The Belt-and-Road Initiative as a paradigm change for European Union-China security cooperation? The case of Central Asia

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Abstract

Security cooperation has increasingly come to prominence in the realm of relations between the European Union (EU) and China as a policy area primed for fostering deeper bilateral strategic convergence. Where leaders on both sides have talked up security cooperation particularly by pointing to recent successes (on counter-piracy, Iran), EU-China scholars have largely qualified these as exceptions to the rule. The rule being that the gulf between Brussels and Beijing continues to be too wide on norms, geopolitics and trust for them to live up to their ambitious rhetoric on security cooperation. Taking this into consideration, this paper sets out to examine whether the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) — given its magnitude and high stakes — can change the dynamics of bilateral security cooperation. Looking at this through the lens of three distinct theories applicable to the study of EU-China relations, it would appear that even bilateral security overlap pertaining to the BRI cannot reverse these deeply entrenched behavioural patterns.

Introduction

Security cooperation in the context the European Union's (EU) relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) remains a topic which — on the basis of sheer bilateral discourse alone — has become increasingly salient bilateral policy area over the past decade. This can be witnessed not only across the various individual or conjoint policy papers published since the turn of the twenty-first century but also in terms of the numerous bilateral mechanisms established to allow both parties to discursively engage on shared security concerns. In addition, on a handful of occasions, the EU and China have actually worked hand in hand to counter specific threats, whether in the shape of tactical alignment (e.g. the fight against Somali

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piracy or non-combatant evacuations) or diplomatic alignment (e.g. on the Iranian nuclear programme) (see Ai and Song 2019; Barton 2017; Dossi 2015). Security cooperation is understood here as discursive bilateral interaction on any matter of a security connotation (whether traditional or non-traditional), whereby the minimal expectation is that Brussels and Beijing avoid negative spill over of the discussed issue at hand into other parts of the bilateral realm. The maximal expectation would suggest that both sides converge diplomatically around ‘joint actions’ in the resolution of a given security concern or, better yet, practically cooperate to help eradicate it (Kirchner et al. 2016: 7).

Since bilateral security cooperation began gaining traction, some EU-China scholars have argued in favour of broadening such collaboration in light of the benefits to be accrued for the partnership as a whole. For example, back in 2007, May-Britt Stumbaum predicted that the EU and China could expect intensified future interaction on issues as diverse as criminal activity, illegal arms transfers, terrorism and disaster management (2007, 363–367; 2015, 343). In a more recent publication, Chen Zhimin pointed to the complementarity of the EU and China’s respective contributions towards counterinsurgency both in Sudan (Darfur) and in Mali. With respect to events in Mali in 2013, Chen states that ‘China and the European states exhibited a kind of division of labour, and in a coordinated way acted with their comparative strengths in crisis management’ where, after having taken the lead militarily, European powers then relinquished parts of the peacekeeping responsibilities to the PRC (2016: 787). This belief in their ability to gradually overcome this divide is based on the assumption that since the EU and China are not engaged in outright strategic rivalry, the space in which opportunities for security can flourish is likely to accrue with time (Golden 2006: 288; Chen 2016: 785; Kirchner et al. 2016: 1).

Yet this belief in some form of incremental rapprochement on security cooperation has not been widely shared across the EU-China literature. Despite the obvious overlap of interests which China and the EU may share in this field, the bilateral propensity to convert these opportunities into examples of diplomatic alignment and/or practical cooperation is low (Li et al. 2017: 59; Montesano 2019: 144). Rather this sentiment is the predominant one expressed across the spectrum of mainstream theories applicable to the study of EU-China relations. Whether normative, geopolitical or institutionalist approaches, the forecasts for bilateral security cooperation are anything but rosy. This is because, in one way or another, they all ascertain that Brussels and Beijing remain constrained by foundational structural differences which, ultimately, they cannot reconcile. This entails that other than ad hoc acts of security cooperation, the general trend of mistrust and paucity of security alignment/cooperation is likely to persist (Finamore 2017: 175; Men 2011: 550; Stumbaum 2007 366).

This author largely subscribes to this ‘glass-half-empty’ assessment. This being said, this paper seeks to explore whether the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI) can help to buck this general trend. The rationale here is that given the stakes at play for the BRI (in terms of investment, success rate or President Xi Jinping’s political legacy), keeping the BRI safe will play a determinant role in this regard. After all, the BRI’s land and maritime routes often traverse highly volatile regions — a dimension to the study of the BRI that has not always received the scholarly interest it deserves,

given the potential headache it is likely to cause BRI planners and builders. China, alone, cannot single-handedly solve all such security dilemmas which threaten to derail the BRI (a reality the government has recently recognised). For now, it has called on signatories to do more to secure the BRI. This too, however, may not be enough. It is here where the EU's repeated calls for closer security cooperation with China would appear to gain prominence. Despite not being an official BRI signatory, Brussels does share overlapping security concerns with the PRC along various parts of the BRI and is likely to be indirectly exposed to the shifting security dynamics brought upon by the BRI in these regions. In any event, this paper seeks to empirically demonstrate whether the BRI, given the stakes, can serve as a variable (or not) in bucking the existing patterns of bilateral security cooperation. This paper will do so by examining these prospects against overlapping security interests in Central Asia (CA) — a region that sits at the heart of the Economic Silk Belt. By doing so, this paper will also help fill the absence of discussion pertaining to the BRI's organic security dynamics.

