

China's OBOR as a Geo-Functional Institutional Project

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Abstract: *This study analyses the feasibility of China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative from an institutional perspective. The initiative is undertaken as a 'geo-functional institutional' project, and this strengthens its feasibility. Firstly, the initiative aims to institutionalize a new international structure paralleling the existing Western-dominated one through which China could re-organize its position as an 'agenda entrepreneur' in the world without any clash with the West. Secondly, the initiative follows a functionalist strategy. It offers a 'win-win' functionalist framework without any hegemonic ambition; thus, the initiative attracts the attention of the rest of the world. China also follows a pure functionalist and bilateral/regional way to deal with the heterogeneity problem among the target countries. However, China's institutionalization attempt might be isomorphic with the existing Western-dominated system in terms of its hegemonic structure due to the cognitive limitations in finding alternatives, and this might ruin the feasibility of the initiative.*

Keywords: *China, functionalism, institutionalism, New Silk Road, One Belt, One Road initiative*

1. Introduction

When the Chinese president Xi Jinping announced the One Belt, One Road (the OBOR) initiative as a global connectivity and infrastructure construction project in 2013, it sounded more like a political ambition than a feasible project. The project aims to connect 65 countries with 4.4 billion people via its two legs: the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt, which would connect China to Europe via Eurasia and the oceangoing 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, which would enhance connectivity between Asia, Africa and Europe (Du, 2016). In the following years, China put the OBOR initiative in practice; however, its feasibility is not yet clear. Particularly, the initiative, as a new institutionalization attempt, is an ongoing process without any concrete blueprint; thus, the gradually emerging outcomes of this institutionalization process determine the fate of the initiative. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse the feasibility of the OBOR initiative from an institutionalist perspective.

The paper mainly argues that the OBOR initiative is governed as a ‘geo-functional institutionalization’ process. To explain its geopolitical aspect, the first section will focus on the point that China is a deliberative actor behaving according to its national interests in the international arena. As a deliberative actor, China considers ‘relative gains’ in the Western-dominated asymmetric world system, but as the Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI) argues, the interdependence in the Sino-West relationship encourages China to cooperate with the West. However, its deliberativeness still pushes China to find alternatives to deal with the asymmetric nature of the mentioned interdependence in the Sino-West relationship. Put differently, China wants to become an ‘agenda entrepreneur’ instead of maintaining its status in the world as an ‘agenda abider’. At this point, the OBOR is designed in a way that gives China a chance to become an agenda entrepreneur in the world. In this regard, the focal point of this design is functionalism, through which the OBOR offers a ‘win-win’ cooperation framework to the rest of the world. Thanks to this functionalist framework without any hegemonic ambition, China has already achieved capturing the attention of other countries. In line with this framework, China also follows a bilateral/regional strategy to get rid of the problems that might stem from the heterogeneity among the target countries. Another positive outcome of this functionalist strategy is that China might institutionalize an alternative structure in the world paralleling the existing Western-dominated system without any clash with the West. Therefore, the second section of the paper will focus on the OBOR’s functionalist nature by considering the abovementioned arguments.

In conclusion, the paper argues that the China-led institutionalization process (the OBOR initiative) is feasible but fragile. Although this paper puts emphasis on the nation state's deliberativeness, China has indeed a limited capacity to make a precise calculation about the alternatives to the Western domination. Thus, the ongoing alternative institutionalization process might be isomorphic with the existing Western-dominated one in terms of its hierarchical shape (a Chinese hegemony similar to the Western hegemony), and if this possibility happens, China's fragile cooperation with the already suspicious and heterogeneous partners might easily collapse. Moreover, from a theoretical point of view, this case study also shows that institutional change might endogenously take place in an international structure via its deliberative members contrary to the mainstream 'new institutionalist' assumption that change is only possible through exogenous shocks in an international structure. Therefore, this case study suggests that we should not be obsessed with 'individual-society' analogy (highly popular in the new institutionalist school of thought) to understand the nation state behaviour but look for different case studies to obtain much information directly derived from the real life.

2. China as a deliberative dependent in the Western-dominated system

China's OBOR initiative is a good indicator showing that nation states are deliberative actors in the existing world system/structure; thus, this deliberativeness gives them the potential to trigger a change in the structure in which they practise. This means that contrary to the mainstream 'new institutionalist' assumptions, institutional change might be endogenous to a structure via its deliberative actors. However, as RCI assumes, interdependence prevents deliberative actors from showing any radical behaviour, but they might become entrepreneurs of any endogenous change when they acquire the necessary competence. In this regard, the OBOR initiative is an outcome of China's deliberativeness in the Western-dominated international structure, and it was designed as a geo-functional institutionalist project aiming for a gradual endogenous change in the system.

