelines bringing crude oil from Russia, Kazakhstan and Myanmar, securing and diversifying Beijing's energy supplies. Two parallel pipelines conveying Russian oil from Skovorodino to Daqing in Heilongjiang Province via Mohe on the Inner Mongolian border—the first operational from 1 January 2011, and the second, seven years later—doubled the annual flow of Russian oil from 15m tons to 30m tons, reinforcing 'the China-proposed BRI'.⁴ In the late 2017, the China Petroleum Engineering & Construction Corporation contracted Russia's Gazprom to jointly build the Amur gas processing plant, further advancing China's energy security.

SREB's transport connectivity component, too, progressed. On New Year's Day, 2017, Beijing launched a China–Britain freight rail service. Trains traversed 7456 miles across Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Germany, Belgium and France, before reaching the UK. This was part of a venture running nearly 1000 freight trains from Chengdu in Sichuan Province alone to European cities in 2017, almost doubling the 73,000 tons of goods worth \$1.56bn shipped from Chengdu by rail in 2016, adding to the rail freight service linking 25 Chinese hubs with European cities, and carrying two-way cargo shipments worth \$17bn in the first half of 2016. The network grew in August 2017 with a new service, linking Zhengzhou in Henan Province to Munich, Germany, via Central Asia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Austria, also linking Spain, Italy and France.⁵ By the end of 2017, 35 Chinese cities were connected to 34 points in 12 European states with 3271 freight trains running along 57 routes.⁶

At the end of January 2017, a container-loaded 'Silk Road train' left China's Yeu city, traversed 7908 km of Chinese and Kazakh territory before reaching Serkhyatak on the Turkmen–Kazakhstan border. It then travelled 1156 km to Serakhs on the Turkmen–Iranian frontier, marking the test launch of the BRI's China–Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran (CKTI) freight route. The train reached Tehran, 10,399 km from Yeu, in mid-February.⁷ CKTI was formalised 10 months later when the four partners harmonised customs, transportation and other regulations and railway hardware, regularising freight traffic along the route.⁸ BRI's terrestrial network, the 'Eurasian Land Bridge', thus rapidly crystallised.

BRI's financial arrangements similarly advanced. Weeks after the 2017 inaugural BRF, China and Russia established joint financial instruments and mechanisms for trans-border trade and infrastructure development spanning not just their territory, but also other members of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)—Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Moscow's sovereign wealth fund, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) and the China Development Bank (CDB) set up a \$10bn fund to finance BRI and EEU projects, enhancing China–EEU trade and development. RDIF also boosted the Russia–China Investment Fund (RCIF), launched in

⁴Xinhua (2018b).

⁵Webb (2017) and Xinhua (2017d).

⁶Zhang (2018).

⁷Xinhua (2017a).

⁸Report (2017a).

2012, with another \$1bn from Beijing's sovereign wealth fund, the China Investment Corporation (CIC).

RCIF, committed to funding 19 manufacturing, transport infrastructure, finance and technology projects in Russia, Central Asia and Central and Eastern European states, expanded its operations.⁹ Sino-Russian financial cooperation cemented the SREB's political-economic foundations, knitting the Eurasian landmass into a cooperative development zone; RMB-denominated financial vehicles insulated the SREB from US-led sanctions against Russia, enhancing project predictability. Bypassing US control, the accord accelerated RMB internationalisation. In 2017, 35 of 68 BRI partner states signed currency deals with China to conduct transactions in RMB; by year end, half of them had begun doing so. These agreements, the SREB's financial core, enabled the fashioning of the terrestrial New Silk Road linking China to the remainder of Eurasia. BRI's resource base was thus secured.¹⁰

Still, 2018 brought mixed prospects. Celebrating BRI's 5th anniversary, Beijing pointed to advances in implementing the SREB and MRI blueprints.¹¹ Days later, at the Beijing Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), Xi Jinping received all African heads of state/governments bar one, further expanding China's trade, aid and investment via the MSR framework and demonstrating its popularity among Africa's rulers.¹² As for Washington, then-head of the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), Ray Washburne, marked BRI's 5th anniversary by insisting China used BRI to 'debt-trap' recipients and then secure 'their rare earths and minerals and things like that as collateral for their loans'. He believed China was not 'in it to help countries out, they are in it to grab their assets'.¹³

Clouding BRI's prospects, elections in Malaysia, Maldives and Pakistan brought in leaders who either cancelled several projects, as Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad did, or reviewed those being implemented, as Imran Khan did in Pakistan.¹⁴ In Europe, Hungary—whose officials described their country as 'a key state on the Silk Road', was severely criticised by fellow EU members for eroding democracy and liberal values.¹⁵ That trend continued into 2019, reflecting the mixed prospects for China's globe-girdling infrastructure connectivity and trade blueprint.

⁹McGrath (2017).

¹⁰Zhang (2018).

¹¹ZX (2018).

¹²Mo (2018).

¹³Washburne and Churchill (2018).

¹⁴Banyan (2018).

¹⁵Report (2018d) and Maraczi (2017).

3.2 The Silk Road Economic Belt's Accretive Evolution

BRI incorporated myriad initiatives, including many long preceding Xi Jinping's twin proclamations. Policy-pronouncements and financial/investment endeavours publicised in 2017 affirmed Xi's vision, but BRI was rooted in history. When the Soviet Union fissioned into 15 'republics', their immediate concerns focused on legitimising their revived sovereignty while stabilising the transition via links securing respective interests in a transformed milieu. Somnolent Central Asian *Stans*—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—reappeared as independent Eurasian polities, confronting severe dislocation as their traditional roles within the centralised Soviet system suddenly came to an end.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan shared 4000 km of borders inheriting ethno-cultural spillover into, and disputed sections with, China's poorly assimilated, marginalised, poverty-stricken and restive Muslim majority Xinjiang, which also abutted Southern Asia, making it central to both the ancient and revived Silk Road. Around 3500 miles of the ancient Silk Road, weaving between the Taklamakan Desert to the south and a prairie to the north separated by a mountain range, traversed Xinjiang.¹⁶ Since 1964, Xinjiang provided Beijing with its Lop Nor nuclear test site and missile test ranges, but later became an emotive fault line in Sino-Soviet animosity.

Bitterly fought military clashes in 1969 along disputed Western Xinjiang borders triggered Mao Zedong's instructions to four of the PLA's ten Marshals to review China's strategic insecurity ecology for initiating appropriate defensive and deterrent action. That, and President Richard Nixon's coincidentally resonant initiative to build diplomatic bridges in Beijing to increase American leverage vis-à-vis Moscow and Hanoi in negotiating an end to the Indochina War, engendered a tacit anti-Soviet US-Chinese alliance which engaged in myriad covert proxy campaigns against Soviet clients on three continents.¹⁷ These drained the USSR, accelerating the Soviet state's evisceration during the late 1970s and the 1980s.

The most spectacular Sino-US campaign targeted Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, reinforcing Central Asia's role in great power contestation and deepening Chinese anxiety. Xinjiang and Central Asia were a theatre of clandestine operations during the Cold War's final stages. After Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution decimated US signals intelligence (SIGINT) assets monitoring Soviet nuclear and ballistic missile (BM) tests in Central Asia, the USA sought new facilities. When Sino-US diplomatic relations were formalised, DCI Stansfield Turner visited China to craft joint building of such stations at Qitai and Korla in Xinjiang. Manned by US-trained Chinese staff, their output, shared by partner intelligence agencies, gained Beijing and Washington insights into Soviet missile forces. It also helped them to grasp Moscow's strategic thinking generally.

In late 1979, Moscow's Afghan invasion, implementing the 'Brezhnev doctrine' in defence of Kabul's Soviet-allied socialist regime, deepened Chinese angst

¹⁶Campbell (2017).

¹⁷Ali (2005).

over Xinjiang's fate. Beijing partnered with the US–Saudi-led coalition sponsoring *Mujahideen* militias, eventually forcing a Soviet retreat. The campaign reinforced China's anxious determination to secure Xinjiang from turbulence precipitated by intensifying religiosity triggered and exploited by the coalition in deploying *Salafist* sentiments sweeping the Muslim world, whose volunteers flocked to fight Soviet 'infidels'. Sino-US covert collaboration continued after Soviet withdrawal but Beijing's June 1989 Tienanmen Square crackdown embittered ties, and the USSR's collapse eroded the anti-Soviet adhesive.¹⁸ These dynamics shaped China's post-Soviet Central Asia policy.

Having helped the USA to undermine Soviet power, China was now disturbed by Soviet collapse precipitating US *unipolarity*. Anxious about the impact of Central Asian renaissance amid growing Islamist-nationalist tendencies on Xinjiang's stability, Beijing sought to prevent spillover instability by consolidating Xinjiang's integration into Han-China.¹⁹ In late 1990, while the USSR struggled to survive gathering domestic and external turbulence, east-west tracks of the future national railways in the five Central Asian *Stans* were connected to PRC railways.²⁰ Viewing interactions with these states as complementary to improved relations with Russia, China recognised the *Stans* in December 1991, later establishing diplomatic relations. China-Soviet railway links, operationalised just months before the USSR collapsed, enabled the notional 'New Silk Road' to realise China's westward progression.

The foundations had, however, been laid even earlier. Soon after the PRC arose, Sino-Soviet alliance leaders initiated travel along a version of the 'Eurasian Land Bridge', now the SREB's spine. To establish treaty relations between the Kremlin and *Zhongnanhai*, Mao Zedong travelled to Moscow by rail, arriving on 16 December 1949 and demonstrating the feasibility of such passenger services. On 16 January 1954, the first of three railway routes linking Soviet and Chinese networks opened. Connecting Moscow to Beijing via Harbin in Heilongjiang Province, and using a section of the Soviet Trans-Siberian Express route, it carried Communist bloc elites. The Moscow–Beijing Express turned south at Chita, crossing the border into China at Zabaikalsk/Manzhouli, on to Harbin, and then to Beijing. Gauge differences forced passengers to change coaches at the border.

The need to change rolling stock limited interest in cargo shipments. However, the initiative focused attention on routes capable of comprehensive service between the allies. They agreed on two other alignments. With coaching stock built in East Germany in 1955–1959, the shorter, Trans-Mongolian route opened in 1959. Chinese- and Soviet-built locomotives hauled the Moscow–Beijing trains on respective sides of the border. As with the first route, gauge variation required trans-shipment, first at Tsining in China and then, since 1966, at Erlian on the Sino-Mongolian border.²¹ But the longest route, linking China's east coast ports to those in the Soviet Baltics

¹⁸Cooley (2002).

¹⁹Karrar (2006, p. 28).

²⁰Shigeru (2001).

²¹Gardner and Kries (2014) and Report (2007c).

via Kazakhstan, held the greatest promise, presaging the SREB's central transport infrastructure alignment.

China's pre-existing rail tracks from the Yellow Sea port of Lianyungang crossed Xian, Shaanxi province, terminating at Lanzhou, Gansu province. Soviet-era tracks in Kazakhstan ended at Aktogay, 340 km west of the Sino-Kazakh border, and 320 km west of Druzhba, Kazakhstan's eastern most township. Fashioning a rail link via Kazakhstan required new tracks on both sides. In 1954, Moscow and Beijing agreed to lay these. China offered to build the Lanzhou–Urumqi–Alashankou line, bringing its railhead to the Kazakh border. The allies decided to construct the Urumqi–Aktogay section in 1956, and Moscow completed the Aktogay–Druzhba section in 1959. When completed, these linked sections would enable rail transport from China's Pacific coast to Baltic ports. However, Sino-Soviet relations chilled in 1959 and the alliance turned adversarial. China completed the Lanzhou–Urumqi extension in 1962 but suspended work on the Urumqi–Alashankou section.

On the Soviet side, the new Druzhba–Aktogay line lay dormant for three decades. When Sino-Soviet relations thawed in 1985, Beijing revived the Urumqi–Alashankou section, completing construction in 1990. In mid-September, the Chinese and Soviet rail networks were linked up at Druzhba. Freight trains began running in July 1991 and, in June 1992, after the Soviet collapse, China and Kazakhstan launched an Urumqi–Almaty passenger service. As Central Asian states expanded their rail networks around Soviet-era tracks, it became feasible to start from China's Lianyungang harbour, travel 11,000 km westward and reach Rotterdam, Europe's largest port. For several years, trains ran between Urumqi and Tashkent, the Uzbek capital, via Almaty. However, by late 2000, given low demand, services were reduced to just two weekly return trips between Urumqi and Almaty. Chinese and Kazakh railways shared responsibility for running these *Zhibek Zholy*, or Silk Road, trains.

3.3 Eurasia's Post-Soviet Coalescence

Diplomacy followed the railways. In 1992, the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan visited Beijing; in November 1992, China's Foreign Minister Qian Qichen travelled to these states and Russia. In 1993, the Presidents of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan visited China. These exchanges laid the foundations for China-Central Asian engagement. Deepening concerns over economic divides fracturing China reinforced Beijing's diplomacy. In late 1993, the State Council announced plans to develop 'the regions along the Eurasian Continental Bridge', aiming to narrow the gulf between China's fast-growing coastal belt and the underdeveloped hinterland, as parallel plans to connect China to the rest of Eurasia gelled.²²

In April 1994, Premier Li Peng visited Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, propounding principles, objectives and processes guiding Sino-Central

²²Apel and Gallagher (2001).

Asian relations: mutually beneficial economic and diversified cooperation, prosperity via shared use of natural resources, improvement of communications and transport infrastructure, offers of Chinese aid, peaceful coexistence, non-interference in internal affairs and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty.²³ Li's commercial focus was manifested in the delegation of SOE executives accompanying him. While addressing the Uzbek parliament in Tashkent on 19 April, Li proposed to found Sino-Central Asian relations on stable ties, economic cooperation and non-interference, symbolised by mutually beneficial collaboration along a 'New Silk Road'. He was the first Chinese leader in the modern era to proclaim, 'the People's Republic of China is now willing to work to build a new Silk Road'.²⁴

SOE leaders signed four agreements, two contracts and around 20 letters of intent on cooperation in petroleum, natural gas, metallurgy, electronics, textiles, construction and other industries.²⁵ Through the 1990s, as Eurasia evolved, security, stability and economic cooperation remained the *leitmotif* of Beijing's diplomacy. A NATO-affiliated assessment identified two motivations driving it: the quest for new energy sources to fuel China's booming economy, and expanding land access westward 'in order to reduce the economic dependence on coastal maritime commerce'.²⁶ Beijing engaged with all five *Stans* but, given its political-economic stature, the length of its border with China, its scientific-technical progress and policy-proximity to Moscow, Kazakhstan received most attention, shaping China's policy.