This paper is split into two sections. The first will review the determinants of bilateral security cooperation through the lens of three schools of thought applied to the study of EU-China security cooperation namely constructivism, neorealism and institutionalism. Once each school of thought has been reviewed in terms of assessing the respective drivers and prohibitors to bilateral security cooperation, this paper will then turn to its empirical contribution. Here, the second section will commence by exposing the rationale behind this study's dependent variable (i.e. the BRI against the backdrop of the patterns of security cooperation) as well as the justification of the decision to apply this case study to CA. This section's second half will then consist in applying the respective theoretical strands' core predictions, in order to test the probability of the BRI engineering bilateral security cooperation in CA. What the findings will show is that with the exception of the existence of certain exceptional circumstances and conditions, the improbability of bilateral security alignment/cooperation is likely to remain the order of the day.

International relations theory and the determinants of EU-China security cooperation

As prefaced in the introduction, the literature is largely — albeit not universally — comprised of scholars unswayed by the prospects for bilateral security cooperation. Their pessimism spans across three complementary schools of thought, as discussed here.

Constructivist considerations

The crux of the argument put forward by authors who adopt a constructivist approach predicts that security cooperation is improbable (albeit not impossible) between Brussels and Beijing mostly because of their divergent foreign policy identities — divergences which find their roots in the norms, values and principles

comprising these respective identities (Christensen et al. 2016: 244). In other words, as a nation-state and great power in the making, the PRC is attached to principles such non-interference and the respect for state sovereignty, which make up part of its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, as opposed to applying universalist liberal principles. According to the literature, the Chinese leadership's preoccupation for placing sovereignty ahead of human rights is overwhelmingly attributed to the trauma caused by the country's occupation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Ai and Song 2019: 282; Chen 2016: 783; Golden 2006: 268; Kavalski 2007: 855; Men 2011: 541). The EU, on the other hand, is a bit-part supranational regional organisation and a proponent of norms (notably democracy, rule of law (RoL) and the respect for human rights) whose genesis can be traced back to the post-WWII international order (Michalski and Nilsson 2019: 435). As Anastas Vangeli aptly summarises, it is this contrast in foundational principles which often leads the EU and China down 'normative dead ends' (2013: 30).

The justification given in EU-China literature rationalising the association between differences in foreign policy identity and the unlikelihood of bilateral security cooperation contends that because both parties adopt non-identical lenses to interpret security concerns, their responses to security crises are likely to be diametrically opposed (Finamore 2017: 165; Montesano 2019: 143; Stumbaum 2007: 352). For example, regarding debates on whether or not the international community should intervene in a given civil conflict, Beijing would expectedly call for the need to respect state sovereignty (even if the legitimacy of state rule has virtually evaporated), while the EU's leaders are likely to call for the international community to intervene to ensure the protection of civilians (Barton 2017: 49–55). Scholars who justify their scepticism on the basis of this normative bridge will usually limit their analyses at this value-based bilateral disjuncture. This being said, some have taken their assessment a step further in arguing that the EU's Normative Power Europe (NPE) projection upon the PRC actually heightened bilateral mistrust. Put differently, because the EU more actively promoted China undergoing domestic reforms to bring about democratic change, RoL (as opposed to rule by law) and the greater enforcement of the respect for human rights, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders continue to cast a suspicious eye on any interaction with the EU of a political order (Golden 2006: 292; Mattlin 2012: 187–191; Michalski and Nilsson 2019: 441). Since the EU's own security blueprint — as expressed through its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) — tends to underscore NPE projection (via the normative training of security personnel, police officers or judges), the sentiment here is one of considerable incompatibility between Brussels and Beijing's respective worldviews on security.

Even though the bulk of constructivist literature remains unconvinced by the prospects of bilateral security cooperation, a few scholars have bucked the trend by investigating exceptional cases of alignment and practical cooperation. Simone Dossi, for example, argues that the emergence of a 'doctrinal common ground' as well as a 'common language' between both parties has boosted the prospects for security cooperation in the post-Cold War era (2015: 78). This is especially true given their equal exposure to non-traditional security threats. More specifically, Ai Weining and Song Weiqing conclude that the EU and China's overlapping

understandings of multilateralism are what fostered a strong alignment over the Iranian nuclear deal and, to a much lesser extent, some form of convergence on conflict resolution in Syria (2019: 281–282). Stumbaum argues that when emerging powers such as China have a specific security demand they cannot fulfil due to their own institutional shortcomings, they can (and do) turn to normative power ‘senders’ such as the EU: ‘[...] for templates, know-how, procedures and processes to address today’s security challenges,’ even in ‘hard security areas’ (2015: 338, 343). The evidence collected by Stumbaum would appear to vindicate her belief that history does not always have to stand in the way of EU-China security cooperation (2015: 341). Moving away from a strictly normative focus, Benjamin Barton explains that when the EU and China can cognitively align their identification processes, their respective expressions of empathy with some form of ideal-type communicative action in the scope of their bilateral interaction over a specific security dilemma, then their propensity for alignment and cooperation increases (2017: 156–158).