Since the 1970s, IR scholars have focused mainly on 'structure' to explain the nation state behaviour and they, in fact, try to explain 'continuity' in the international system rather than 'change'. For example, in his seminal book, *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz (1979) as a leading realist IR scholar

re-conceptualized anarchy as a system that significantly affects the nation state behaviour. In the same vein, Keohane (1984) argued that cooperation among nation states is possible via interdependence as an outcome of international institutions without a need for a hegemon contrary to the ‘hegemonic stability theory’. Subsequently, ‘new institutionalism’ as a new influential school of thought adamantly stressed that international structure has a determining role in the nation state behaviour. According to the new institutionalist logic, the existing international structure is in stasis as nation states have a tendency to cooperate. Briefly, Rational Choice Institutionalism (RCI) tries to explain stasis in the structure via ‘interdependence’, Historical Institutionalism (HI) via ‘path-dependence’, and Sociological Institutionalism (SI) via ‘logic of appropriateness’ (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Schmidt, 2010). Thus, according to the new institutionalist approaches, ‘change’ is exogenous to any existing structure (Harty, 2005; Olsson, 2016; Gorges, 2001). Particularly, Historical and Sociological Institutional approaches agree on the depiction of the nation state as an unconscious dependent of any international structure (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Pollack, 2009); thus, exogenous shock emerges as the best explanation for any institutional change (e.g., see Wendt, 1999). However, China is a deliberative actor aiming to endogenously change the existing Western-dominated system (without replacing it) through achieving parallel institutionalization. This means that these approaches cannot provide a sufficient theoretical framework to understand the OBOR initiative, but RCI might provide some useful insights for a better explanation of this case since this approach perceives the nation state as a deliberative actor in the international environment.

RCI mainly argues that high alternative costs and interdependence drive deliberative nation states to cooperate (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985; Keohane & Nye, 1989). In this sense, ‘iteration’ in the nation state behaviour is proposed as a convincing theoretical explanation (via game theories) to show how the nation state rationally learns that cooperation is more profitable than deception (Axelrod, 1984; 1997; Oye, 1986). Therefore, this logic assumes that nation states focus on ‘absolute gains’ instead of ‘relative gains’ in any international cooperation (Keohane, 1984). According to this static theoretical scenario, China should accept its ‘agenda abider’ role in the Western-dominated international system due to interdependence in the Sino-West relationship and behave accordingly, but the OBOR initiative is actually a manifestation showing that China refuses this passive role and wants to become an ‘agenda entrepreneur’ in the world. Therefore, contrary to RCI’s assumption, China’s behavioural pattern supports the realist argument that ‘relative gain’ is a significant factor affecting the nation state behaviour in the international system (see Barbieri, 1996; Copeland, 1996;

Grieco, Powell, & Snidal, 1993; Grieco, 1988; Waltz, 2000). Particularly, if the interdependence between nation states is institutionalized in an asymmetrical way, this asymmetrical structure gives significant power to dominant partners, and thanks to this power, some dominant players might demand to change the rules of a game in the middle of it (or in the following phases). Therefore, the disadvantageous sides need to consider 'relative gains' in any international cooperation.

If we analyse the Sino-West relationship from this theoretical framework, we can understand better why China needed to launch the OBOR initiative. As noted above, the Sino-West relationship was institutionalized in an asymmetrical way due to the West's domination over the world, and this gave the West power to intervene in the world system any time they want. In practice, this happened in the 1990s at the expense of China's national interests. The victory in the Cold War gave the West an illusion that they can intervene in the affairs of any country in the name of 'human rights' by infringing the 'sovereignty principle'. To illustrate, Tony Blair (1999), the then British prime minister, declared 'the doctrine of the international community' arguing that the democratic Western countries should launch military operations against the states infringing fundamental human rights; and in the following era, this new doctrine was adopted to legitimize Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq wars. China strongly opposed any idea to replace the 'sovereignty principle' with 'human rights' (Feigenbaum, 2008, p. 100; Shen, 2012, p. 195). Therefore, as a deliberative nation state, China did not obey the changing rules in the international system for normative reasons, and was highly irritated by the Western domination in the system. However, China's dependence on the Western capital and technology for economic growth forced it to cooperate with the West despite being extremely uncomfortable with the West's new interventionist doctrines which were weakening the 'sovereignty principle' in the international system (Feigenbaum, 2008; Pan, 2012). As a result, interdependence (with high alternative costs to China) in the Sino-West relations made China an unwilling agenda abider in the Western-dominated international system (Ding, 2010; MacDonald, 2016; Stephens, 2015). On the other hand, the asymmetric nature of this interdependence forced China to consider the 'relative gains' in its cooperation with the West (or as a deliberative nation state, China sought any chance to get rid of this asymmetrical structure).