Astana shared Beijing's interest in forging the Eurasian Land Bridge with new roads and pipelines, although railways remained central to the enterprise. In 1990, the cross-border line reached Aktogay, joining Soviet-era tracks running southwest to Kazakhstan's old capital, Almaty. From there, it ran westward for about 1000 km before crossing into Uzbekistan, reaching its capital, Tashkent, Central Asia's largest city and a trading hub on the ancient Silk Road. From Tashkent, the line ran westward for 350 km, to another fabled Silk Road market city, Samarkand. From there, 1,000 km west, it reached Turkmenistan's capital, Ashgabat. Before Ashgabat, a spur line branched off at Tedzhen, heading south to Sarakhs on the Iranian border. In 1996, a newly built 100 km line joined Sarakhs to Mashhad, allowing train travel from China to Tehran and then, via Sirjan, to Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf, giving Central Asian economies maritime access for the first time. Europe, too, beckoned.

In May 1996, Beijing, with UN support via UNDP and the Department for Development Support and Management Services, hosted a three-day international symposium on 'Economic Development along New Euro-Asia Continental Bridge'. More than 400 officials, experts, representatives of multilateral institutions and business executives attended. Ministers from regional states discussed Eurasian development with senior figures from the UN, EU, WBG, ADB and other institutions. Song Jiang, China's Minister of the Commission for Science and Technology and conference co-chair, stressed the 'urgency of formulating collective actions within the countries and

²³ Alam (2014) and Karrar (2006, p. 104).

²⁴ Li (1994) and BBC (1994).

²⁵ Report (1994).

²⁶ Vingoe (2015).

among the people' of Eurasia to boost shared development. He invited groups and individuals, including those from outside Eurasia, to join 'the challenging endeavour' lasting 'decades to come'. Speakers pressed for transportation and telecommunications infrastructure, economic and trade cooperation, sustainable development, environmental protection, population and social affairs and poverty alleviation.²⁷ Eurasian collaboration gained salience in China's development plans.

Another group coincidentally coalescing in 1996 also drove Eurasian connectivity. Following a November 1994 Singaporean–French joint initiative, 56 Asian and European members and dialogue partners of ASEAN and the EU, established the Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM). ASEM urged deepening post-Cold War intercontinental ties, reinforcing political, economic, sociocultural and other cooperation, fostering 'open discussions on geopolitical issues of common concern', creating 'a space of peace and shared development', promoting 'poverty eradication, protection of cultural heritage' and advancing 'intellectual endeavours, economic and social development, knowledge and educational resources, science and technology, commerce, investment and enterprise'.²⁸ Members hoped economic cooperation would stabilise Eurasia through transformational development.

Premier Zhu Rongji reminded ASEM science ministers at their first meeting: 'There has been a long history of science-and-technology exchanges between the two continents. Even in the ancient times, our ancestors were engaged in a two-way dissemination and exchanges of advanced scientific and technological inventions through the ancient Silk Road, benefiting the people of both continents and contributing to world civilization'. Meaningful Euro-Asian exchanges required ASEM's recognition that 'science and technology advance by leaps and bounds and all countries are attaching greater importance to the important role of scientific and technical advancement in socio-economic development'. Zhu noted, links between scientific exchanges and socio-economic development had 'become an important component of international relations'.²⁹ Hence the Silk Road's revival.

ASEM established inter-ministerial commissions to drive sector-specific collaboration. Leaders acknowledged that unequal development between an industrialised Europe and still industrialising Asia must be addressed by exchanging scientific–technological knowledge, information, skills, expertise and data. Ministers, striking complex balances, crafted mechanisms for disseminating scientific knowledge without draining investment and revenue streams from firms which had patented new processes and sought to protect their intellectual property. In 2001, China extended the idea of fashioning mutually beneficial commercial, cultural and 'civilisational' connectivity from the Pacific Ocean to Europe's shores via terrestrial transport linkages along ancient alignments. Welcoming ASEM foreign ministers to Beijing for their third meeting, Jiang Zemin urged: 'ASEM should become a major channel for exchanges between eastern and western civilizations. Both Asia and Europe are cradles of human civilizations and have long been associated with each other'.

²⁷Information Office (1996).

²⁸EU External Action (2016).

²⁹Zhu (1999).

Significantly, 'the ancient Silk Road, which used to be an important passage of interflow of Asian and European civilisations, has played a unique role in the exchanges between eastern and western civilisations. ASEM should build up a new Silk Road to actively boost exchanges between these two civilisations in the new century so that countries in Asia and Europe will build on their respective civilisations and respect, learn from, complement and benefit each other'.³⁰ The fact that China and the USA were recovering from a crisis following the collision between two of their military aircraft near Hainan Island seemingly reinforced the impetus to forging China–Europe links via a new Silk Road.

Recognising this was a long-term vision, China intensified Eurasian diplomacy, especially with Kazakhstan. By mid-2008, Sino-Kazakh trade represented about 70% of China's Central Asian commerce. Kazakh success in halving its poverty level in 15 years and raising *per capita* GDP to \$9400, second only to Russia's \$12,000 among former Soviet Republics, encouraged Beijing.³¹ Astana reciprocated by opening consulates in Hong Kong and Shanghai, boosting economic exchanges. In the 1990s, diplomacy pursued goals of 'good neighbourliness' and stabilisation by settling border disputes. Since Hu Jintao's June 2003 visit and the launch of a five-year cooperative programme, economics predominated. In May 2004, the partners established a Kazakhstan–China Cooperation Committee to implement agreed programmes and drive further growth. Given Kazakhstan's relative wealth, China's 2004 offer of \$900m credit for Central Asia, executed from 2006, targeted poorer *Stans*.³²

In July 2005, Hu Jintao and his Kazakh host, Nursultan Nazarbayev, proclaimed a 'strategic partnership'. Trade expanded by 22% to \$8.3bn in 2006.³³ Nazarbayev's return visit in December 2006 produced a 'Cooperation Strategy for the twenty-first Century' and a 'Plan for Economic Cooperation'. The leaders agreed to build a four-lane motorway linking Lianyungang in eastern China to St. Petersburg, Russia, by extending China's Lianhua highway to Khorgos and on to Western Russia. Hu returned to Astana in August 2007, signing nine agreements, stressing mutual determination to diversify trade composition from energy and commodities, and secure balance. Cabinet- and official-level exchanges implemented leadership-level accord. A decade before Xi Jinping hosted the first BRIC, Beijing and Astana began discussing knitting together Eurasia with connectivity hardware and software.

In March 2007, Kazakh Prime Minister Karim Massimov inspected the Korgas–Khorgos and Dostyk–Alashankou border crossings to better understand issues relating to frontier inspections regimes, customs procedures and trans-shipment infrastructure. China mostly imported petroleum and ferrous and non-ferrous metals, while Kazakhstan bought consumer goods, e.g. textiles, shoes, appliances, toys, electronics, spare-parts, foodstuffs and pharmaceuticals. Despite a dramatic growth in commerce, however, the trade balance mirrored overall imbalances: in 2006, Kazakhstan

³⁰Jiang (2001).

³¹Peyrouse (2008, p. 34).

³²Peyrouse (2008, p. 35).

³³Report (2007b).

represented just 0.49%, and Central Asia, 0.69%, of China's international trade.³⁴ Goods crossing the China–Kazakh border nonetheless rose to 13.1m tonnes in 2006, but dropped to 12m tonnes in 2007, indicating the routes' potential.³⁵

That April, Beijing began laying double-track sections in northern Xinjiang, while electrifying the entire Chinese section. Stipulating that their countries 'will use the potential of freight transport to the maximum, as well as the consolidation of port capacity and will promote the construction of the international transport corridor for protecting transport between China and Europe through China and Kazakhstan', Hu and Nazarbayev slashed bureaucratic regulatory obstacles, enabling the expansion of both bilateral and transit trade.³⁶

Container railway freight service between Lianyungang and Moscow began after the August 2007 Hu-Nazarbayev summit. China's appetite for Central Asian energy and mineral resources grew, but the region's locus within Beijing's commercial firmament was that of a way station, not the final destination. The partners began work on the Lianyungang–St. Petersburg highway in 2008 and opened the 5246-mile motorway to commercial traffic in October 2018, reducing travel time to 10 days. This was the outcome of protracted, complex and challenging diplomatic, regulatory and engineering negotiations. The partners managed a dynamic environment while maintaining focus on a trans-continental vision.³⁷

3.4 The 'Shanghai Spirit' Paradigm

Security proved paramount. Soviet collapse transformed the interstate landscape. As China struggled to comprehend its new circumstances, its strategic analyst community devoted the 1990s to examining a fluid, unfriendly, international milieu. Confronting the consequences for China, it generated a series of primarily *Sinic* constructs: the New Security Concept, the New Development Approach, the New Civilisation(al) Outlook and the Harmonious World Concept. Together, these comprised China's post-Cold War 'New Diplomacy'.³⁸ These historically rooted and culturally derived frameworks informed Beijing's approaches to China's post-Soviet neighbourhood, with the emphasis on proximate Eurasia.

China's diplomatic goals drew upon Deng Xiaoping's 'reform and opening up' initiative, i.e. to 'focus on the central task of economic construction and to ensure a peaceful and favourable international environment' for sustained development.³⁹ A dynamic ecology demanded agile adaptation. Even as conceptual paradigms evolved, policy-makers confronting unfamiliar challenges needed to act promptly. Still, the

³⁴Peyrouse (2008, p. 36).

³⁵Ilie (2010).

³⁶Hu and Nazarbayev (2007), Kazakh MoFA (2007), Hu and Nazarbayev (2009) and Fang (2009).

³⁷Tang (2018).

³⁸Gao (2010, pp. 1–2, fn. 2).

³⁹Gao (2010, p. 2).

urgency of establishing longer-term frameworks for effective diplomacy precipitated 'new' thinking. On 3 March 2004, Hu proposed to the CPCCC his 'Scientific Development Theory' to inform China's 'New Development Approach'. It posited: 'all countries should strive to achieve mutual benefit and win-win situations in their pursuit of development. They are encouraged to open up rather than close themselves, to enjoy fair play instead of profiting oneself at the expense of others'.⁴⁰ The formulation being primarily directed at the CPC elite, rather than at external audiences, it likely represented beliefs animating the PBSC's response to post-Soviet *unipolarity*.

In contrast to the US 'global leadership' or *systemic primacy*, and the European Union's legal order, Beijing's 'Harmonious World Order' and 'New Civilisation Outlook' constructs challenged deterministically competitive Western and allied notions of interstate relations. The 'Harmonious World Concept' stripped interstate dynamics of elemental antagonism, stipulating that actors pursue peaceful inter-civilisational coexistence, each imbued with inalienable, inviolable, rights to choose its developmental path suited to its own circumstances.⁴¹ Essentially demanding, no external impositions, and cooperation instead of competition.

A 'Harmonious World' would be peaceful, stable, open and tolerant, enabling equal prosperity and enduring peace. Diverse civilisations bearing distinct social organisation and developmental designs, sharing mutual trust and respect, communicated with and learnt from each other; states maintained peace and security by using 'just and efficient' security institutions to address international affairs with dialogue and negotiations on the basis of international law.⁴² Resonating with the UN's founding principles and foundational aspirations, the 'New Civilisation Outlook' encouraged 'inter-civilisation dialogue' to build a harmonious world based on sovereign equality among states.

Responding to the West's elation at its 'victory' over Cold War adversaries and the apparent dead-end confronting polities lying outside the expanding capitalist-liberal-democratic circle, specifically post-Tiananmen Square China, these frameworks argued for legitimising normative equality between the victorious pluralist domain led by the USA and the residual authoritarian states, principally China itself. Without explicitly challenging the post-Soviet *unipolar* order, Beijing's mutually consistent paradigms demanded equal representation, adequate strategic space in which to function, and intra-*systemic* autonomous agency.

In a milieu reverberating with aftershocks of the USSR's collapse, strategic insecurity drove conceptual work. The Cold War's end lowered great power tensions, but China's national security environment brought 'new challenges': 'The vicious rise of the "Taiwan independence" forces, the technological gap resulting from RMA, the risks and challenges caused by...economic globalization, and the prolonged existence of unipolarity vis-à-vis multipolarity—all these will have a major impact on China's security'. Beijing was 'determined to safeguard its national sovereignty and security no matter how the international situation may evolve, and what difficulties it

⁴⁰Hu (2004c) and Li (2005).

⁴¹Li (2005).

⁴²Zhang (2006).

may encounter'.⁴³ The CMC ordered the PLA to 'maintain the fundamental principle and system of absolute Party leadership over the armed forces'.⁴⁴

Assuming CMC Chairmanship three months before the MND published its December 2004 Defence White Paper, Hu Jintao expounded his Scientific Development Theory's national defence elements on Christmas Eve. Summarising the PLA's 'new historic mission' as a 'Three-Provides-and-One-Role' framework, he decreed that the PLA

- Provide an important guarantee of strength for the CPC to consolidate its ruling position
- Provide a strong security guarantee for safeguarding the period of important strategic opportunity for national development
- Provide powerful strategic support for safeguarding China's growing national interests, and
- Play an important role in safeguarding world peace and promoting common economic development⁴⁵

The missions, codified in Beijing's 2006 Defence White Paper, and ratified by the CPC's 17th (2007) and 18th (2012) Congresses, underpinned the PLA's newly proclaimed responsibility to 'go global' in defending China's rapidly expanding economic interests.⁴⁶ Beijing's decision, following the December 2008 UNSC Resolution-1851, to protect Chinese shipping from pirates in the Gulf of Aden by despatching a naval flotilla and maintaining rotational deployments since reflected this shift.⁴⁷ China's launch of an aircraft carrier programme with a view to building a CSG-centric blue water fleet similarly indicated global aspirations.⁴⁸ Chinese rhetoric stressed developmental, economic and defensive impetus driving policy, but in its theoretical postulates and policy-praxis, Western critics saw a newly 'assertive' China.

Diplomacy flowered. In 1992, China inherited border disputes with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. With Moscow coordinating, the five governments negotiated frontier disarmament and border demarcation. In April 1996, heads of the five governments, meeting in Shanghai, signed an 'Agreement on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions', catalysing the 'Shanghai five' process and generating an 'Agreement on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions' in April 1997. These agreements, combined into a joint statement, proposed, 'on the principles of equality, trust, consultation and mutual benefit', the parties reduce military deployments, lowering threats to regional and national development.⁴⁹ China resolved border disputes with Kazakhstan in 1998, Kyrgyzstan in 1999, Russia in 2004 and Tajikistan in 2006.

⁴³CMC (2004, Chap. 1).

⁴⁴Ibid., Foreword.

⁴⁵Hu (2004a).

⁴⁶Editorial (2006), Huang (2009) and Cooper (2009).

⁴⁷Lai et al. (2014).

⁴⁸Ibid. pp. 6–7.

⁴⁹Hali (2016).

Peaceful negotiations encouraged cooperation across the economic–political security spectrum. Perceived marginalisation, even alienation, vis-à-vis the US-dominated post-bipolar order, stimulated Eurasian collaboration.