Constructivist reflections thus generally contend that bilateral security cooperation will remain improbable, unless the security concern under consideration triggers some form of bilateral normative alignment, China formulates a specific demand for the EU’s normative services and/or if leaders on either side can find and build common cognitive ground.

Geopolitical considerations

If the discussion on norms has largely fallen under a constructivist heading, of late, some EU-China scholars have pinpointed the value of incorporating this discussion under a geopolitical heading. In other words, the promotion of norms is not interpreted as a benign exercise by the Chinese leadership but instead, as a struggle, it is engaged in with the West to defend its ‘cultural sovereignty’ (Yong 1998: 313). In other words, the EU’s attempts to promote its political values vis-à-vis China is seen in Beijing as a means to both help reinforce Western hegemony over the rest of the world and to: ‘[...] discipline a rising China’ (Ibid.). Thus, what may be seen by some in Brussels as the anticipated pursuit of China’s future political trajectory, not only are these antagonistically rejected by the Chinese leadership but also have given Beijing a cause to pursue an obvious global counter-balancing strategy against Western liberal ideals. This can be observed through the following:

- Accusations over Chinese interference in the function of European democratic and electoral processes (e.g. Brexit referendum) (Syal 2017);
- Chinese attempts to undermine EU unity on the promotion of the latter’s core values (e.g. the purported association between BRI financing in Greece and the Tsipras government’s derailing of the common EU position on China’s human rights record in July 2017 at the United Nations Human Rights Council) (Emmott and Koutantou 2017);
- Chinese attempts to usurp liberal freedoms around the world (e.g. media in freedom in Africa) (Matthews 2020);

- China's support for other illiberal regimes (e.g. the Assad regime in Syria) (Hemenway 2018).

Although the EU may not necessarily be China's primary target, it is clearly directly concerned by this strategy. Brussels has thus been dragged into a global race for influence by China, but by dogmatically adhering its NPE identity, it has refused to adjust to the geopolitics of norms/counter-norms. According to Anna Michalski and Niklas Nilsson, this has resulted in a:

New competitive environment that [*sic*] had a significant impact on the EU's ability to fulfil its role as a normative power, as the diffusion of liberal values and norms was simply no longer accepted by illiberal global powers, which instead endeavored to push back against the EU's normative mission, thereby challenging the foundations of its contested identity (2019: 443).

This assertion will not come as a surprise to scholars such as Mikael Mattlin who have long advocated for the EU to give more of a 'realist tweak' to this NPE identity, by adhering to what he calls a 'defensive normative approach' (2012: 182). Mattlin's concern stems from the relative 'power sensitivities' and 'concrete material interests' which continue to dominate EU-China relations (Ibid). In particular, it is this reality of concrete material interests which renders some member states vulnerable to Chinese commercial financial largesse and compromises the entire NPE façade, that in turn then requires the EU to promulgate its norms more forcefully. The recent announcement of a 'geopolitical EU' by Commission President Ursula von der Leyden would appear to reflect Brussels' recognition for a firmer normative stance (Bayer 2019).

All of the above, of course, is acknowledged even without attesting for the elephants in the room: the United States (US), US-China rivalry and the transatlantic alliance (Finamore 2017: 161). Even if it has been empirically proven that the strength of the transatlantic alliance has waned in terms of Brussels' policy autonomy pertaining to China, the EU is in the PRC's line of fire because it continues to champion the norms characteristic of the Western liberal international order — an order endemically anchored around US global leadership (Riddervold and Rosén 2018: 567). Under normal circumstances, the EU has limited strategic room for manoeuvre given its transatlantic alliance with the US. This reality is further exacerbated when Washington and Beijing are involved in their own strategic rivalry, as has been the case from the Obama administration onwards. Consequently, when the bilateral Sino-US pressure is ratcheted up, the EU and its member states are expected to fall in line behind the American position. This became obvious on topics such as 5G networks, investment screening and even on the plight of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang Province during the second half of President Trump's mandate (Cerulus 2018; Politi and Williams 2019; The Economist 2018). Yet this is more reflective of strategy-making by default than by design because the EU remains internally conflicted about castigating China to the extent where this could jeopardise profitable commercial relations. In the words of Tomasz Grosse, this lays bare to '[...] the weakness and naivety of European geopolitical thinking' (2014: 41).