As a result, after acquiring enough competence, China launched the OBOR initiative as a good synthesis considering both China's dependence on the West and its need to eliminate the asymmetrical nature of this dependence. Therefore, the OBOR initiative might be perceived as a strategic 'soft' behaviour of China to gradually increase the country's power in the world. As Nye (2004) argues,

interdependence might force the nation state to behave in a soft way; however, this softness might involve 'strategic behaviour'. At this point, the main strategy behind China's behaviour is to institutionalize an alternative system paralleling the existing Western-dominated one without any clash with the West due to China's dependence on the West (high alternative costs prevent a direct clash between China and the West). Moreover, the OBOR initiative is designed as a 'functionalist project', which strengthens the feasibility of the initiative. Firstly, the initiative offers a 'win-win' framework without any hegemonic ambition; thus, it has a capacity to develop a polycentric world system (as an alternative to the existing system under the control of the Western hegemony). Secondly, China also follows a pure and bilateral functionalist strategy, which might help the country to successfully handle the heterogeneity problem among the target countries. In the light of these arguments, the following section will analyse the feasibility of the OBOR initiative in depth.

3. The OBOR as a parallel institutionalization process against the Western domination

As noted above, nation states are deliberative actors in the international system, and interdependence encourages them to cooperate with each other. However, unlike RCI's assumption, it does not actually result in stasis in an international structure because the asymmetric nature of interdependence gives the advantageous side the power to change the rules of the game, and as a response to this, the other side needs to consider 'relative gains' in the existing system. However, the consideration of 'relative gains' by deliberative nation states does not necessarily lead to a clash among them. The disadvantageous side might attempt to make an endogenous change in the system in favour of itself without any direct clash (or any immediate attempt to ravage the existing system) since any radical behaviour might turn out to be more costly. At this point, China's OBOR initiative is a good case supporting this argument. On the one hand, China wants to achieve a new form of institutionalization paralleling the existing world system without a clash with the West due to its dependence on the West. On the other hand, the initiative implicitly challenges the Western domination in the international system. Therefore, the OBOR initiative might also be defined as an outcome of China's 'subversive action'¹ which takes place in the existing international structure. However, the achievement of this geo-functional institutionalist project depends on the challenger's entrepreneurial

¹ For more information about what is 'subversive action' see Olsson, 2016.

competence and its ability to convince other states.

Firstly, the empirical facts show that China has entrepreneurial capacity to make the initiative feasible. To illustrate, Xi Jinping started to implement a much more proactive foreign policy to create/shape an external environment consistent with China's national interests compared to his predecessors (Chang-Liao, 2016; Zhang, 2015). Additionally, the formation of a National Security Commission might be seen as a concrete Chinese plan to strengthen its global governance capacity (Hu, 2016). Moreover, many scholars agree on the point that China has an oversupply in capital goods and construction-oriented industrial sectors, which could be used for the OBOR initiative (Baviera, 2016; Karim, 2015; Swaine, 2015; Wang, Zheng & Liu, 2016). Related to this argument, China's outward direct investment already exceeded 1 trillion US dollars as of 2015 (MOFCOM, 2016). Last but not least, China managed to institutionalize a sufficient financial system which is necessary to carry out the OBOR initiative. In this sense, the most important one is the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (the AIIB) with a capital of 100 billion dollars, founded by 57 countries, and its rich capital and numerous participants make it a real international development bank (Du, 2016). Especially the participation of the Philippines and Vietnam, with whom China has a territorial dispute in the South China Sea, in this financial structure might be seen as a significant functional/financial success of the initiative. Therefore, the establishment of the AIIB has already put China at the centre of geo-economics and geopolitics in the region and beyond (Yu, 2016). China also created the Silk Road Fund with a capital of 40 billion dollars as a medium and long-term development and investment fund, which is open to any country involved in the OBOR (see www.silkroadfund.com).