The Shanghai Five platform enabled cooperation against Beijing's 'three evils', i.e. terrorism, separatism and extremism, as well as drugs and human trafficking and weapons proliferation. In 1998, the five began joint action on counter-narcotics and narcotic finances, cutting off terrorist funding, thus lending the group an anti-terrorism focus. Consolidating cooperative experience, in June 2001, the 'Shanghai Five' signed the 'Shanghai Convention on Fighting Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism', proclaimed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and welcomed Uzbekistan as a member. A year later, the six adopted the SCO Charter, establishing a Secretariat and ministerial committees to address shared concerns. Initially focused on intra-regional issues, the group gradually widened the remit of collective action.

Since 2002, when the SCO established the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure as the group's focal institution, members held progressively larger and more complex drills, enabling shared learning and best practice adoption. The 'Peace Mission' drills evolved from counterterrorism exercises to more conventional combat-oriented combined arms and joint services manoeuvres. Peace Mission 2007, held in Siberia's Chelyabinsk region, marked a departure. It combined armed forces of all six member-states, with the PLA dispatching its first-ever training contingent overseas. It involved about 6000 troops, over 1000 combat vehicles and dozens of aircraft far from home 'fighting' week-long 'operations'.⁵⁰ All six SCO presidents, after concluding their annual summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, travelled to Chebarkul in Western Siberia, to review the drills' final stages. The symbolism reverberated powerfully.

The SCO also looked outward, especially at Afghanistan, the source of myriad concerns, inviting President Hamid Karzai to the 2004 annual summit. In 2005, the SCO and Kabul established a Beijing-based liaison body to be the official channel of communication on cross-border crime, drug trafficking and intelligence sharing. Afghanistan, the first SCO Observer State, was later joined by Belarus, Iran, India, Pakistan and Mongolia. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey became 'Dialogue Partners'. In March 2009, the SCO hosted an international conference on Afghanistan in Moscow, inviting external stakeholders, including the USA, NATO and the UN. At their June 2009 summit, SCO leaders pledged to work with other interested parties in addressing the Afghan conflict's fallout. In 2017, they welcomed India and Pakistan as full members. The SCO thus accreted influence in managing Eurasian security and economic cooperation.

Insecurity drove coherence. The Shanghai Five's July 2000 Dushanbe Statement underscored a determination to not only counter separatism or 'liberation movements', terrorism and extremism, but also 'oppose intervention in other countries' internal affairs' on the pretexts of 'humanitarianism' and 'protecting human rights' and support the efforts of one another 'in safeguarding the five countries' national

⁵⁰Radyuhin (2016).

independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and social stability.’⁵¹ US observers noted the potential use China or Russia might make of the SCO to counteract the US post-Soviet pre-eminence. Some described Jiang Zemin’s remarks: ‘We should strengthen mutual support in safeguarding the national unity and sovereignty of our nations and resist all kinds of threat to the security of the region’, and the SCO’s opposition to the ‘use of force or threat of force in international relations without the UNSC’s prior approval and...any countries or group of countries’ attempt to monopolise global and regional affairs out of selfish interests’, as challenging the USA in Asia.⁵²

US bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan underscored close security ties, but the former’s ‘colour revolution’ and the latter’s ‘Andijan incident’ in 2005 transformed perceptions. That year’s SCO summit urged Washington to specify its base withdrawal timeframe while Sino-Russian Peace Mission 2005 drills deepened collaboration. Two years later, Washington’s top diplomat for Central Asia described the SCO as ‘a subject that seems to make a lot of Americans’ blood just boil’.⁵³ Events partly explained US outrage. Just before the Shanghai Five became the SCO, Sino-US relations plunged over the collision between a US EP-3E *Aries* ISR aircraft and a PLANAF J-8II interceptor 70 miles from China’s Hainan Island. The J-8II crashed, killing the pilot. The damaged EP-3E made an ‘unauthorised’ landing at a PLA airfield on Hainan, its 24-strong crew being detained for 11 days. A bushfire of anti-US anger spreading across China triggered the George W. Bush Administration’s first ‘China-crisis’.⁵⁴

Contradictory narratives mirroring conflicting interpretations of international maritime law exposed fundamental divergences in US and Chinese perspectives, claims and interests. USN and NSA investigations concluded that Beijing had obtained ‘large volumes’ of ‘technical data’ and ‘sensitive COMINT (communications intelligence) equipment’ from the damaged EP-3E.⁵⁵ The crisis, eventually diplomatically resolved, nonetheless exacerbated mutual mistrust. While US anger at Chinese ‘assertiveness’ was understandable, scrutiny suggested outrage was misplaced. Towards the end of Hu’s tenure, with international relations gaining focus in Hu’s second term, his platitudinous formulation, ‘Major powers are the key; surrounding/peripheral regions are the first priority; developing countries are the foundation, and multilateral fora are the important stage’,⁵⁶ reflected and explained Beijing’s largely defensive Eurasian outreach and shaped the continuity in Chinese diplomacy under Hu’s successors.

The ‘Shanghai Spirit’ manifest in the SCO’s formation represented the first instance of China’s ‘New Security Concept’ in practice. SCO members collaborated as partners, without accepting legally binding mutual obligations inherent in

⁵¹Report (2000a) and Gill and Oresman (2003).

⁵²Gill (2001).

⁵³Feigenbaum (2007).

⁵⁴Kan et al. (2001) and Rosenthal (2001).

⁵⁵USN/NSA (2001, p. v).

⁵⁶Liu et al. (2011).

an alliance. SCO members did not endorse Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, nor its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Unlike NATO members, who are obliged to treat an attack on one as an attack on all, SCO members took consensually negotiated decisions, each choosing which decisions to implement. This afforded the *Stans* formal equality to Russia and China, giving them a stake in collective approaches to shared concerns, without compromising their recently regained sovereign identities.⁵⁷ This loosely egalitarian collective security structure hastened trans-frontier trade-related linkages.

The low bar of mutual obligations limited the SCO's ability to act in unison, but by allowing cooperation among actors pursuing varied goals, the formulation stabilised much of the Eurasian landmass after a traumatic transition. Western analysts, ignoring the occasionally mutually defensive insecurity driving several SCO members, betrayed misplaced anxiety by asking if the SCO was becoming a 'Eurasian NATO' or even a rival to NATO.⁵⁸ After the group's 18th summit in Qingdao inducted India and Pakistan in June 2018, one observer averred, 'the SCO remains focused on relationship-building, rather than achieving concrete outcomes'.⁵⁹ Contrasting origins, motivations, purposes and frameworks undergirding the NATO alliance and the SCO collective belied the validity of western fears.

The SCO's one challenge to the US-led order resided in the possibility of alternatives it suggested to suddenly self-aware subaltern actors subsisting precariously on a landscape dominated by a *unipolar system* premised on values threatening those on which they were themselves organised. Authoritarian, underdeveloped, and eclectically mixing and matching varied combinations of public, private and foreign capital to grow, these states were outliers in the post-Soviet US-led order. Their ideational preferences, developmental needs, state-building priorities, accretive experience of cooperation and response to persistently perceived external challenges, helped to crystallise a collective Eurasian mindset vital to imagining and then sustaining the realisation of the future BRI/SREB blueprint.

In one of his final formal diplomatic tasks in hosting Central Asian and other regional delegations, Wen Jiabao noted: 'Over 2000 years ago, our ancestors...opened the Silk Road that connected both ends of the Eurasian continent and served as a bridge for interactions between the East and the West...The ancient Silk Road has regained its past vigor and vitality...Today, we should draw strength from our historical heritage and, with greater confidence and in a pioneering spirit, work together for new glory of the Silk Road and a better future of the Eurasian people'.⁶⁰ A year later, Xi Jinping proposed the SREB in Kazakhstan's capital, Astana: 'In order to make the economic ties closer, mutual cooperation deeper and space of development broader between the Eurasian countries, we can innovate the mode of

⁵⁷Maksutov (2008) and Xing and Sun (2007).

⁵⁸Fillingham (2009) and Darling (2015).

⁵⁹Report (2018f).

⁶⁰Wen (2012).

cooperation and jointly build the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' step by step to gradually form overall regional cooperation'.⁶¹

Continuity notwithstanding, the vision would have remained a dream without strong endorsement and active participation of Russia and Kazakhstan. Russia's key role has been analysed elsewhere.⁶² The changing trajectory of Central Asia's trade relations underscored the pattern. By 2016, Russia's \$18bn commerce with the five *Stans* was dwarfed by China's \$30bn.⁶³ Investments followed a similar pattern. Kazakhstan, by far the largest Central Asian economy, reflected the shift in the China–Central Asia–Russia dynamic. During 2013–2018, Astana and Beijing agreed on the construction or completion of 127 BRI projects worth \$67bn, although implementation was uneven. The most visible ones included a \$1.9bn light railway system in Astana, and a \$600m, five-year transport infrastructure plan covering Kazakhstan's other areas. In 2018, Kazakhstan's debt to China crossed \$12.3bn.⁶⁴

Another impetus to Beijing's westward drive came from the vulnerability of the explosive expansion of its maritime trade, especially growing energy imports powering its economy, to interdiction by US and allied fleets deployed along South-east Asian choke points, i.e. China's 'Malacca Dilemma'. Dependence on shipping through the Malacca and Lombok/Makassar straits explained Beijing's concerns. The shortest link between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, stretching north from Singapore between the Indonesian island of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, the Malacca Strait was one of the world's busiest 'choke points'. The deeper Lombok/Makassar Strait between Indonesian islands of Lombok and Bali, used by Very Large Crude Carriers, too, mattered to China's crucial energy supplies.

Growth enlarged China's 'national security interests' from conventionally defined territorial integrity to include the maritime domain, space and the electromagnetic spectrum.⁶⁵ Middle Eastern supplies comprised 60% of China's crude oil imports in 2006, then projected to rise to 75% by 2015. In fact, this ratio reached 80% by 2012.⁶⁶ Despite slowing growth, China imported 440m metric tons of crude and 125bcm of gas, marking year-on-year increases of 11% and 31.7%, respectively, in 2018, with import-dependence of 69.8% and 45.3%, respectively.⁶⁷ Beijing feared that in a crisis, hostile US and allied naval fleets, controlling the choke points, could cut off energy supplies to strangulate China, holding its economy to ransom. Beijing lacked the ability to defend its vital sea lines of communications (SLoC), but boosting its forces appropriately could trigger hostile pre-emption; hence the 'dilemma'.

In November 2003, noting that 'certain major powers' were bent upon controlling the Malacca Strait, potentially threatening China's strategic well-being, Hu Jintao asked the party state to prepare imaginative countermeasures to this, in Chinese eyes

⁶¹Xi (2013).

⁶²Majumdar (2018), Stronski (2018), Ali (2017b), Wishnick (2017) and Goldstein (2017).

⁶³Stronski (2018).

⁶⁴Kurmanov (2018).

⁶⁵General Political Department (2006).

⁶⁶Storey (2006) and Pottter (2012).

⁶⁷Zheng (2019).

very real, challenge.⁶⁸ Some US analysts acknowledged China's defensive concerns driving its efforts to forge energy connectivity with Central Asia–Eurasia, but insisted China's premise and response were 'misguided'.⁶⁹ US critique neither allayed Beijing's anxiety nor slowed the fashioning of alternative supply routes via Russia, Central Asia, Myanmar, Pakistan and possibly Iran, designed to mitigate the 'dilemma'. Economic insecurity drove China's expanding engagement with East Asian, South-east Asian, Central Asian, South Asian and West Asian—i.e. Eurasian, neighbours. Developmental motivations reinforced a broader 'going out' policy-outlook.

3.5 Beijing's Regional Developmental Drivers

As 2018 ended, the NDRC and line ministries with economic charters outlined 2019 plans at work conferences. They pledged to 'promote western region development, northeastern region revitalisation, the central region's rise and support the eastern region' in pursuing 'optimal development'.⁷⁰ Regionally focused perspectives drove BRI, specifically, SREB's evolution. Early in the reform era, labour and capital-intensive foreign-invested assembly and production, growing trade from coastal hubs and investment in scientific–technological education and skills catalysed rapidly rising disposable incomes. Beijing's WTO accession and explosive trade growth accumulated surpluses, raising savings-based investment. Regulatory reforms nurtured entrepreneurial middle classes, concentrated wealth and deepened inequality. Expanding commercial interests caused disruptions.⁷¹ Fearful of inter-regional disparities, in 1999, the Ministry of State Planning and Development drafted a 'Go West'/'Open Up the West'/'poverty-reduction' campaign.

In the 1980s–1990s, China attracted FDI worth over \$300bn, fuelling its manufacturing prowess, but the central and western hinterland only received \$9.9bn, of which \$6.8bn went to just Sichuan. In contrast, Shanghai's Pudong District alone received \$11bn.⁷² Early in the twenty-first century, 'communist' China stood internally transformed and socio-economically divided.⁷³ CPC leaders responded with a 'Develop the West' campaign in 2000, pushing investments into Gansu, Guangxi, Guizhou, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Qinghai, Shanxi, Sichuan, Tibet, Xinjiang and Yunnan Provinces/autonomous regions, and the province-sized Chongqing Municipality. The focus-area comprised two-thirds of China's territory, and 22.8% of its population. The western region shared 3500 km of land borders with a dozen neighbouring states. Plans to improve transport and communications links between coastal

⁶⁸Hu (2004b).

⁶⁹Shea (2014).

⁷⁰Report (2018e).

⁷¹Haltmaier (2013), Parietti (2016) and Morrison (2017).

⁷²Report (2001a, pp. 1–2).

⁷³Kujis (2008).

China and the west, and the latter and neighbouring economies, promised to transform the region into a 'second golden area' for reform and opening-up efforts.⁷⁴

In mid-September 2000, Jiang Zemin chaired a PBSC/CPCCC meeting attended by China's non-communist parties,⁷⁵ the Federation of Industry and Commerce and several 'eminent persons', presumably including retired leaders. He explained Beijing's new Western Development Strategy. Targeting the gulf separating China's coastal belt and its hinterland and the threats this posed to national cohesion, Jiang cautioned those present that developing the west demanded 'generations of strenuous efforts'. He warned against 'any short-term behaviour'. Beijing would drive the process and expected the participants' engagement,⁷⁶ but implementation required financial, technical and scientific support from other sources. To attract foreign investment into the region, China announced a preferential tax regime, demanding only 10–15% after the initial tax-exempted period expired. Provincial governments' project approval authority was raised to \$30m, the same as coastal counterparts.

Jiang acknowledged tensions rocking China's developmental experience in his awkwardly translated 'Three Represents' theory in 2000, explaining it on the CPC's 80th anniversary in 2001. His postulate was incorporated into the CPC Constitution at the 16th Congress which transferred party leadership to Hu in November 2002. Jiang recorded 'the development trends of advanced production forces', 'the orientations of an advanced culture' and 'the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the people of China'.⁷⁷ He sought to reconcile the nascence of a proto-*bourgeoisie*, aspirations of the emerging middle-classes and continuing CPC support for the toiling masses whose labours sustained growth. Jiang's formulation reflected concerns over imbalances between a rapidly urbanising, prosperous and globally connected coastal belt and China's poor, rural and neglected central and western hinterland.