As for how this translates in bilateral security cooperation terms, the above does not lend itself easily to any form of optimism. On the contrary, since the EU and China are becoming increasingly involved in an intensifying global split opposing liberal and illiberal camps, the prospects for bilateral security cooperation make little sense. If there is to be some practical cooperation or security alignment, this is only likely to be an outlier. For Brussels in particular, its alliance with Washington implies that any prospects of security cooperation which could be interpreted as benefiting Chinese interests will need vetting by the USA, only to be dismissed, particularly during periods of heightened Sino-US tension. And this in spite of any short-term or long-term benefits the EU could itself incur from such bilateral security cooperation.

This makes the prediction of security cooperation between two distinct partners such as the EU and China not only highly unlikely but also a futile one when framed against the shifting structure of world politics.

Institutionalist considerations

If constructivists and neorealists have mostly talked up the obstacles and challenges of security cooperation, institutionalists appear more divided. The institutionalist approach in itself is characterised by the need for both parties to bridge their political divide by fostering closer interdependence. For disparate actors as the EU and China, this can be achieved by constructing common institutions through which to mitigate mistrust. EU-China scholars have largely praised the effort both sides have taken, at least on paper, to develop the lines of communication that ultimately frame their bilateral political relations (Maher 2016: 959; Smith 2014: 39–40; Zhou 2017: 12, 24). This framework now rests on policy papers, annual summit meetings and other endogenous/exogenous dialogue mechanisms (such as the direct dialogue between the EU's High Representative/Vice President for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy with China's Defence Minister). Many of these dialogues directly or indirectly deal with security cooperation.

On one side of the spectrum pertaining to the liberal institutionalist approach are scholars who see value in institutional exchanges. These scholars see the benefits not only because of the possibilities it presents for 'norm diffusion' and the 'reproduction of role identities' but also because it has allowed the EU and China to realise the need for closer institutionalised bilateral cooperation on security matters (Ai and Song 2019: 286; Montesano 2019: 142; Stumbaum 2015: 343). This was the case as argued by Ai and Song, for example, in relation to the bilateral recognition during high-level summit meetings for the EU3 and China to find a mutually acceptable agreement pertaining to the Iranian nuclear deal (2019: 286). Others have argued that under the right institutional conditions, the EU and China can satisfactorily bridge their political divide to foster security cooperation. This was the case in the context of the fight against Somali piracy where under the aegis of the SHADE mechanism, EU NAVFOR naval officers and their People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) counterparts were able to build political trust by expressing empathy and engaging in ideal-type communicative action (Barton 2017: 150–155).

On the other side of this spectrum, other EU-China scholars have long dismissed this superficial process of bilateral institution-building. The criticism purported here contends that the multiplicity of policy papers and dialogue mechanisms simply lead to the creation of considerable volumes of rhetoric while only generating paltry returns in terms of concrete actions (Holslag 2011: 299, 309; Mattlin 2012: 196; Montesano 2019, 143; Smith and Xie 2010: 438). These concrete actions would then translate into the empirical basis upon which the EU and China would breathe actual life into their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. One could argue that the same is true for bilateral security cooperation. For all the talk and written promises, as the introduction surmised, there have only been a handful of actual examples of practical cooperation and/or alignment. Some of these examples have actually been ad hoc rather the result of a top-down volition (Kirchner et al. 2016: 6). Worse still, scholars such as Mattlin are convinced that the PRC, in particular, is fond of dialogues as talking shops for compartmentalising certain sensitive topics (2012: 190). Dialogues and policy papers also serve as a useful way to demonstrate that parties are doing something as opposed to nothing, even if the means would appear to matter more than the ends. Security cooperation is no different in this regard. The EU and China may bring up overlapping security considerations across their plethora of dialogues and policy papers, but more often than not Brussels and Beijing talk the talk but do not walk the walk. Indeed, as neoliberal institutionalist theorists might have predicted, weak institutional design only encourages the pursuit of self-centred interests (Smith 2004: 100; Wilkins 2008: 366–367).

In sum, the liberal institutionalist approach is equally pessimistic in scope when it comes to predicting security cooperation and this despite the supposedly impressive bilateral institutional structure pertaining to security cooperation. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, but these exceptions do not find usually their roots in the top-down implementation of this bilateral institutional design.

The BRI — a game-changer for EU-China security cooperation? The case of Central Asia

Case study and dependent variable rationale

The take-away from this overview of the different theoretical strands undergirding the prospects for EU-China security cooperation is that, bar certain exceptional circumstances, these prospects are inherently dim. To further verify this trend, this paper seeks to explore whether the BRI is likely or not to act as a paradigmatic catalyst for change in the realm of EU-China security cooperation. This section will now test this dependent variable against the prospects for bilateral security cooperation in CA. It will do so by pitching this dependent variable against the predictions drawn from the three theoretical strands assessed above. Before doing so, this subsection will first rationalise the decision to select the BRI as the dependent variable and CA as the case study.