Secondly, the implementation of the project via a 'win-win' oriented functionalist framework gets positive feedback from other nation states, and this significantly increases the feasibility of the initiative because a 'win-win' oriented functionalist project alleviates the 'relative gains' problem in the international system. Particularly, in a similar way to how the cooperation on steel accelerated the European integration process, China wants to use 'steel' (via train routes or harbours at this time) to trigger a new institutionalization process. However, China's functionalist initiative is different from the functionalism implemented in Europe, which was constrained by a hegemonic ideology (liberal democracy) and regional contiguity. Therefore, in David Mitrany's words (1966), it could be argued that China only offers 'technical self-determination' to other nation states in the world, and the exclusion of geographical and ideological rigidities might make 'common action' more feasible in this project (Mitrany, 1948).

Moreover, the spill-over in the Chinese initiative only represents the expansion of economic prosperity among sovereign states rather than the formation of a political community via diluting nation states' sovereign power. Put differently, China aims to achieve cooperation among nation states but not harmony, and cooperation can even occur in a situation where there is "a mixture of conflicting and complementary interests" (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). In a concrete manner, for example, the initiative aims to create shared transport links without intervening in the relevant countries' production structures (Ferdinand, 2016), which means that a convergence of complementary interests among the related countries is enough for China to implement the OBOR initiative (and this is also an implicit answer to the question how China will govern trade among highly heterogeneous countries). In this regard, the OBOR initiative might be defined as an 'actor centred' functionalist process (Pierson, 2004), in which actors (nation states) could focus on their own individual interests with less collective responsibility. Related to this argument, Garcia (2014; 2016) also mentions a potential Sino-centrism as an outcome of the OBOR initiative because the connection of Europe and China via the New Silk Road Belt, and Latin America and China via the Maritime Silk Road might trigger a new kind of 'industrial revolution'. However according to him (Garcia, 2014; 2016), this Sino-centrism might be considered as a polycentric world system because it does not constitute any periphery zones like those in the Eurocentric world system. As an example supporting this argument, a White Paper published in 2008 (The State Council of the PRC, 2009) acknowledges 'economic globalization and world multipolarization' as the main parameters of the currently changing world.

As another example, China Development Bank argues that the initiative is being governed according to four principles: openness (the initiative is open to any country), inclusiveness (no conditionality to participate in it), mutual benefits, and participation (every participant is part of the decision-making process) (Zhigang, 2015, p. 6). Thus, these principles might be seen as a manifesto promising that the initiative is being carried out as an 'actor centred' functionalist process with a high respect for sovereignty. In addition to the exclusion of any hegemonic idea, this functionalist initiative is also a global project excluding any geographical contiguity although China's surrounding area has a primary focus. In this regard, China's attempts to connect Latin America to the initiative might be given as a good example, and thanks to these efforts, China became the second biggest trade partner of Latin America ahead of the EU as of 2015 (EC DGT, 2016). Moreover, China follows bilateral/regional arrangements rather than multilateral decisions, which is an effective strategy to get around the problems

stemming from the heterogeneity among the target countries. For example, China, as the biggest investor in Africa as of 2015 (ECN, 2015), recently signed an agreement with the African Union on an infrastructure construction project aiming to connect 54 African countries to each other (Chen, 2016). As another successful bilateral/regional arrangement, China managed to initiate a loose institutionalization process with 16 Central and Eastern European countries (see CEEC, n.d.). Moreover, thanks to its bilateral functionalist framework, China could focus on the technical expansion of the initiative despite the significant geopolitical considerations on it. For example, one might explain Russia's and Iran's support for the initiative as an ideological/geopolitical position against the West. However, compared to its partners, China tries to follow a more impartial and technical way to integrate the West to the East. To illustrate, unlike Russia, China does not want to use the Shanghai Cooperation Council as an anti-Western security bloc but to transform it into an economic framework as well (Marketos, 2009, p. 61; Yuan, 2010). Moreover, China tries to deepen its cooperation with Iran in the comity of the West (Garver, 2016). As another example to China's functionalist position, the country tries to avoid being thrown in the loop of the Middle East's sectarian conflicts. Thus, it aims to deepen its relationship not only with Iran but also with the Gulf countries. In this sense, China initiated '1+2+3' cooperation mode² in order to develop its relations with the GCC, in which priority is given to energy cooperation; then, to two important fields: infrastructure construction and trade-investment facilitation; and thirdly, to the cooperation on hi-tech (Lirong, 2015). Last but not least, China not only aims to avoid irritating the West while implementing the OBOR initiative but also wants to include the West into its institutionalization attempt to make the initiative more feasible. In line with this purpose, China has already achieved to grab Germany's attention as a pivotal EU member. For instance, Markus Ederer (2016), State Secretary for the Federal Foreign Office of Germany, sees the initiative strategically feasible; thus according to him, Germany and the EU should be part of it. German Deutsche Bahn also agreed with China to initiate rail freight transport from Hefei to Hamburg via Eurasia in September 2016 (see Deutsche Bahn, 2016).