In March 2001, Premier Zhu Rongji told the 4th Session of the 9th NPC that to reduce disparities, Beijing sought the 'development of science and technology' in the western region, devoting 70% of its FY2000 budget, \$396bn, to infrastructure construction there. In 2001–2002, another \$45.5bn helped to speed up western development: local governments received \$37.1bn in subsidies; \$8.4bn went into building infrastructure. Several special economic and technical development zones, piloted by ones in Xian, Shaanxi Province and Yibin, Sichuan Province, were planned. Over the next decade, the region would add more than 2500 miles of rail tracks and 20,000 miles of motorways.⁷⁸ To attract foreign investors, the 2001 China International Fair for Investment and Trade (CIFIT), held every September in Fujian Province, launched

⁷⁴State Council (undated-a) and Ding and Neilson (2003).

⁷⁵China Revolutionary Committee of the KMT, China Democratic League, China Democratic National Construction Association, China Association for the Promotion of Democracy, Chinese Peasants and Workers' Democratic Party, China Zhi Gong Dang, Jiusan Society, and Taiwan Democratic Self-government League.

⁷⁶Report (2000c).

⁷⁷State Council (undated-b).

⁷⁸Zhu (2001) and Report (2001b).

10,000 projects targeting western development. Regional entities signed more than 200 contracts worth \$4.3bn with foreign investors.⁷⁹

Although Beijing planned to mobilise resources and channel managerial and planning skills towards hinterland urbanisation and development, given the coastal belt's experience, environmental protection acquired salience. While seeking eastern provinces' investment support towards western industrialisation and infrastructure building, Zhu warned coastal enterprises against transferring their obsolescent, energy-intensive and polluting operations to the hinterland. To obviate fresh imbalances, western farmland unsuited to agriculture would be reafforested, grasslands protected from over-grazing and scarce water resources afforded improved conservation management.⁸⁰ The region received significant leadership attention, but implementation proved challenging.

Western critics questioned Beijing's 'sincerity' in promoting western development: 'the campaign is an excuse for China to exploit the vast natural resources of the western region, while imposing strict security measures that will counter any attempts by ethnic separatists to break away from the PRC'. Although few countries tolerated separatism at home, China's conduct was considered problematic. Still, foreign governments and corporations showed interest in the strategy, seeking benefits in energy, petro-chemicals, transportation and telecommunications sectors, but critics feared, 'building physical infrastructure will attract large numbers of ethnic Chinese and weaken many of the unique minority cultures in the west'.⁸¹ This perspective found Beijing's efforts to integrate underdeveloped regions with developed ones, raise incomes and deepen societal cohesion across ethnicities, disingenuous.

State consolidation may have informed Beijing's Western Development Strategy, but rising inequality and its socio-political consequences did deepen elite anxiety. Deng was aware of income variations inherent in capitalist modes of production resulting from varied levels of risks, uncertainty and individual responses, particularly in societies used to the levelling comforts of statist, egalitarian, distributive regimes,⁸² but believed distribution could follow accumulation. Western critique rested on GDP and GDP growth *per capita* in the rapidly marketising China. However, *per capita* calculations ignored distortions caused by China's *hukou* residential registration regime. Millions of marginal farmers and unemployed youth, registered residents of underdeveloped regions, flocked to coastal cities looking for jobs, providing the labour which gave China comparative advantages in export manufacturing, built shiny new districts enabling coastal urbanisation and generated personal/family income and national wealth. But *hukou*-regulations, skewing distributive data, injected inaccuracies.⁸³

Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, succeeding Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji in November 2002, built on their policy-inheritance. In 2003, Wen launched a 'Revitalise

⁷⁹CIFIT Secretariat (2018).

⁸⁰Report (2002).

⁸¹Report (2001a, p. i).

⁸²Li et al. (2012b) and Drysdale (2012).

⁸³Gibson (2012) and Plummer (2012).

the Old Northeast Industrial Bases' plan covering Liaoning, Jilin and Heilongjiang Provinces and five eastern prefectures of Inner Mongolia. In March 2004, Wen proclaimed before the NPC the 'Rise of Central China Plan', focusing resources on hinterland areas closest to the coastal belt, considered better able to absorb investment: 'Accelerating the development of Central China is an important aspect of our endeavours to ensure well-balanced development of regional economies'.⁸⁴ The plan targeted Anhui, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi and Shanxi Provinces. Together, the strategy and the plan would mitigate well analysed intra-PRC inequality. The NDRC, in drafting the 11th FYP (2006–2010), adopted Hu's theoretical approach to building China's future: scientific development. By applying advanced science and technology, this approach would help to achieve high-quality, highly efficient and sustainable development, securing the goal, i.e. a harmonious society. The NDRC set new priorities to focus leadership efforts and resources on developing the Yangtze River Delta, Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei, 'the old industrial base' in northeast China, and Chengdu-Chongqing. The latter belt would power the central region, enabling it to assist western development.⁸⁵

Concern over inter-regional disharmony informed policy-discourse, shaping the FYP drafting process. Over 1978–2008, China's GDP increased nearly 17 times, and *per capita* GDP 12-fold. Outside a handful of coastal provinces, however, growth faltered. The average income in Central and Western China reached 77% of the national average in 1999, inching up to just 80% in 2008.⁸⁶ Iniquity may not have been the principal trigger behind rapidly rising 'mass group incidents'—large-scale protests, i.e. sit-ins, strikes, group petitions, rallies, demonstrations, marches, traffic blocking and building seizures, public melees, rioting and inter-ethnic strife, but central planners considered these a key contributor. Official figures showed 'mass incidents' rose from 8700 in 1993 to 32,000 in 1999, 50,000 in 2002, surpassing 58,000 in 2003, 90,000 in 2006 and an unconfirmed 127,000 in 2008, when Beijing stopped publishing strife data.⁸⁷

Opacity over the incidents' scale, nature and triggers rendered causal connections conjectural. Economic triggers cut across ethnic divisions, and ethnic violence was rarely amenable to economic solutions. One study of certain categories of 'mass incidents' rocking China during 2003–2009, for instance, found that the highest frequency, 54, occurred in Guangdong, one of China's most prosperous provinces, and the lowest, 1, occurred in Jilin, Qinghai and Tibet, the last two among the poorest.⁸⁸ Societies experiencing rapid change, with dramatic asset growth for some, juxtaposed with slower accumulation or little for many, via a sharp transition from state-protected equality to state-authorised uneven protection, often betrayed angry despair.⁸⁹ China's single-party rule with loosened economic levers contrasting with

⁸⁴Wen (2004).

⁸⁵Ma (2006) and Information Office (2005).

⁸⁶Huang et al. (2010) and Dunford and Bonschab (2013).

⁸⁷Tanner (2005) and Tong and Lei (2010, pp. 23–33).

⁸⁸Tong and Lei (2010, p. 25).

⁸⁹Sekiyama (2016).

strong political control generated difficult to manage friction. The CPC's authoritarian political imperatives left only economic measures with which to address mass outrage.

3.6 In the *Great Recession's* Wake

Beijing responded to the US subprime financial crisis wreaking global havoc with a RMB 4tn (\$586bn) stimulus package designed to boost infrastructure building, social spending equivalent to 2–3% of GDP and credit availability, to encourage private consumption. As GDP growth averaged 9% during 2008–2011, the *Great Recession's* peak, which either stalled or catalysed recession in most major economies, China's response was considered successful.⁹⁰ However, while China's GDP expanded by 14.2% in 2007, the stimulus enabled it to grow by only 9.6% in 2008 and 9.2% in 2009, indicating much pain.⁹¹ The optimism driving China's stock markets in 2005–2007 dissipated. FDI flows fell by 15% to \$121.68bn in 2008 and by 42% to \$70.32bn in 2009, recovering to \$124.93bn in 2010.⁹² By early 2009, more than 20m migrant workers, 15.3% of the 130m who powered coastal construction and manufacturing, had lost work. Non-migrant job losses, too, rose; officials warned of risks of social unrest.⁹³

CPC leaders learnt from the experience: China needed to 'be prepared for extreme cases' of exogenous shocks while striving for 'the best possible results' by dealing with 'abrupt shocks and impacts', and making 'long-term preparations for structural changes resulting from the crisis'; China must 'understand the changed implications' of its strategic opportunities to seek 'the widest intersection between Chinese and global interests' apparent in 'the domestic market driving a world economic recovery, acquisition of technologies of developed countries and investment in infrastructure'; and finally, China must 'concentrate on our own affairs', avoid entanglements in conflicts, focusing instead 'on really important matters to substantially improve our domestic conditions'.⁹⁴ These lessons guided China's recovery efforts, including in Western China. There were then few indications of any global ambitions driving Beijing.

China's Western Development Strategy transformed the region's economy, but did not heal gulfs separating the Han majority from minority nationalities. Differences deeply affected Lamaist-Buddhist Tibetans in Tibet, Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan, and Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. Mutually reinforcing ethno-cultural, political and economic tensions flowing from unresolved grievances exploded in Tibet in 2008 and Xinjiang in 2009. Security forces' 'strike hard' operations, with the PLA

⁹⁰Yi and Jing (2017) and Cunha et al. (2012).

⁹¹Li et al. (2012a).

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Yi and Jing (2017), Giles et al. (2012) and Anderlini and Dyer (2009).

⁹⁴Liu (2014).

providing a 'forceful guarantee', restored control, but cost lives, limbs, assets and confidence. Beijing swiftly incorporated Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan and Yunnan into its Tibet Development Plan. To drive Xinjiang's growth, the Muslim majority trade centre of Kashgar/Kashi was designated a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). China also engaged with Turkey, the Turkic-speaking Uighurs 'cultural homeland', attenuating any tacit Turkish endorsement of Uighur irredentism. Tibetans, with their iconic leader, the Dalai Lama, still symbolising 'splittism' from India, seemed less persuaded.⁹⁵

Presiding over a PBSC meeting in late May 2010, Hu Jintao assigned greater import to Western Development Strategy implementation. The PBSC noted, 'the Western part of the nation is strategically important and there should be special policies to support the region'. Support should be 'increased with greater resolution and force'. In addition to infrastructure building, water conservancy and natural resources-based industrialisation, now education, technological innovation, health care, employment, social security and cultural development gained salience. The PBSC also ordered developing 'old revolutionary bases in poor, ethnic and border regions', as 'ethnic and religious harmony is important to the region's stability'.⁹⁶

Five weeks later, marking the Strategy's 10th anniversary, Hu and Wen addressed heads of implementing ministries and agencies at a 'work meeting on developing Western China'. Although much had been done, Hu worried that 'the development gap between eastern and western regions remains broad, and the west is still a conundrum for the country's endeavour in building an overall moderately prosperous society'. Slamming poor execution, Wen urged 'serious and good implementation of all the policies and measures' adopted by Beijing. He asked that the region's resources be utilised to develop 'modern' and environmentally friendly industries, while advancing agricultural and tertiary sectors. He pledged 'vigorous efforts in social development' enabling western compatriots to 'share in the fruits of national economic progress'. Wen vowed to focus Beijing's poverty alleviation efforts on southern Xinjiang, eastern Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and Western Yunnan Province.⁹⁷

Given the strategy's rising profile in elite calculus, urgency flowing from the Great Recession's impact and growing social disharmony, Beijing invited neighbouring states and potential overseas partners to help develop Western China and fashion terrestrial connectivity binding Central and Western China, Eurasia and Europe. Leadership-level exchanges began in October 2009 in Chengdu, at the 10th Western China International Economy and Trade Fair and the 2nd Western China International Cooperation Forum. Hosting the summit, Wen welcomed the Prime Ministers of East Timor, Cambodia, Cote d'Ivoire, Kenya, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.⁹⁸ Discussions boosted ties and addressed concerns precipitated by deepening Chinese economic

⁹⁵Shan and Clarke (2011).

⁹⁶Xinhua (2010).

⁹⁷Report (2010b).

⁹⁸Xanana Gusmao, Hun Sen, Guillaume Soro, Raila Odinga, Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, and Nguyen Tan Dung.

engagement. Wen's message: Beijing encouraged 'the Western Region to expand exchange and cooperation with these countries'.⁹⁹

Wen briefed foreign leaders on the Strategy's goals: 'changing the backward outlook of Western China, building a moderately prosperous society in all respects, improving national land development pattern, promoting balanced regional development, expanding the scope of opening up both internally and externally, and fostering new economic growth areas'. In the first decade, Beijing provided over RMB 3.5tn in 'transfer payment and special subsidies', earmarking over RMB 730bn for the region's 'construction projects'. In 2000–2008, the west's GDP grew at an annual average of 11.7% from RMB 1.66tn to RMB 5.82tn. Revenues rose at 19.6%, and fixed asset investment, by 22.9%, exceeding national averages. During 1999–2008, urban and rural per capita disposable income grew by 105% and 74%, respectively, with 9.54m rural poor crossing the poverty threshold. Western China's highway mileage increased by over 888,000 km, and railway track length, by over 8,000 km. Regional airports now numbered 79, nearly half of China's total. Landmark projects like the Qinghai–Tibet railway, west to east gas transmission line and west to east electricity transmission grid, became operational.

Major water conservancy, energy and telecommunications projects progressed. Nearly 200,000 eastern Chinese businesses invested over RMB 2.2tn in the west which, in 2008, absorbed FDI worth \$6.62bn while its foreign trade reached \$106.8bn.¹⁰⁰ Despite the devastatingly coincidental Sichuan earthquake and the *Great Recession* in 2008, with Beijing devoting 43% of its stimulus to the region, it began recovering. In the first half of 2009, regional GDP grew by 11.8%, urban fixed asset investment by 42.1%, consumer goods sales by 19% and local government revenues by 12.8%, all above national figures. For the Strategy's 2nd decade, Wen made six promises. Two of these underscored Beijing's vision of Western China becoming a nexus of dense Sino-Eurasian connectivity channels:

- Build major transport hubs and passage ways that connect China with the rest of the world; speed up the construction of modern infrastructure
- Deepen reform and opening-up to expand exchanges and cooperation between the region and the rest of China, and the world at large, at a higher level.

Encouraging his guests, Wen outlined recent and planned progress: The China-ASEAN FTA would be completed in 2010; trade cooperation among SCO members was increasing; Beijing would 'actively push forward' Lancang-Mekong sub-regional cooperation, ensure success of the China-ASEAN Expo in Nanning, the Western China International Economy and Trade Fair in Chengdu, and the China–South Asia Business Forum in Kunming. Wen pledged to finance a China-ASEAN Fund on Investment Cooperation, provide credit support to SCO member-states and develop an East Asian foreign exchange reserve pool. Stressing Beijing's commitment to fashioning physical and normative connectivity linking Western China

⁹⁹Report (2009b).