With regards to the BRI, its potential as a game-changer stems as much from the obvious economic, social and political impacts that it will generate along its land

and maritime components as it will in terms of determining (in part) Xi Jinping's legacy as leader of China. Within the specific confines of this paper, it must be noted here that the EU (as a collective entity)¹ is not, for the time being, a BRI signatory. In fact, the EU has at times mixed veiled criticisms of the BRI with outright contempt, as best encapsulated by its refusal to sign off on the communiqué prepared by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce during the 2017 BRI Forum. This is not to say that the EU is categorically opposed to working with China in and around the BRI. The launch of the 2015 EU-China Connectivity Platform is a testimony to this. As a result, it is worth considering the BRI as a potential game-changer here not only for the levels of investment at stake but also due to the physical security of BRI projects. Indeed, since some BRI projects are located in highly volatile regions, varying Chinese actors have become exposed to such volatilities. This is best illustrated, for example, by the 2016 blast at the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek (Tajikistan) or by attacks on Chinese engineers involved in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects (Putz 2017). The PRC has itself acknowledged the need for a collective approach to safeguarding projects. To this end, the first BRI security cooperation dialogue forum was held in May 2017 in Beijing, where the head of the Commission for Political and Legal Affairs of the CCP's Central Committee explained that all BRI stakeholders should foster a 'concept of common and cooperative security' (CCTV 2017). Such statements build upon those made the same month by the Office of the Leading Group for the BRI at the United Nations: '[...] calling on the international community to provide a secure environment for the construction of the BRI' (2017: 8).

Again, this reality could be interpreted as being the sole responsibility of China and BRI signatory states. Yet, as extrapolated below, the EU has overlapping security concerns with those identified by China pertaining to the integrity of the BRI, while EU institutions have, for the best part of a decade, been advocating the need for closer cooperation with the PRC to help alleviate some of these concerns. This is where CA comes into play. To start with, the EU and China's interests in CA dovetail around connectivity and the need to maintain peace and stability by supporting local actors in the fight against terrorism, border management and drug trafficking. In this regard, the EU-China Connectivity Platform matters not only because it builds upon successful large-scale transport infrastructure projects — such as the Yiwu-Madrid railway line — but also because it is designed to foster joint projects, some of which are likely to cross the region. One example of this is the proposed highway construction linking Jinghe county (PRC) with the Alatau Pass that sits on the border between China and Kazakhstan. This project was recently presented to the Platform's Expert Group (European Commission 2019). Additionally, despite the BRI garnering most of the infrastructure investment headlines, China is not the only external power to pour funds into regional infrastructure development. Between 2010 and 2018, the EU leveraged more than €4.2 billion worth of financial and technical assistance for infrastructure connectivity (European Commission 2018: 10).

¹ Some EU member states have even signed individual Memoranda of Understanding with China on the BRI such as Poland, Hungary and Italy (Okano-Heijmans and Kamo 2019: 1).

Naturally, this entails overlapping interest in terms of the furtherance of regional peace. Efforts at promoting peace have, thus far, predominantly been individual in scope, albeit demonstrating some degree of convergence and similitude. With the release of its 2019 strategy paper for CA, entitled *A New EU-Central Asia Strategy: Deepening Relationships and Generating Long-Lasting Impact*, the EU strives to consolidate upon the modest strategic gains it has made as a security actor in the region. Since 2007, the EU has made a marginal impact as an external security actor namely thanks to the assistance it has provided to fight terrorism, fight drug trafficking and settle border disputes and in the sphere of jurisprudence (Baizakova 2013: 90–91; Gussarova et al. 2019: 3; Putz 2015). In particular, the EU's reputation was enhanced thanks to the technical assistance provided under the impetus of Border Management in CA and the CA Drug Action Programme initiatives, towards which the EU contributed approximately €1 billion (Baizakova 2013: 92). To institutionalise its own forms of security cooperation with CA actors, the EU established a high-level strategic dialogue placing the emphasis on border management, counter-terrorism, organised crime, migrant smuggling, human trafficking, counter-narcotics and RoL capacity-building (EEAS 2019: 5; Lain 2017). All of the above has culminated in the EU's enhanced visibility in this domain, which was best captured by two recent developments. First is in the shape of the former EU High Representative and Vice President for Foreign and Security Policy's participation in the 2018 Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan (Gussarova et al. 2019: 6) and the second being the newly established post of EU security and counterterrorism expert with competence for CA whose remit includes strengthening practical cooperation on security sector reform and governance, hybrid threats and on the water/security nexus (EEAS 2019: 6).

As established above, on paper, the PRC shares similar security concerns with the EU. Regarding border management and the fight against the trade in illicit drugs, China has provided financial and training support for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Marty 2017). The driver behind China's stance on security in CA stems from a desire to see stability in the region (Chung 2006: 10; von Hauff 2019: 198). After all, stability in the region has partly become a precursor for the BRI's legacy (Idan 2018). And it is on the theme of regional stability that the EU and China mostly converge. The diplomatic language coming out of Brussels would appear to indicate a tentative desire on behalf of the EU to create synergies with the PRC to help further consolidate stability in CA by mitigating the potential ill effects of the threats posed by violent extremism, drug trafficking and instability in Afghanistan (Gussarova et al. 2019: 5). The European Commission's 2016 *Elements for a New EU Strategy on China* paper points to Central Asia as a region providing opportunities to 'step up' security cooperation with the PRC, with counterterrorism earmarked as an area of mutual concern (2016: 11–12). In 2017, EU Special Representative Peter Burian openly admitted to the EU's willingness to work side-by-side with other external powers in the region towards this end, when he conceded that 'the EU does not have and does not want to have any exclusive kind of space, but rather share the cooperation with others, avoiding geopolitical games in the region' (cited in Shayakhmetova 2017). This complements the emphasis placed on the link between security and connectivity as highlighted in the EU's 2018 Connecting Europe and Asia: Building

Blocks for an EU Strategy paper. To document highlights the need to further cooperation with Asian countries in combatting terrorism, cyber security and organised crime (European Commission 2018: 4). In sum, to cite Chen, the BRI can be seen as a basis for security cooperation in the region due to the likely cooperative spillover effects it may generate:

If the EU and its member states could develop cooperation with China in mutually beneficial projects of infrastructure construction, it would not only open up new room for EU-China cooperation, but also offer the opportunity for the two to join forces to promote stability and development in the vast areas in the Eurasian continent between them (2016: 789).

The mirage of bilateral BRI security cooperation in CA

From the above, it can be inferred that some degree of bilateral overlap — coupled to the apparent official will for joint action — renders the discussion on prospective security cooperation plausible. The purpose now is to test the predictions from the three schools of thought highlighted in the first half of the paper to determine the extent to which the BRI can realistically serve as a game-changer on bilateral security cooperation.

Commencing with the normative outlook, the prospects for security cooperation in CA in and around the BRI would not appear to be favourable, once more, because of both sides being conflicted by their inherent divergence over norms. Referring back to the mention earlier of the EU's refusal to collectively adhere to the 2017 BRI Forum communiqué, this seemingly rare and unexpected display of solidarity by member states not only left Chinese officials red-faced. Beyond the embarrassment caused, the rationale behind Brussels' Janus-face was attributed to the member states and institutions unanimously disapproving of BRI standards regarding transparency, sustainability and tendering processes (Phillips 2017). Communications coming out of Brussels on the matter have reiterated the value-added of the EU's own approach to infrastructure financing. Indeed, the 'Connecting Europe with Asia' strategy indirectly points to value-incompatibility with the BRI as it emphasises issues such as the fiscal viability of infrastructure projects, transparency and the stringent respect of environmental impact assessments (European Commission 2018). The strategy does not cite China or the BRI by name, but the focus on respecting market rules for procurement and other 'rights' makes it ominous. Moreover, the EU has also helped to plant the seed of global pushback against the BRI's purported monopoly over infrastructure financing, by joining hands with its traditional partners in generating collaborative counterinitiatives. For example, the EU has been solicited by the US' Overseas Private Investment Corporation agency to sign up to a trilateral agreement with Canadian counterparts in devising an infrastructure financing model able to 'rival state-led' alternatives (Barton 2019: 6–7).

Value differences pertaining to their respective interpretations on the means to consolidate regional stability serves as another blow to the prospect of security cooperation. On its side of the spectrum, the EU stresses liberal norms in the development of its security profile which sit in diametric opposition to China's preference

for state-driven responses. The literature is quick to remind readers of China's suspicions of the EU's normative agenda towards CA, and this disjuncture has obvious consequences to the prospects for bilateral cooperation (Sharshenova and Crawford 2017: 453, 465; von Hauff 2019: 201). As a case in point, the Chinese government's perception of security in Central Asia is somewhat devised as an extension of its domestic security policy governing Xinjiang province (Blank 2018; Pantucci cited in Coomarasamy 2014: 53). By extension, cooperation with the EU would amount to the Chinese government being open to discussing, and sharing, information relative to the management of its own domestic security — a prospect most unlikely to arise given their divergences on the interpretation of sovereignty. And even if Beijing did favour this prospect, it is unlikely that any of the EU's institutions would consider it politically viable to lend support to what the European Parliament labelled as 'repressive police and security methods' in Xinjiang (2013: 10). In parallel, the PRC will not want to be associated with a potential CSDP operation in CA that seeks to promote any of the EU's liberal values.

In a recent piece on bilateral cooperation pertaining to CA, Luba von Hauff took a less Manichean stance by arguing that:

[...] the presence of normative divergence between the EU and China need not inevitably imply the presence of mutual antagonism and of working against each other, especially since the definition's other requirement of a "common purpose" — in the case at hand, a non-violent, predictable Central Asia — is certainly met (2018: 205).

Von Hauff's argument is justified in the sense at the very least, despite their normative divergences, the EU and China found a way to contribute towards a common goal in helping to ensure stability across the region (even if they may not be the main precursors of such stability). This lowest common denominator approach, actually, speaks volume of how bilateral normative divergences have hijacked prospects for any substantive security cooperation. In sum, by casting a normative lens over the prospects for bilateral security cooperation in CA, we find that even if Brussels and Beijing share a common apprehension of security threats undermining regional stability, the BRI is unlikely to prove a sufficiently strong stimulus to get both partners to circumvent these structural differences. Furthermore, there does appear to be a norm-driven demand emanating from China which could serve as a basis for cooperation or alignment with the EU. As further explained below, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is likely to play the part of the normative trend-setter for security matters in the region, with its purview on strengthening the existing regional order as oppose to contesting it (Chen 2016: 781; von Hauff 2019: 198–199, 204).