¹⁰⁰Wen (2009).

and wider Eurasia, Wen urged the region's deeper engagement with neighbouring countries in:

- Energy and transportation
- Trade and investment
- Energy conservation and environmental protection and
- Regional and international affairs¹⁰¹

Foreign leaders, seeking national economic gains, responded to China's trans-regional aspirations. Thereafter, partner states sent high-level delegations to these annual gatherings, reviewing progress, refining plans and expanding networks of collective, connective, action.

China's 11th FYP laid 8,000 km of new rail tracks and 365,000 km of new motorways across the west, helping to boost annual growth rates to 13.6%.¹⁰² The region needed to sustain the pace for five years, and Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan, promised a key role, as Hu Jintao stressed during another visit: 'Recognizing the huge potential in bilateral economic and trade cooperation, we have set a target of \$40bn for bilateral trade by 2015'. Energy cooperation being 'very important to the development of Sino-Kazakh relations, we agreed to continue expanding and deepening energy cooperation. To reinforce cooperation on oil and gas, we will ensure the smooth construction of several oil and gas pipelines'.¹⁰³

New motorways, expanded border trade facilities and reduced regulatory bureaucratic impediments eased economic integration. The process would mature by the end of China's 12th FYP (2011–2015). The NDRC, leading the FYP drafting effort, stressed substituting export dependence with domestic consumption, accelerating service sector growth and establishing capacity quotas for 'new energy' sources, i.e. nuclear, hydro, solar and wind. Abandoning past emphases on infrastructure-building and industrialisation in the strategy's previous iterations, planners now sought 'more balanced growth' between developed and poorer regions.¹⁰⁴

The State Council approved the NDRC's draft 12th FYP for further promoting the economy of the Western Regions, i.e. Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, Shaanxi, Guizhou, Yunnan and Chongqing, in February 2011. The plan emphasised building 'key economic regions', promoting agricultural production of 'main areas', sustainable development of key 'ecological zones', intensive development of resource-rich areas, hastening completion of 'border development zones' and 'leap-forward development' of areas with 'special difficulties'. Noting, 'infrastructure construction is the main guarantee to the western development', planners organised the region into 11 zones¹⁰⁵:

- Chengdu-Chongqing
- Guanzhong-Tianshui

¹⁰¹Report (2009a).

¹⁰²Dezan (2012).

¹⁰³Hu and Nazarbayev (2011).

¹⁰⁴Report (2010a).

¹⁰⁵Liu (2011) and Report (2011).

- Beihai Gulf
- Hohhot–Baotou–Yinchuan–Yulin
- Lanzhou–Xining–Geermu
- North Tianshan
- Central Yunnan
- Central Guizhou
- Yellow River valley in Ningxia
- Central and Southern Tibet
- Shaanxi–Gansu–Ningxia.

The Chengdu–Chongqing economic zone, comprising Chongqing Municipality, 15 cities and 31 districts and counties in Sichuan Province covering 200,000 square km, received top billing. With thriving auto and machinery plants, science and technology hubs and defence factories, this was already a leading industrial base. By 2015, the plan envisaged it becoming Western China's key economic centre and, by 2020, one of China's 'strongest comprehensive regions', to join the Bohai Bay, Yangtze River Delta and the Pearl River Delta as the 'fourth pole' of China's economy. The plan integrated these 'poles' via new Beijing–Kunming and Shanghai–Chengdu transport and communication corridors; 15,000 km of new highways would link Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang and Qinghai; urbanisation would top 45%.¹⁰⁶

Western China, as a connectivity hub, would link Northeast Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia. New railway lines joining Chongqing, Lanzhou, Urumqi, Guilin and Guangzhou would knit Xinjiang closer to eastern China, enabling Chengdu, Xian, Lanzhou, Urumqi and Kunming to 'serve as major container stations for goods criss-crossing their way across Asia'.¹⁰⁷ Phase II of the China–Kazakhstan crude oil pipeline, the Dushanzi–Urumqi pipeline, the Jiaopiao–Ruili–Kunming section of the China–Myanmar crude oil pipeline and sub-sections of the Kunming–Chongqing pipeline would either be completed or brought near completion. Provinces would industrialise by processing mineral and other resources for producing energy, petrochemicals and fertilisers. By 2015, Western China would drive Beijing's terrestrial economic outreach.

Emphasising China's drive to forge trans-continental economic/infrastructural connectivity along a new Silk Road, Wen Jiabao framed Beijing's regional developmental goals in Eurasian terms. Welcoming the Presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Maldives, Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan,¹⁰⁸ over a thousand Eurasian officials and business executives, and multilateral organisations attending the 2012 China–Eurasia Development and Cooperation Forum in Urumqi, Xinjiang, Wen recounted Silk Road history. Reviewing the contemporary landscape, he enthused, 'As world multipolarity and economic globalization gather momentum, Eurasian countries have strived to enhance themselves through unity and achieved faster development. Their mutual political trust has deepened, trade and investment have rapidly expanded, regional and subregional cooperation has flourished'.

¹⁰⁶Dezan (2012).

¹⁰⁷Dezan (2012).

¹⁰⁸Almazbek Atambayev, Mohammed Waheed, Hun Sen, Karim Massimov and Akil Akilov.

Over the past decade, China's trade with Central Asia, West Asia and South Asia had surged annually by 30.8%, growing from \$25.4bn to over \$370bn. Chinese firms, signing project contracts worth \$470bn, had invested nearly \$250bn in Eurasian economies.¹⁰⁹ Wen noted, the financial crisis had inflicted much pain, and 'profound and complex historic changes' presented Eurasia with 'both rare opportunities of development and cooperation and many severe challenges'. China and its partners were 'speeding up' construction of the 'grand Eurasia passage'. The China–Kazakhstan oil and gas pipelines were operational; a second China–Kazakh railway link was ready; the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan motorway was nearly so. 'A connectivity network consisting of roads, railways, air flights, communications and oil and gas pipelines is taking shape'.¹¹⁰ He proposed a four-step process:

- Enhance political trust to safeguard regional peace and stability
- Open markets wider to promote common development
- Advance cooperation in cross-border infrastructure to accelerate connectivity growth
- Deepen cultural and people to people exchanges to enhance friendship among societies.

Wen drew attention to Xinjiang's locus within the new Silk Road and its rapidly improving developmental status as an exemplar of the 'glory of the Silk Road' that could boost 'the vision energising the new Eurasia for the benefit of its peoples'. This was the baton Wen Jiabao and Hu Jintao handed to Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang two months later.

3.7 Xi Jinping's 'New Era' of Reform and Opening-up

In November 2012, CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping and a new PBSC with Li Keqiang as Premier of the State Council, assumed leadership. In his farewell address, Hu underscored his theoretical legacy, the Scientific Outlook on Development, proposed to the 16th CPCCC in 2003, and which was written into the CPC Constitution by the 17th National Congress in 2007. Hu noted the framework had been informed by China's rapid economic growth generating 'a series of problems including excessive consumption of resources, serious environmental pollution and a widening gap between the rich and poor'.¹¹¹ China must address these with a scientific approach bearing 'major immediate significance and far-reaching historical significance for upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics', a recurrent refrain colouring China's political–economic discourse.

Hu reported that notwithstanding considerable progress made, 'much room for improvement in our work' and 'a lot of difficulties and problems on our road ahead'

¹⁰⁹Wen (2012).

¹¹⁰Wen (2012).

¹¹¹Hu (2012).

remained. 'Scientific development' demanded 'freeing up the mind, seeking truth from facts, keeping up with the times and being realistic and pragmatic'. This would enable the CPC to 'boldly engage in practice and make changes and innovations, respond to the call of the times, follow the aspirations of the people, ensure that the party is always full of vigour and that China always has the driving force for development to open a bright future for developing socialism with Chinese characteristics through the creative practices of the party and the people'.¹¹² Hu's legacy was the inheritance on which Xi would erect his own policy-edifice.

Xi spent a year reenergising the CPC and state organs still recovering from the Bo Xilai crisis. Bo, CPC Secretary of Chongqing, a member of the Politburo, a rising star and, like Xi, a 'princeling', was stripped of all his titles, tried, convicted and sentenced to prison after his sacked police chief, Wang Lijun, sought refuge at the US Consulate in Chengdu in February 2012. Wang was taken into custody after a night spent at the Consulate. His testimony and further investigations led to the arrest of Bo and his wife, Gu Kailai, the latter in connection with the late 2011 murder of a British business associate, Neil Heywood. After confessing, Gu received a life term. Bo, convicted of abuse of power, bribery and corruption,¹¹³ too, received a life sentence. This shocking fall of a CPC leader traumatised cadres both ideologically and functionally as Bo associates, seen as more 'red' than was acceptable, began toppling over.¹¹⁴

The NDRC, fountainhead of Chinese economic planning, had a busy year as Xi and Li took charge. Since 2010, NDRC economists had worked with WBG colleagues, examining the trajectory of China's post-1978 'reform and opening-up' progress. Diagnosing looming challenges, they recommended further reforms. This NDRC-WBG report, 'China 2030: Building a Modern, Harmonious, and Creative Society', launched in 2013, charted the pathway guiding Beijing's economic future.¹¹⁵ The framework, enabling China to overcome myriad pitfalls precipitated by three decades of breakneck growth, directed Beijing's economic vectors towards its two centenary goals. Many major initiatives that Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang proclaimed in their first term, flowed from this seminal study.

Other NDRC economists spent 2013, the year Xi proposed his SREB/MSR visions, reviewing implementation of the Western Development Strategy, reporting in early 2014. Twelfth FYP goals, e.g. faster than national average GDP growth and residential income growth, were being met. However, railway construction, water resources management, and energy-saving and ecological protection targets were not. The NDRC refined the plan stressing infrastructure building, urbanisation and environmental protection. Beijing would 'push forward the construction of railway, highway and water projects', while also addressing transport and water supply issues. Railway bottlenecks prevented mineral-rich western provinces from shipping goods to 'resource-thirsty regions'. In 2013, construction began on 20 'major projects' with

¹¹²Hu (2012).

¹¹³Choi (2018).

¹¹⁴Wishik (2012), Osnos (2012), Potter (2012) and Liu (2012).

¹¹⁵Liu et al. (2013).

\$53.87bn invested in new highways, airports, hydro-electric plants and wind-power stations.¹¹⁶ In 2014, NDRC planned to open up Chongqing, Chengdu, Xian and Nanning, and 'step up efforts' to build SREB linkages binding 24 cities in eight countries.

By August 2015, when Xiamen in coastal Fujian began freight railway services to Lodz, Poland, 12 Chinese cities were connected by train to Europe. In March 2017, the EU–China Smart and Secure Trade Lane (SSTL) facility, enabling swift customs inspection of goods shipped by sea, was extended to China–Europe railway services. In April, Xiamen launched direct freight rail services to Moscow, thus becoming the first Chinese coastal hub to link up with Europe via both maritime and terrestrial routes. In January 2018, Chinese and Kazakh railways opened a freight service from Urumqi, Xinjiang, to Baku, Azerbaijan, where containers were loaded on to ships heading to Europe, slashing journey time. In 2017, China sent over 3000 trains to Europe;¹¹⁷ in 2018, China–Europe freight trains made 6363 trips between 59 Chinese cities with 49 destinations in 15 European countries.¹¹⁸

Efforts begun years earlier now knit China and Europe via Central Asia.¹¹⁹ This resulted from persistent, accretive, evolving, elite-driven planning and policy-execution while *Zhongnanhai* changed hands. Twelfth FYP programmes, especially those in Central and Western China, shaped these outcomes. Li Keqiang reported that in 2000–2016, Beijing invested \$914bn (RMB 6.35tn) in '300 major projects mostly in infrastructure and energy', across Western China. RMB 743.8bn went into 30 major regional projects in 2016, the first year of the 13th FYP.¹²⁰ Li urged rapid growth of big data, cloud computing and 'sharing economy' as regional development drivers, inviting foreign investment and pledging to 'integrate big data and the Internet with manufacturing', upgrade traditional industry and protect IPR.¹²¹ Results became apparent. Chongqing and Guizhou, growing at 10.7% and 10.5%, respectively, led 28 provinces, province-level municipalities and autonomous regions, in GDP growth during January–September 2016. Chongqing built automotive, 'strategic emerging manufacturing' and high-value high-tech industries; Guizhou promoted 'supply-side structural reform and speeded up the shift from old growth engines to new ones'.¹²² Their success energised region-wide efforts.

The NDRC's 13th FYP Western Development Plan (2016–2020), submitted to the State Council in 2016, was approved on 24 January 2017. The final version stressed basic infrastructure, ecological protection, coordinated urbanisation, industrialisation, 'informatisation' and agricultural modernisation. Improving the people's lives, social harmony, border security and ethnic unity, too, received attention. Implementation needed to cohere with 13th FYP execution as well as BRI and the Yangtze River

¹¹⁶Chen (2014).

¹¹⁷Xinhua (2018d).

¹¹⁸Report (2019c) and Song (2018).

¹¹⁹Yang (2019) and Xinhua (2017b).

¹²⁰Xinhua (2016a) and Li et al. (2016).

¹²¹Xinhua (2016b).

¹²²Information Office (2016).

economic belt development plans.¹²³ Against this backdrop, Xi Jinping invited the world to the May 2017 inaugural BRF. Despite progress in linking Western China to rest of the country, Eurasia and Europe, and plans to build it up over the next 18 months, the scale of the task became apparent in an August 2018 review.

Premier Li, head of the State Council's Leading Group promoting western development, while noting 'enormous achievements' in the region's socio-economic progress, noted large gaps demanding greater efforts by both central and regional authorities, and increased infusion of private capital. Major railway links, e.g. Sichuan–Tibet and Chongqing–Yunnan lines, and 'key water diversion projects' in Yunnan, Qinghai, Gansu and Guangxi Zhuang, needed faster progress. The development of the Internet for enhancing online retail and wholesale trade, for the extension of education and healthcare facilities in remote areas, and further development of employment opportunities, offered possibilities. The region, covering 6.8m km² and a population of 30%, accounted for a fifth of China's GDP in 2017. During 2013–2018, the west recorded an annual GDP growth of 8.8%, with yearly fixed asset investment rising by 13%, lifting 35m people out of poverty.¹²⁴ But with 55m rural poor in 2015, achieving the centennial goal of eliminating poverty by 2020 demanded 'significant policy-adjustments'.¹²⁵

3.8 The Silk Road Economic Belt's Longitudinal Spurs

BRI projects could take two decades to build and another to mature. Unstable governments, poor governance, uncertain financial management and incompetent oversight posed potential risks. With maritime shipping still cheaper, if slower, than rail freight, and rail containers carrying Chinese exports to Europe often returning empty, challenged SREB's commercial merit and prospects.¹²⁶ Meaningful cost-benefit analyses would take longer but the experience of SREB's longitudinal spurs offered insights into the ground reality. Conceived in 1954 as PRC-USSR railway tie-ups, by 2018, SREB became a 'Eurasian Continental Land Bridge' connecting China to Europe. By the end of June 2018, trains making the China–Europe run in both directions had made over 9000 trips. However, as some Chinese cities and provinces sought to take advantage of government subsidies, many trains carried several empty containers to make up the numbers.¹²⁷ In the seas, the MSR linked Coastal China to Eastern Africa and South-Western Europe via ports, airports and industrial hubs along the shores of the SCS and the Indian Ocean. Trade between China and its BRI partners

¹²³Information Office (2017b).

¹²⁴Xinhua (2018c).

¹²⁵Report (2018h).

¹²⁶Hillman (2016).

¹²⁷Leng (2019).

reached \$664bn in the first seven months of 2018, up 11.3% year-on-year, exceeding a quarter of China's total foreign trade.¹²⁸

In July–September 2018, BRI trade grew 20.1% year-on-year to \$332bn, with Chinese exports reaching \$182bn and imports, \$150.5bn.¹²⁹ Aggregate trade between China and other BRI partners in 2013–2018 reached \$6.47tn. In these five years, more than 80 'economic and trade cooperation zones' were built in various BRI partner states and over 244,000 jobs had been created for non-Chinese locals.¹³⁰ Estimates for 2019 suggested China's exports to BRI states could increase by \$56bn and its imports from them rise by \$61bn.¹³¹ In the first half of 2019, China's actual trade with BRI partners hit \$617.5bn, an increase of 9.7% year-on-year, compared to overall trade growth of 3.9% during the same period.¹³² Long before Xi's twin proposals, however, partner states had initiated north-south 'economic corridors' designed to integrate Eurasia and its maritime periphery, corridors that now connected the SREB and MSR alignments. One unheralded SREB/MSR spur, the China–Singapore Connectivity Initiative (CCI), showed how some projects steadily progressed while others stalled. Launched in 2017, CCI was designed to link Chongqing to Singapore, reduce shipping distances by 1000 km and slash cargo voyages by 12 days. An unstated aim was to bypass the Malacca Strait choke point.

In 2018, CCI-borne cargo, using 660 sea-rail trains, 100 freight trains and 500 specialised cross-border cargo vehicles, travelled among 58 ports in 35 countries, but a planned high-speed Malaysia–Singapore section suffered an unexpected delay.¹³³ CCI and several other connective spurs, e.g. the China–Kazakhstan–Azerbaijan and the CKTI railway lines, germinated in the early twenty-first century, but the China–Mainland Southeast Asia, China–Pakistan, the Balkan Silk Road and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar alignments accreted over decades. The origins, evolution and progress recorded by these 'corridors' showed that each uniquely combined diverse elements and interests. Even within each spur, segments grew at varying paces. Chinese initiative and finance, while essential, proved insufficient for success. With the reticence of even one partner precluding completion, the 'corridors' presaged BRI's mixed prospects.

3.8.1 The Lancang–Mekong Economic Corridor

On 15 March 2003, with world attention riveted on the USA's imminent invasion of Iraq, all passengers and crew aboard a New York-to-Frankfurt flight were off-loaded on arrival and 'taken to hospital isolation'. The pandemic spread of the

¹²⁸Liang and Bianji (2018).

¹²⁹Report (2018b).

¹³⁰Li (2019b).

¹³¹Chen (2019).

¹³²Report (2019b).

¹³³Palma (2018) and Hongyu (2018).

severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus had caused atypical human pneumonia in Canada, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Hours after that German action, Gro Bruntland, Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), proclaimed SARS a 'worldwide health threat'.¹³⁴ The pandemic led ASEAN to summon a special summit in Bangkok in April.

The host, Thailand's Prime Minister, in addition to counter-SARS action, proposed an 'Economic Cooperation Strategy' to counterparts from co-riparian Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar to reduce economic gaps between Thailand and its neighbours, harmonise relations and strengthen ASEAN. The four leaders met again in Bagan, Myanmar, in November, adopting the Bagan Declaration on cooperation in five sectors, endorsed a decade-long Economic Cooperation Strategy Plan of Action listing 46 common projects and 224 bilateral ones. Underscoring shared riverine interests, they named the initiative the 'Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy' (ACMECS). Vietnam joined in May 2004.

ACMECS leveraged bilateral and group cooperation to join other regional programmes to secure 'common benefits, shared prosperity, enhanced solidarity, peace, stability and good neighbourliness'.¹³⁵ Working groups focused on

- Trade/investment facilitation
- Public health and social welfare
- Human resources development
- Industrial/energy cooperation
- Tourism cooperation
- Transport connectivity
- Agricultural development and
- Environmental protection.

China's relations with ACMECS members, except Vietnam, were close. Despite Hanoi-Beijing tensions,¹³⁶ Chinese trade and investment featured prominently across the sub-region. The biggest Chinese projects, including a gas pipeline and an oil pipeline running north-east from Myanmar's Bay of Bengal coast to Kunming in Yunnan, were in Myanmar. Feasibility talks began in 2004. In December 2005, PetroChina contracted to buy Myanmar's natural gas for 30 years. The NDRC approved the twin pipelines project in April 2007. In November 2008, China and Myanmar agreed to build a \$1.5bn oil pipeline and a \$1.04bn gas pipeline. PetroChina's parent company, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), signed a contract on Christmas Day, 2008, with a Daewoo-led consortium, to buy gas from Myanmar's offshore Shwe gas field.¹³⁷ Officials signed state-level contracts on

¹³⁴Media Centre (2003).

¹³⁵Department of Foreign Trade (2016).

¹³⁶Ali (2017a).

¹³⁷Report (2008).

the two pipelines in March and June 2009. Work on the Maday Island deep sea oil terminal began on 31 October 2009.¹³⁸

The Kyaukpyu–Kunming gas pipeline, with an annual capacity of 12bn cubic metres, completed in June 2013, began moving both Myanmar and imported gas to China in October.¹³⁹ After a 300,000 ton supertanker discharged its crude cargo at the Maday Island terminal for the first time, the oil pipeline began operating on 29 January 2015. The pipelines cut oil and gas sailing distance by 700 miles, and time, by 30%.¹⁴⁰ Promises to pay royalties worth \$53bn over 30 years to Naypyitaw, and \$25m to regional authorities for social development projects, addressed local grievances.¹⁴¹ Reduced time, costs and avoidance of the Malacca Strait mitigated China's 'Malacca Dilemma'-rooted energy insecurity.¹⁴² Other ACMECS states shared less acute but still significant interests with China.

At the November 2014 ASEAN-China summit in Naypyitaw, Li Keqiang proposed building on the Thai initiative on sustainable development across the Lancang–Mekong sub-region by forging a China-ACMECS grouping. ASEAN leaders 'welcomed the countries of the Mekong region and China to explore possibilities for setting up relevant dialogue and cooperation mechanisms'.¹⁴³ The Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) programme followed. The first LMC Foreign Ministers' meeting in Yunnan in November 2015 affirmed the group's framework documents. Hosting his five LMC counterparts at their first summit in March 2016 in Sanya, Hainan, Li announced a special LMC fund, with \$1.6bn in preferential loans and \$10bn in credit facilities.¹⁴⁴ Leaders insisted LMC operate on 'the principles of consensus, equality, mutual consultation and coordination, voluntarism, common contribution and shared benefits, and respect for the UN Charter and international laws'.¹⁴⁵

They endorsed a 26-point developmental cooperation charter to 'Encourage synergy between China's BRI and LMC activities and projects, as well as relevant development programs of the Mekong countries, including the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC)', and 'Step up both hardware and software connectivity among the LMC countries. Improve the Lancang-Mekong rivers, roads and railways network, push forward key infrastructure projects to build a comprehensive connectivity network of highway, railway, waterway, ports and air linkages in the Lancang-Mekong region; expedite the construction of network of power grids, telecommunication and the Internet; implement trade facilitation measures, promote trade and investment and facilitate business travel'.¹⁴⁶ The LMC advanced BRI's shared goals, with periodic official, ministerial and summit meetings driving progress.

¹³⁸Xinhua (2009).

¹³⁹Aung (2013) and Report (2014).

¹⁴⁰Meyer (2015).

¹⁴¹Meyer (2015).

¹⁴²Hook (2013).

¹⁴³Sein (2014).

¹⁴⁴Liu (2016).

¹⁴⁵FMPRC (2016b).

¹⁴⁶Ibid., Agreed Measures, paragraphs 6–7.

Member-states established LMC National Secretariats/Coordination Units in respective capitals before the third Foreign Ministers' meeting in Dali, China, in December 2017, when they approved a Chinese-drafted FYP of Action and its first set of projects. Beijing extended fresh concessional loans worth \$1.1bn and credit worth \$5bn for 45 'early harvest' projects.¹⁴⁷ Officials reviewed the FYP's project proposals for leadership approval at their second summit in Phnom Penh in January 2018. The plan indicated coalescing convergence.¹⁴⁸ LMC institutionalised consultation and joint management of political-security issues, economic and sustainable developmental activities and sociocultural and people to people exchanges. Chinese funding, technical support and training and investment incentivised collaboration; voluntary, consensual decision making offered leverage to LMC's weaker members. The first Chinese-funded LMC projects were in Cambodia and Laos. In late 2017, using Chinese designs and hardware, Thailand began building a high-speed railway linking Bangkok to Nong Khai on the Lao border. The Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge over the Mekong beckoned to Vientiane 25 km upriver, as the first phase of a regional connectivity project.¹⁴⁹

The LMC's 'foundation-laying stage' (2018–2019) would be followed by an 'expansion stage' (2020–2022), with Beijing initially funding 132 projects. Several, e.g. the Kunming–Bangkok road, China–Laos railway, and Vietnam's Long Jiang Industrial Park, were listed in BRI portfolios; others could follow. This first Chinese-built sub-regional cooperative institution offered templates for others. Progress from initial proposal in November 2014 to formal launch of the 2018–2022 FYP in January 2018 was rapid,¹⁵⁰ but trans-frontier collaboration across the 'Greater Mekong Subregion' (GMS) went back decades. Historically inhabited by four loosely related ethnic-Dai principalities, the Lancang–Mekong basin below Tibetan highlands was incorporated into China (Yunnan), Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. As frontiersland troubled by ethnic conflicts fuelled by drug-financed warlordism, the GMS was a volatile cockpit of interstate intrigue and security operations. In 1957, ESCAP proposed a Mekong Committee to drive regional development,¹⁵¹ but Cold War era political challenges thwarted action.

The GMS received scant attention beyond state consolidation efforts. Then, in 1987, Myanmar's informal and formal border trade with Yunnan, catalysed by Yangoon's liberalisation policies resonating with China's fast-growing economy, rose 72% over 1986. New official border transit points, opened in 1988, boosted trade by another 65%.¹⁵² Sino-Lao relations, helped by China funding the 1960s–1970s era 'Mao Zedong Road' in Phong Saly region, chilled when Laos sided with Vietnam in the 1978–1979 Sino-Vietnamese crisis. Sino-Lao relations were normalised in 1988 but trade volumes remained modest. Sino-Vietnamese commerce, suspended until

¹⁴⁷Information Office (2017a).

¹⁴⁸Xinhua (2017c, 2018a) and Report (2018c).

¹⁴⁹Lowe (2018), Deng (2018), FMPRC (2016a) and Song (2015).

¹⁵⁰LMC National Secretariat (2018).

¹⁵¹Severino (2000).

¹⁵²Berman (1998, p. 3).

1990, rapidly grew since. Sino-Thai trade, exploding from \$700m in 1992 and 1993 to over \$2bn in 1994, showed the potential. However, poor infrastructure, primitive roads and railways, old cross-Mekong ferries, diverse hardware designs and regulatory norms, and varied levels of interest in the six capitals, constrained 'natural' trade growth between Yunnan and its five GMS/LMC neighbours.

Post-Cold War dynamics catalysed change. Beginning in 1992, the six neighbours, reviving the Mekong Committee's GMS Economic Cooperation Programme, met repeatedly to coordinate infrastructure development and investment plans. They asked the ADB to be the programme's Secretariat, precipitating an 'economic quadrangle', integrating a market of 50m populating 600,000 km² in the Mekong basin.¹⁵³ In May 1993, the Governor of Yunnan proclaimed a 'Lancang Economic Belt' spanning GMS neighbours, with mining operations in the basin's mountainous upper sections, hydro-power and timber-processing projects in the middle sections, and the lower sections open to international river traffic. This coincided with a joint field survey by specialists from China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand and Premier Li Peng's presence when the Governor made his 'Kunming proclamation'. Yunnan's provincial administrators took this leadership-level endorsement as the start of a drive to build new transport networks from Kunming across the Mekong basin southward to the sea.¹⁵⁴

China promoted GMS/LMC trade links as mutually beneficial 'South-South' engagement because Yunnan's transport links to coastal China could only handle half of the province's coal and phosphates output. Access to foreign markets via LMC ports would help while meeting regional developmental needs, but connectivity required concerted effort.¹⁵⁵ Pressure for such cooperation grew when the USSR and Soviet-bloc states suddenly dissolved, forcing Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos to seek new trade partners. In December 1993, a Sino-Lao border treaty was signed; a Lao-Myanmar accord was concluded in October 1995, enabling formal boosting of infrastructure development and trans-frontier trade, including riverine commerce.

The fourth GMS conference in September 1994 listed priority projects as ASEAN economic ministers and Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry launched plans to help develop Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. In April 1995, the moribund Mekong Committee was revived into the Mekong River Commission. The ADB, UNDP, ESCAP, the Tourism Authority of Thailand and the Mekong River Commission together pressed for progress. In May 1996, the ADB offered a technical assistance grant of \$800,000 for training staff in environmental protection measures. At the August 1996 GMS conference in Kunming, the ADB extended \$300m in loans for Greater Mekong Basin projects. Japan and New Zealand, too, helped. With China and ASEAN driving leadership and the ADB offering financial help and technical supervision, GMS was ready when LMC was proposed.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³Report (1996).

¹⁵⁴Central News Agency (1993) and Dao (1996).

¹⁵⁵Berman (1998, p. 13, fn. 10–11).

¹⁵⁶GMS Secretariat (2015) and Severino (2000).

The major BRI-ASEAN/ACMECS project designed to connect China to South-east Asia was the 'Pan-Asia Railway Network' with three key routes, all beginning in Kunming: Eastern route linking Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand—\$600m; central route linking Laos, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore—\$33bn; and a western route linking Myanmar and Thailand—\$2bn. Lateral spurs would knit the region into an interconnected whole.¹⁵⁷ Work progressed slowly and along the central route, was suspended in 2018, after Mahathir Mohamad assumed Malaysia's premiership. LMC projects advanced against a darkening regional backdrop.