Turning to the geopolitical dimension, the outlook would appear equally bleak. Although not a geopolitical consideration per se, the first port of call for most security considerations of a regional dimension for CA states would be the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and/or the SCO. In case of regional instability (which could endanger BRI projects), the agency of CA states will most likely drive them to seek support from either of these two organisations. Both of these entities reflect the pre-eminence of Russia and China as sources of influence from

a strategic perspective, rendering it highly unlikely for there to be demand for the EU's services, even if these organisations may not have succeeded in: '[...] blocking the attractiveness of the EU's ideas altogether' (von Hauß 2019: 203). For the time being, Moscow and Beijing seem to have settled on an arrangement whereby Russia continues to serve as the security guarantor for CA states, but appears relaxed in the face of China's increased need to demonstrate greater involvement with regional security matters. This is partly explained by Beijing's desire to ensure a secure environment for BRI projects. Since China has not explicitly earmarked the SCO as the forum through which to discuss BRI-related security concerns pertaining to CA, this does indicate that Beijing may be open to alternative forms of security cooperation should instability in CA bring BRI projects into disrepute. Hypothetically, if the conditions were right, this could lead to some form of interaction with the EU, akin to how both sides grew closer in the fight against Somali piracy. For as long as the EU did not press too hard to promote its norms as part of such security cooperation, one could imagine China and Russia tolerating such cooperation and this despite ongoing bilateral tension between Moscow and Brussels over Ukraine/Crimea.

Interestingly, the geopolitical dimension is triggered more than anything by the absent power in these dynamics: the USA. The rationale here is that the blow-back from potential EU-China security cooperation in CA pertaining to the BRI is unlikely to be supported by Washington, in light of its own strategic rivalry with Beijing. Particularly under the outgoing Trump administration, one could imagine that this prospect would be swiftly dismissed as an attempt by Brussels and Beijing to undermine the USA in the scope of its own strategic contentions with China. Furthermore, Washington has grown to be the BRI's fiercest critic in part because it has been interpreted as a direct attempt to promote Chinese global influence to the detriment of American leadership. Mike Pompeo has not hesitated to use his trips overseas in his capacity of former Secretary of State to voice out the outgoing administration's disapproval of the BRI (Global Times 2019). Even if President Joe Biden rekindles the flame of alliance between the USA and the EU, Brussels would still be wary of the damage caused by cosying up too closely to China even in a region where the USA has traditionally taken a back seat. This unless Washington (and the international community at large) legitimises the need for particular security cooperation required (amongst others) between the EU and China. Due to the sensitivity of geostrategic concerns pitting the transatlantic alliance against EU-China relations, such prospects will continue to remain the exception rather than the rule.

Finally, when ascertaining the institutionalist take, there is again little to suggest that the BRI could buck the bilateral security cooperation trend. This mostly stems from the fact that since the EU is not a BRI signatory, there exists very few pathways through which both parties could seek to institutionalise any form of engagement pertaining to BRI security concerns in CA. By not officially endorsing the BRI, the EU cannot sit on any existing fora where BRI security matters might be discussed and subsequently acted upon. Without there being any form of 'contractual obligation' towards the BRI for the EU, any desire or expectation for Brussels to step in would be sporadic, ad hoc and externally driven in nature. Even without becoming a signatory to the BRI, there is the sense that although the EU and China do discuss security matters pertaining to CA as part of their various organic fora (e.g. HLSD)

or when devising policy papers, this may not in fact be driven by the desire to trigger any tangible output. These exchanges may simply occur to facilitate information-gathering or implicit coordination of their respective security positions/activities vis-à-vis CA. If this is the case, then the critique of the institutionalist approach of the EU and China accumulating ‘talking shops’ would be accurate since any of the fora utilised for bilateral consultations on the security of the BRI in CA would only serve a discursive purpose. Institutionalists might welcome these talking shops as a gain over the absence of any such exchange but if they produce little tangible output or fail to help bridge the political divide, it is not unreasonable to question their intrinsic value. Worse still, if security cooperation does happen to occur but cannot be traced back to the interactions which are conducted under the scope of these institutional exchanges, this further brings into perspective their initial added-value. In any case, with the BRI entering the eighth year of its inauguration, the EU and China do not appear to be any closer to institutionalising their security cooperation pertaining to CA security.

Conclusion

Bilateral security cooperation between the EU and China has often been seen by leaders on both sides as a mechanism to help reduce mistrust by encouraging discursive exchanges, and on the odd occasion, actual forms of alignment and practical cooperation. Scholars and policy commentators alike have at times supported security cooperation not only as a means to help promote peace worldwide but also to help provide meaning to the strategic contours of their bilateral relations. Yet, in truth, this constitutes more wishful thinking than anything else. Indeed, as demonstrated in the paper’s first half, beyond the existence of a few extraordinary circumstances, EU-China security cooperation is likely to constitute a failed enterprise. This was shown by analysing this prospect from the lens of three distinct theoretical approaches. Commencing with the constructivist/normative lens, this approach highlighted the general improbability of security cooperation due to divergences over the principles that form the core of their respective foreign policy identities. With Brussels and Beijing sitting on diametrically opposed sides of the divide due to their inherently different political systems, their conflicting norms will continuously prevent them from being able to carry out their promise of greater bilateral interaction in this regard. Only a radical reinterpretation and synergising of their respective norms would facilitate such enhanced interaction which, for the foreseeable future, appears unlikely. Furthermore, even if a handful of scholars have shown through their findings that a convergence of norms is not mandatory in fostering acts of bilateral cooperation, as a whole, their inability to bridge this divide features as a major hindrance.

For scholars who have given privilege to applying a neorealist angle to the study of EU-China security cooperation, there is — surprisingly — a sense of greater optimism than can be observed from the norm-driven approach. This optimism is gleaned from the fact that although great power rivalries do feature as a factor determining the outcome for Sino-European security cooperation, it would appear not

to act as greater a deterrent as the bilateral gulf over norms. For the most part, the deterrent here emanates from the EU's transatlantic alliance with the USA, particularly in circumstances when the USA and China's own relations have been beset by heightened strategic tension (as was the case under the Trump administration). That deterrent could be understood as the default setting in the context of triangular dynamics tying the EU and China with the USA. Yet, as witnessed in the case of the fight against Somali piracy, with Washington's tacit blessing (and with the overarching support of the international community), Brussels was able to entertain acts of practical security cooperation with China. Meanwhile, the institutionalist outlook on security cooperation has found solace in the seemingly impressive (at least on paper) institutional structure undergirding bilateral security cooperation, as seen in the shape of the multiplicity of extant fora and policy papers in which cooperation is discussed. However, this theoretical approach has often been discredited in the EU-China literature by the absence of tangible outputs generated by this apparent hive of discursive activity. Both Brussels and Beijing would seem to have favoured this approach over the years. In hindsight though, their true purpose in establishing such an elaborate framework remains unclear. In effect, even when acts of security alignment and cooperation have occurred, these have been ad hoc in nature which implies that they were not the product of a premeditation (even if both sides have subsequently attempted to spin them as such). This leaves this institutional structure somewhat redundant.

With the above having been taken into consideration, this paper then sought to examine the extent to which the BRI could serve (or not) as a paradigm change to the pattern of bilateral security cooperation. This paper has done so by testing the general predictions of these three schools of IR thought to the prospects of BRI-induced security cooperation in the CA region. The target here was to uncover whether the BRI, through its sheer vastness, could breach the usual defeatism characterising the prospect for EU-China security cooperation. The results are not conclusive. Firstly, the prediction of the constructivist school would appear to hold true in that divergences over the norms, which the EU and China respectively seek to promulgate through their own security initiatives in the region, are more likely to keep them apart than bring them together. In fact, some have surmised that the EU's implicit normative agenda in CA is only likely to further trigger China's ire and thus lessen the appeal of security cooperation for China. While vice versa, the EU is only likely to continue looking pejoratively upon the PRC's interpretation of CA as an extension of domestic security considerations (i.e. Xinjiang province). Secondly, the geopolitical approach demonstrated that although the EU would be somewhat constrained due to the transatlantic alliance (particularly when Sino-US tension is high), this would not prove to be an insurmountable challenge. Likewise with Moscow, the region's security guarantor, Brussels may be still be in a position to entertain the idea of security cooperation with China despite its lingering spat with Russia. The difficulty, as shown in this section of the paper, does not pertain so much to the approval (for allegiance or balance-of-power purposes) of an external power as to the reality that CA countries are likely to trigger existing multilateral fora such as the CSTO or SCO to help resolve a given security crisis. EU-China security cooperation may not come across as an attractive or effective replacement. Nonetheless,

geopolitics would not appear to be as greater a constraint as bilateral normative variances and would not necessarily prohibit bilateral security cooperation relative to the BRI. Lastly, the liberal institutionalist approach would appear to predict the unlikelihood of bilateral security cooperation on the BRI in CA, predominantly due to the EU's current refusal to officially endorse the BRI. This refusal signifies that the EU cannot integrate any BRI fora facilitating further interdependence not only with the PRC but also with other signatories, including CA states. This in turn compromises the chances of both sides broaching security cooperation pertaining to the BRI and simultaneously compromises the value of any organic bilateral dialogue mechanism emanating on the BRI. In sum, regardless of the theoretical lens adopted, the prospects for the BRI triggering a paradigm shift on bilateral security cooperation between the EU and China would appear slim at best. In spite the BRI's largesse and sheer magnitude, it cannot reverse the structural divide undergirding bilateral relations — a structural divide that seems to have further widened with the fallout triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic (Silver et al. 2020).

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