3.8.2 The Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor

The outcome of a decades-long initiative launched by Yunnan's Development and Reform Commission (YDRC), research centres and universities, the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC)'s slow progress underscored pitfalls confronting China's regional connectivity enterprise. Years of track-2, track-1.5 and, finally, track-1 engagement, aimed at linking Kunming to Kolkata (K2K) via road, rail and riverine transport networks binding Myanmar and Bangladesh to India and China failed to deliver. The K2K vision grew around a 2800 km road alignment from Kunming via Dali, Tengchong and Ruili (China), Mandalay and Ka Lay (Myanmar) Imphal (India), Tamabil (Bangladesh), Silchar (India), Dhaka and Jessore (Bangladesh), to Kolkata.¹⁵⁸ Xi Jinping secured Narendra Modi's endorsement of the BCIM blueprint during Xi's September 2014 state visit to India, where he pledged to invest \$20bn in India's economy and infrastructure over five years. That visit followed the first meeting of the BCIM Joint Study Group (JSG) in Kunming and the two leaders pledged to 'continue their respective efforts to implement understandings reached at the meeting'.¹⁵⁹

At the JSG's second session in November 2014 in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, delegates assigned each country to 'synthesise' specific 'chapters' of the BCIM framework document; that is where it stood. The vision appeared reasonable. BCIM represented 40% of humanity occupying 9% of Earth's landmass. The population of just Yunnan, Northeast India, Myanmar and Bangladesh totalled 440m. However, intra-BCIM trade in 2005 stood at 7.99% of world trade and, although it grew, in 2012, it was just 5% of total BCIM trade. This compared to ASEAN's intra-regional trade representing 35% of the group's total trade. Upgrading 312 km of the 1940s era Ledo-Kunming road linking North-Eastern India to Yunnan via Northern Myanmar

¹⁵⁷Vineles (2019).

¹⁵⁸Ghosh (2017).

¹⁵⁹Media Centre (2014).

could boost trade by reducing Sino-Indian transportation costs by 30%.¹⁶⁰ Notwithstanding acknowledged potential, summit-level pledges, and track-1.5 proclamations, BCIM remained 'comatose' until 2017, when discussions were elevated to an inter-governmental process.¹⁶¹

Pre-existing Yunnan–Myanmar road and pipelines alignments to be shared between the BCIM and LMC ECs should have aided BCIM's central ambition: fashioning surface transport links. However, Sino-Indian divergences hobbled progress. At the third JSG session in Kolkata in April 2017, Bangladesh and Myanmar offered fresh proposals for moving forward, but the leader of the Indian Delegation insisted: 'We should be mindful of different domestic circumstances and development aspirations in our respective countries. While we focus on expanding trade volumes, equal attention should also be paid to its sustainability. Greater access to each other's markets is desirable to achieve more viable and sustainable trade cooperation in our region'. His Chinese counterpart, Vice-Chairman of the NDRC, urged concrete action: 'There is a need to put in place an Inter-Governmental Cooperation Mechanism for the success of the proposed initiative'.¹⁶²

His team had drafted the proposed outline of an 'Inter-Governmental Cooperation Mechanism', but facing Indian resistance, did not table it. Delhi's anxiety over BCIM potentially increasing Chinese exports, further widening trade imbalances, and the need to strictly control India's insurgency-prone border districts, imposed caution. The mismatch between Chinese, Bangladeshi and Myanmar enthusiasm and Indian reluctance, and BCIM's consensual underpinning, stalled progress. This explained Kunming's provincial-level initiatives.

Efforts to boost support for BCIM via visits to China by leaders of Eastern Indian states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and West Bengal made slow progress. Raman Singh, Chhattisgarh's Chief Minister (CM) met Chinese leaders and potential investors in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, and Zhengzhou, Henan province, in April 2016. His aides signed deals with Chinese corporations offering to invest \$945m in projects to be built in the largely rural and violence-afflicted state.¹⁶³ However, the biggest regional prize, visits by West Bengal's CM Mamata Banerjee, eluded Beijing. By January 2018, Chinese provinces had extended ten separate invitations to her, but she took up none.

The Chinese Consul-General in Kolkata encouragingly noted, 'the blueprint drawn at the 19th National Congress of the CPC last October will have great significance on China's ties with Bengal and other eastern states as this region lies within the areas covered by the BRI and the BCIM'.¹⁶⁴ Delegations representing 30 Chinese corporations, led by Jiangsu Province's Vice-Governor, Chen Zanning, attended

¹⁶⁰Sahoo and Bhunia (2014).

¹⁶¹Report (2015, 2016), Li and Modi (2015), Yan (2017) and Iyer (2017c).

¹⁶²Iyer (2017b).

¹⁶³Droliat (2016) and PRC Con-Gen (2016).

¹⁶⁴PRC Con-Gen (2018).

the January 2018 Bengal Global Business Summit (BGBS) in Kolkata.¹⁶⁵ Chinese investors showed interest in automobiles, electronics, engineering, garments and textiles across Eastern India, but compared to other trade delegations, they secured few agreements, with none listed in the official press release. Chinese emphasis on BRI and BCIM for boosting Sino-Indian trade and investment drew no attention at the summit, reflecting profound unease afflicting Indian leaders, analysts and businessmen over both. China also participated in the February 2019 Bengal Global Business Summit (BGBS), but was neither made a 'partner', nor received a mention in any of the summit's official reports.¹⁶⁶

Banerjee eventually agreed to visit Beijing and Shanghai in June 2018, but a failed demand to meet a PBSC member during the visit triggered a last-minute cancellation.¹⁶⁷ Prime Minister Modi's refusal to attend the 2017 BRF, and Delhi's official explanation, underscored concerns over 'territorial and sovereignty' issues. Those concerns were rooted in the CPEC's alignment across Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region, which Delhi considered parts of disputed Jammu and Kashmir. However, Indian enthusiasm for any Chinese initiative, e.g. BRI and BCIM ('Kunming Initiative'), was limited. China had proposed K2K connectivity and the BCIM-EC at a GMS meeting in Kunming. Chinese officials hoped that in addition to road links passing through Mandalay in Myanmar and Sylhet in Bangladesh, BCIM could lay a parallel 2800 km K2K high-speed railway line benefiting all BCIM states.¹⁶⁸ With Myanmar straddling the LMC and BCIM alignments, both Myanmar and India could advance or hinder BCIM's implementation. This was the key obstacle to the process¹⁶⁹ which was begun by the YDRC shortly after the Soviet collapse transformed the planet's political-economic landscape.

Chinese planners had revived a 1959 vintage UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Far East (ESCAPE, later ESCAP) proposal for cooperative development by building road transport linkages. YDRC, the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS), the Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences and regional universities hosted several workshops in Kunming with academics, think tank analysts, journalists and businessmen from Eastern India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Organisers promoted synergistic development using trade and investment, linking South-Western China, Eastern India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Track-II exchanges socialised participants from diverse backgrounds, historically insulated from mutual exposure, crystallising a collective sub-regional vision of shared development potentially transforming a region marginalised by post-Cold War globalisation. After several sessions, YDRC consensually named the gatherings the Conference on Regional Cooperation and Development.

¹⁶⁵Despite this level of presence, the BGBS did not consider China as a 'partner country', a group comprising the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, RoK, UAE, Poland and UK. BGBS (2018); BGBS report <https://bengalglobalsummit.com/> Accessed 26 Jan 2018.

¹⁶⁶Report (2019a), Rakshit and Dutt (2019) and Singh (2019).

¹⁶⁷Chaudhury and Patranobis (2018).

¹⁶⁸PTI (2015).

¹⁶⁹Mishra (2011).

In August 1999, Chinese and Myanmar officials attended the first BCIM gathering with academics, analysts, businessmen and journalists. Participants—94 from China, 22 from India, 13 from Bangladesh and four from Myanmar, launched the BCIM Economic Connectivity Forum for Regional Cooperation, or ‘the Kunming Initiative’, as a track-1.5 process.¹⁷⁰ Next, YDRC and the Yunnan government established the ‘China Kunming International Logistics & Finance Association’ (ILFA) to facilitate connectivity, trade and investment among states in Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). ILFA would aid infrastructure projects, especially roads, land and sea ports, industrial parks and free-trade zones.¹⁷¹

BCIM aimed to develop economic growth and connectivity via transport infrastructure, energy resources, agriculture and trade and investment.¹⁷² Three Delhi-based official think tanks, as counterparts to the YDRC and its academic partners, hosted the second BCIM Conference on Regional Cooperation in December 2000. Participants cheered at the screening of a documentary on the 769 km Ledo-Kunming Road which linked Arunachal Pradesh (then Assam’s North-East Frontier Agency) with Yunnan in the 1940s and which was named after the Commander of US–Chinese joint forces in their war against Imperial Japan, General Joseph Stilwell. The Stilwell Road had fallen into disrepair in Myanmar and India, but offered an alignment for enabling heavy commercial traffic in the future.¹⁷³

An absence of road and railway connectivity, especially usable alignments linking BCIM countries, added to the challenges. China and Myanmar, and Myanmar and India, had developed border roads connecting neighbouring regions, but apart from stretches of Yunnan–Myanmar highways, these were unsuited to serving BCIM-envisaged heavy commercial traffic. Bangladesh and Myanmar lacked any surface connectivity. Recognising the dramatic economic growth in China and ASEAN members, and the potential for accessing new markets there, in 2003, Bangladesh and Myanmar proposed road links between Bangladesh’s south-eastern Cox’s Bazar district and Myanmar’s Western Rakhine State. In 2004, during Myanmar’s Prime Minister’s visit to Dhaka, officials signed a MoU endorsing this proposal.

In July 2007, Myanmar’s Construction Minister and his Bangladeshi counterpart signed an agreement affirming Dhaka’s offer to fund construction of the crucial Phase-1 between Guandhum in Cox’s Bazar and Bawlibazar in Rakhine, a 25 km stretch with 2 km in Bangladesh and 23 km in Myanmar, of the planned 153 km Bangladesh–Myanmar Friendship Road. Myanmar would build a border trade economic zone near Bawlibazar, formalising informal border trade. The two ministers reportedly discussed linking the planned road to Myanmar’s highway to Kunming as part of BCIM connectivity, but this was left out of official records.¹⁷⁴ In July 2009, Bangladesh signed the UN’s 2003 Inter-governmental Agreement on the Asian Highway Network, and the Agreement entered into force for Dhaka in November.

¹⁷⁰Report (2000b).

¹⁷¹Mazid (2017).

¹⁷²Islam et al. (2015).

¹⁷³Report (2001c) and Ding (2016).

¹⁷⁴Kamaluddin (2007) and Report (2007a).

Three Asian Highway routes traversed 1771 km of Bangladeshi territory. AH1: from Dawki (India) to Petrapole (India) via Tamabil–Sylhet–Dhaka–Bhanga–Jessore–Benapole (Bangladesh), ran for 492 km in Bangladesh. AH2: from Dawki (India) to Fulbari (India) via Tamabil–Sylhet–Dhaka South–Dhaka North–Bogra–Rangpur–Bangalbandha (Bangladesh), ran for 294 km in Bangladesh. These two could serve as sections of the BCIM's Myanmar–Bangladesh–India alignment. AH41: from Teknaf–Cox's Bazar via Feni–Dhaka South–Dhaka North–Kushtia–Jessore–Khulna to Mongla, ran for 762 km excluding 162 km common with AH2.¹⁷⁵ This section, with existing spurs, could serve as a Southern Myanmar–Bangladesh–India K2K alignment with an extension to the Chittagong port in South-Eastern Bangladesh.

At the ninth BCIM Forum in Kunming in January 2011, participants 'discussed the existing and potential routes of roads, rail, air and water to enhance connectivity within the region, reviewed the progress achieved so far and discussed to (sic) call for joint working groups to consider ways and means to further improve the infrastructure regarding connectivity'. They agreed to 'enhance the thrust for improved regional connectivity and to focus on establishing the Kunming–Mandalay–Dhaka–Kolkata Economic Corridor'.¹⁷⁶ Agreeing that progress required decision-makers' involvement for coordinating development of transport, telecommunications and energy networks, conferees took up a suggestion made by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during Chinese President Hu Jintao's 2006 visit to Delhi:¹⁷⁷ to hold a K2K car rally demonstrating BCIM's feasibility, and enthusing public and official-level support.

To hasten progress, in July 2011, the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) and the YASS hosted a China-SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) conference themed 'Towards a Better Understanding through Enhanced People-to-People Exchanges', in Kunming. Around 40 scholars and officials from China and SAARC member-states attended.¹⁷⁸ Sponsors sought South Asian governments' support for BCIM and China-South Asian collaboration generally. Much of 2012 was spent in preparations, including a route survey, for the planned car rally. In February 2012, five Chinese, four Indian, two Bangladeshi and two Myanmar pioneers began the route survey from Kunming, reaching Kolkata after nine days. They identified physical, regulatory and security problems confronting rally drivers. BCIM countries, addressing these, scheduled the rally in February–March 2013.

Flagged off in Kolkata by Chief Minister Banerjee on 22 February, 75 enthusiasts from the BCIM countries riding 20 SUVs, shared equally between Indian- and Chinese-built models, crossed the Petrapole–Benapole border checkpoints into Bangladesh. After a halt at Jessore, they continued north-eastward, crossing the Jumna River by ferry, and reached Dhaka, where a reception awaited them. From

¹⁷⁵Siddique (2016).

¹⁷⁶YDRC (2013).

¹⁷⁷Mahalingam (2013).

¹⁷⁸Zhou (2011).

Dhaka, the teams rode north-east to Sylhet, turning eastward to cross the Tamabil–Dawki border checkpoints into India for a break at Silchar in Assam. The next leg took them to Imphal, capital of Manipur State, where they turned south, crossed into Myanmar, and halted at Ka Lay in Sagaing Division.¹⁷⁹ The rally then proceeded southeast to Mandalay, where it turned north and then north-east towards the Chinese border, crossing into Yunnan at Ruili. The road ran north-east to Tengchong and Dali where the riders drove south-east on the final leg to Kunming, arriving there on 5 March. The 12-day, 3000 km rally showed that commercial road transportation along the K2K alignment was feasible.¹⁸⁰

The 2013 BCIM-EC Forum in Dhaka was timed to coincide with the motorists' passage. Participants reflected the enthusiasm the rally generated, but Bangladesh's decision to upgrade the forum to track-1 level in 2005 and 2010 had left Delhi 'increasingly isolated and on the defensive'. Anxiety over China's foundational role in BCIM and its 'strategic objectives' turned BCIM in Indian eyes into a tool of Beijing's 'geo-strategic and economic interests in the region', giving China 'unfettered access to the Bay of Bengal'.¹⁸¹ Additionally, while Yunnan represented the Chinese 'pillar' driving BCIM's development, North-Eastern Indian states, given their 'security status', could not pursue reciprocal diplomatic/economic initiatives. Delhi's deep scepticism dimmed BCIM's prospects.

Then, in May 2013, during Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India, 'The two sides appreciated the progress made in promoting cooperation under the BCIM Regional Forum. Encouraged by the successful BCIM Car Rally of February 2013 between Kolkata and Kunming, the two sides agreed to consult the other parties with a view to establishing a Joint Study Group (JSG) on strengthening connectivity in the BCIM region for closer economic, trade, and people-to-people linkages and to initiating the development of a BCIM Economic Corridor'.¹⁸² In October 2013, Beijing received Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, Dipu Moni, and the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, in quick succession. As hosts, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Premier Li Keqiang, respectively, stressed the strategic import of building up the BCIM-EC, with Moni and Singh endorsing the development of a 'southern Silk Road'.¹⁸³

The JSG, at its first meeting in Kunming in December 2013, agreed that 'the proposed corridor could run from Kunming (China) in the east to Kolkata (India) in the West, broadly spanning the region, including Mandalay (Myanmar), Dhaka

¹⁷⁹For more information, you can find the 2013 'BCIM K2K Car Rally Route Map' issued by the State of Manipur, India, here: <http://manipur.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/souvenir-bcim-car-rally-2013.pdf> (last accessed October 16th, 2019).

¹⁸⁰Government of Bangladesh, Foreign Affairs Office of the People's Government of Yunnan Province, Confederation of Indian Industry, Government of Myanmar (2013), Government of Manipur (2013) and John (2014).

¹⁸¹Uberoi (2014).

¹⁸²MEA (2013a).

¹⁸³Report (2013a, b).

and Chittagong (Bangladesh) and other major cities and ports as key nodes'. Delegates believed, 'with the linkages of transport, energy and telecommunications networks, the Corridor will form a thriving economic belt that will promote common development of areas along the Corridor'.¹⁸⁴

In June 2014, the BCIM Exchange Forum, ILFA and the South Asia Federation of Exchanges together reviewed progress. Participants agreed to support both SREB and MSR and work towards establishing an Asian Economic Corridor Transport Facility to help realise the BCIM objectives of collaborative development via trade, investment and connectivity. They also lent support to the UN-ESCAP Governmental Land Ports Agreement, which proposed building international land ports at Dhaka–Kamalapur (Bangladesh), Kunming–Tengjun (China), Kolkata–Durgapur (India), Mandalay (Myanmar) and others. Participants agreed to encourage the use of RMB-denominated products for accelerating trade and other BCIM activities.¹⁸⁵

At the twelfth BCM Forum, meeting in Yangon in February 2015, officials presented specific proposals to infuse momentum.¹⁸⁶ No concrete action followed. Beijing, pointing to India's historic role in the ancient Silk Road commerce, offered to coordinate its BRI projects with Delhi's own 'Mausam' programme,¹⁸⁷ but received no response. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's May 2015 visit to China, Li, while acknowledging Sino-Indian differences, insisted 'our common interests go far beyond our differences'. For 'the welfare of 2.5bn people', Li urged Modi to accelerate 'building of the BCIM-EC and promoting regional economic development'.¹⁸⁸ The two leaders 'agreed to continue their respective efforts to implement understandings reached' by the JSG. They expressed satisfaction with Sino-Indian collaboration in developing key sections of India's railway network,¹⁸⁹ but progress stalled.

After high-level meetings failed to implement BCIM projects, in 2015, Dhaka proposed a new alignment for the Bangladesh–Myanmar Friendship Road—linking its Bandarban Hill District to Myanmar's Chin region, then on to the Myanmar–India Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport project.¹⁹⁰ This would reduce new work, but without support from BCIM partners, this road, too, went nowhere. Fighting between Rohingya militants and Myanmar forces triggering an exodus of refugees to Bangladesh in 2017–2018 halted road link discussions. And even though Modi and Li presided over the first session of a new forum of Chinese and Indian provincial leaders, BCIM faded. Top-level engagement failed to breathe life into the vision.¹⁹¹

Perhaps to mitigate that disappointment, Beijing focused on Myanmar's National League for Democracy (NLD) after it won general elections and took office following decades of military rule. Even before the NLD assumed power, in December 2014,

¹⁸⁴MEA (2013b) and Yan (2013).

¹⁸⁵Mazid (2017).

¹⁸⁶Xinhua (2015b).

¹⁸⁷Zhang (2015).

¹⁸⁸Xinhua (2015a).

¹⁸⁹Modi and Li (2015).

¹⁹⁰Rohingya News Agency (2015).

¹⁹¹Yao (2018), Iyer (2017a) and Yhome (2017).

signalling diplomatic pragmatism, Beijing hosted its head, Aung San Suu Kyi, as the official leader of the opposition. In early 2015, as the NLD moved towards replacing military-backed politicians hitherto enjoying Beijing's backing, fighting between ethnic Chinese autonomists and Myanmar forces flared along sections of the 2185 km Sino-Myanmar borders.¹⁹² Naypyitaw's forces occasionally crossed into Chinese territory. Suu Kyi also closed several major Chinese-funded projects seen as detrimental to local interests. The NLD, beneficiary of US, Indian and Japanese support, was considered a nationalist party opposed to alleged Chinese tacit co-option of Myanmar's military rulers.¹⁹³ Against that backdrop, Beijing hosted Suu Kyi in mid-2015 before general elections in November, which the NLD won.

Xi Jinping, assuring his guest that China viewed bilateral relations 'from a strategic and long-term perspective', expressed the hope that Naypyitaw, too, would 'maintain a consistent stance' and remain 'committed to advancing friendly ties no matter how its domestic situation changes'.¹⁹⁴ Agreements on resuming operations at the Letpadaung Mining Project, reopening the Myanmar–China oil pipeline, Chinese-funded construction of the Kyaukpyu deep sea port and establishing a border economic cooperation zone, followed.¹⁹⁵ Suu Kyi kept frozen the Chinese-financed Myitsone Dam project in northern Myanmar, suspended in September 2011 by transitional President Thein Sen and maintained friendly ties to the West, but reliance on China grew. Taking office as State Counsellor in March 2016, Suu Kyi returned to Beijing on another official visit in August. Agile pragmatism restored bilateral warmth.¹⁹⁶

Naypyitaw's troubles over the Rohingya crisis, triggered by Muslim attacks on the repressive Arakan state police exploding into an 'ethnic cleansing' response, reportedly killing and raping many stateless Rohingyas, forced over 700,000 survivors to seek refuge in Bangladesh.¹⁹⁷ Widely condemned in the west, Myanmar deepened its China ties. As international organisations and news media focused on the Rohingya's plight, especially in vast 'temporary' refugee camps sprawling across South-Eastern Bangladesh, the UNSC debated their fate. In mid-March 2017, the USA and its allies tabled a draft mildly critical of Myanmar's actions, including denial of 'humanitarian access to all affected areas'. China, with Russian support, blocked a vote.¹⁹⁸ Two months later, Suu Kyi attended the inaugural BRF in Beijing. In October, a Chinese consortium acquired 70% equity in the Kyaukphyu port with its oil and gas pipeline terminals linking the Bay of Bengal to Kunming.¹⁹⁹ With UN critics silenced, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed a 'three-step solution' to the Rohingya issue in November.

¹⁹²Naing (2016).

¹⁹³Naing (2016).

¹⁹⁴Pang and Wang (2015).

¹⁹⁵Nian (2018).

¹⁹⁶Naing (2016).

¹⁹⁷Darusman et al. (2018), Report (2017b, 2018g) and High Commissioner (2017).

¹⁹⁸Nichols (2017).

¹⁹⁹Liu (2017).

This relieved the pressure on Myanmar. Suu Kyi returned to Beijing in December 2017. In her meetings with Xi and his aides, they agreed to speed up construction of the Sino-Myanmar economic corridor, part of the BRI/BCIM blueprint.²⁰⁰ Her entourage included Myanmar's energy and construction ministers and the CM of Mandalay, a key waypoint along the BRI's Kyaukpyu-Kunming alignment. The team first stopped off at Kunming for dinner meetings with provincial leaders. Deepening economic and security diplomacy between the neighbours enabled the partial pursuit of Beijing's BRI vision along moribund alignments so that work could resume if and when recalcitrant parties reconsidered their options.²⁰¹

3.8.3 *The Balkan Silk Road*

China's construction of the 'Balkan Silk Road', an offshoot of BRI's European alignment, built on economic, commercial and investment ties to Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), was formalised via Beijing's 16 + 1 framework.²⁰² Established in 2012, the grouping caused consternation in the West, especially among the original EU member-states. In July 2018, Li Keqiang co-hosted his CEEC counterparts at a 16 + 1 summit in Bulgaria. On the sidelines, 700 CEEC businessmen and executives from 250 plus Chinese firms discussed current and future projects. Bulgaria's Deputy Foreign Minister Georg Georgiev noted, 'Our main goal is to increase Chinese business presence in Bulgaria and in the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe'. Li replied, 'China, now and in the future, supports European integration and welcomes a united, stable, open and prosperous Europe and a strong Euro'.²⁰³

Notwithstanding benign sentiments, the 16 + 1 process deepened EU unease over Chinese presence sufficiently for the EU to discuss the issue at the highest levels.²⁰⁴ The Balkan Silk Road, despite early excitement, did not advance very fast. Also, Beijing gained little influence over CEEC voting practices at the UN and other international fora on issues affecting China's interests. In terms of resource flows, Chinese investments contributed less than one per cent of the CEEC's FDI stock; and more than 90% of Beijing's EU investment went to Western Europe. China-CEEC trade grew from around \$50bn in 2012 to \$90bn in 2017, falling short of stated aspirations of crossing \$100bn by 2015.²⁰⁵ CEEC exports to China often comprised products bearing components from the rest of the EU while some Chinese exports to CEEC destinations were reexported to Western Europe. EU anxiety appeared to

²⁰⁰Nitta (2017).

²⁰¹Mu (2018) and Report (2018a).

²⁰²China's 16 partners: Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia.

²⁰³Tsolovia et al. (2018).

²⁰⁴Mazumdar (2018) and Spisak (2017).

²⁰⁵Turcsanyi (2018).

be founded more on presumptions and subliminal concerns than on an empirically evident complex reality.

The 16 + 1 inaugural summit held in Warsaw in April 2012 identified ten fields of cooperation, to be managed via regular summit meetings:

- Policy-coordination
- Economy and trade
- Culture and education
- Agriculture
- Transportation
- Tourism
- Science & technology
- Health
- Think tanks and local exchanges
- Youth exchanges.

Prime Ministers from the 17 partners endorsed 'Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation' between China and CEEC states. Beijing initiated the establishment of a '16 + 1 Secretariat for Cooperation between China and CEEC' as an official structure with links to CEEC governments for policy-coordination and driving development. In September 2012, the Secretariat hosted the first China-CEEC National Coordinators' Meeting in Beijing. The second meeting, in Bucharest, followed in October 2013, and the second China-CEEC summit in November, when leaders issued the 'Bucharest Guidelines for Cooperation between China and CEEC'. Beijing hosted the third China-CEEC National Coordinators' meeting in May 2014, followed by the fourth meeting in Belgrade in November. The leaders' summit in December issued the 'Belgrade Guidelines for Cooperation between China and CEEC'. This sequence drove collaborative projects with Chinese investment across the CEEC region.

Following up on summit 'Guidelines', China established Joint Working Groups (JWG) and high-level conferences (HLC) with specific sets of CEEC countries to initiate, implement, supervise and monitor projects. The China–Hungary–Serbia JWG on Infrastructure Cooperation met in Beijing in June 2014 while a parallel HLC on 'Transport, Logistics and Trade Routes: Connecting Asia with Europe' was held in Riga. This led, in December, to officials from China, Hungary, Macedonia and Serbia reaching agreement on cross-border customs clearing cooperation while Hungary and Serbia signed a MoU on building a high-speed railway link between their capitals with Chinese aid. In addition to terrestrial connectivity, China, Hungary, Macedonia and Serbia took a 'China–Europe Land Sea Express Line' initiative that led, in May 2015, to a four-party 'Cooperation Action Plan for 2015–2016'.

BSR building received a boost in April 2015 when FMPRC appointed a 'Special Representative for China-CEEC Cooperation'. In December 2015, the parties began constructing the Hungary–Serbia high-speed railway. China and CEEC countries also signed MoUs on jointly building BRI projects. These accreted into an economic/commercial/regulatory infrastructure on which the 17 countries focused attention. However, BSR comprised the CEEC, as well as Cyprus, Greece and Turkey.

By the end of 2017, Chinese investment across the wider BSR region in port infrastructure, steel mills, highway construction, bridge building and thermal power plants exceeded \$10bn.²⁰⁶

A key BSR terminus connecting the SREB/MSR alignments resided in the Greek port of Piraeus near Athens. And there, China's COSCO shipping and port management conglomerate began investing, acquiring equity and expanding facilities, in 2009. Although Beijing entered the region two decades after the Berlin Wall came down, and long after Russia, the EU and EBRD extended developmental aid there, BSR's progress stirred unease.²⁰⁷ BSR consolidation picked up speed in 2016, when the China-CEEC Secretariat initiated two new mechanisms: the Secretariat began a quarterly meeting with CEEC embassies in Beijing, lending structure to coordinating and monitoring progress, with the first meeting held in February. The Secretariat also invited senior CEEC officials to visit Beijing and Chinese provinces playing major roles in developing the SREB and MSR.

A conference of Presidents of the Supreme Courts of China and CEEC met in Suzhou in May 2016; senior CEEC officials visited Fujian and Ningxia in August. Reviews and correctives ensured that notwithstanding EU/IMF concerns over BSR member debts, projects proceeded apace. Regular exchanges at official, diplomatic and leadership levels built cooperative mechanisms and experience. Bureaucrats and politicians collaborated on key aspects of the foundation the 17 countries laid for the rapidly evolving Balkan Silk Road.²⁰⁸ The near simultaneity of the EU formally designating China a 'systemic rival' and Italy joining BRI in early 2019 betrayed an ambivalence troubling Europe's approach to China.²⁰⁹

Steady progress culminated in Xi Jinping's assurances to French, German and EU leaders that notwithstanding the EU's formal designation of China as a 'systemic rival', Beijing would further open itself up, and support Sino-European collaboration and European consolidation. Italy's accession to BRI was topped by Greece joining and expanding the China-CEEC grouping to 17 + 1 at the April 2019 Dubrovnic summit in Croatia.²¹⁰ Some tension persisted. CEEC leaders questioned why Beijing had signed on to a strongly reciprocal framework of cooperation with EU but would not quite do so with CEEC. The response, 'this was a different platform', reflected China's challenges in balancing myriad, occasionally divergent, interests while moving forward across Eurasia in building BRI's SREB and MSR networks. Beijing's vigour united its critics, including EU/CEEC envoys in Beijing, but not always predictably.²¹¹

²⁰⁶Bastian (2017).

²⁰⁷Eng (2017).

²⁰⁸FMPRC (2017).

²⁰⁹Mogherini (2019) and Zhong (2019).

²¹⁰Li (2019a).

²¹¹Chaguan (2019), Elmer (2019a, 2019b) and Zhen et al. (2019).

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