Despite the arguments in this section showing the feasibility of the OBOR initiative, there are also some significant challenges which make the initiative fragile. If the OBOR initiative is an attempt to parallel the existing Western-dominated system, we need to know its relationship with the existing one. In this regard, from a HI perspective, the OBOR might be isomorphic with the existing one (a hierarchic structure) because of the cognitive limitation about

² This is also another example for China's bilateral/regional strategy.

prospective alternatives (see Fields, Dimaggio & Powell, 1983), and there are two points making this theoretical argument considerable in this case. Firstly, the initiative is an ongoing process and we cannot anticipate the future phases of it. Secondly, as noted above, we know that the OBOR initiative is more like an 'institutional bricolage' than a brand-new invention as its institutionalization depends on both the exploration of new arrangements (e.g., the AIIB) and the exploitation of the existing system (e.g., technological and capital accumulation through cooperation with the West) (De Jong, 2013); therefore, its relationship with the existing system via exploration and exploitation might be open to the mentioned isomorphic effect. In a concrete manner, China tries to initiate a polycentric institutionalization process as an alternative to the West-centred institutionalization in the world. However, Sino-centrism as a hegemonic core might emerge in the coming phases of the process and this possibility will most probably ruin the abovementioned gains of the initiative. In this regard, there is already suspicion about the mentioned possibility in China's surrounding area (e.g., India and Japan) (Fujiwara, 2016; Li-juan, 2016; Siling, 2015). Moreover, this alternative institutionalization process is fragile against exogenous shocks. For example, Russia's reaction to the Western domination in the international system, which drives China to develop a 'soft power' project, is different since Russia prefers to directly challenge the West and tries to compete with the Western institutions through alternative institutionalization projects such as Eurasian Economic Union (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2012; Vilpisauskas, 2016, ch. 15). Therefore, as Russia has its own agenda for Eurasia, its lukewarm but crucial support for the initiative might be lost at any phase of the initiative (Ferdinand, 2016; Wilson, 2016). The geopolitical tension in the South China Sea has also the potential to spoil the initiative despite the inclusion of the Philippines and Vietnam in the AIIB (Yu, 2016).

4. Conclusion

This paper analyses China's OBOR initiative from an institutionalist perspective and argues that the initiative is designed as a 'geo-functional institutionalist' project. As RCI assumes, China is a deliberative actor in the Western-dominated international system, and thanks to this deliberativeness, it takes into account the 'relative gains' in the system. However, as RCI argues, the dependence of China on the system prevents it from displaying any marginal behaviour, but the asymmetric nature of its dependence pushes China to find an alternative. At this level, the OBOR initiative stands for this alternative because it aims at

new institutionalization paralleling the Western-dominated international system without any direct clash with the West. Moreover, the findings of the study support the argument that the OBOR initiative is a feasible project. Firstly, China has sufficient competence to carry out this functionalist project. To illustrate, the foundation of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank is a good indicator showing this competence. Secondly, its functionalist strategy improves the feasibility of the project. On the one hand, the OBOR initiative has a 'win-win' framework without any hegemonic ambition; thus, it is attractive to the rest of the world. This framework also does not have any geographical limitation, which strengthens its global agenda. Thus, the influence of China is on the rise both in Africa and Latin America. On the other hand, China follows a pure functionalist and bilateral strategy to overcome the heterogeneity problem among the target countries. To illustrate, thanks to its bilateral strategy, China managed to cooperate with both Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf despite the loop of the Middle East's sectarian conflicts. Although these advantages strengthen the feasibility of the OBOR initiative, it is still a fragile project mostly because of the fact that the hierarchic structure of the existing international system might have an isomorphic effect on China's initiative due to the cognitive limitations in finding alternatives. Therefore, if the OBOR initiative starts to get a hierarchic structure, the mentioned gains might easily be lost.

The findings of this research might also be attributed to the institutionalist discussions on the concept of 'change'. In particular, the explanation of 'change' remains an important puzzle for new institutionalism (James, 2016). In this regard, as noted above, new institutionalist assumptions mainly focus on exogenous shocks to explain institutional change. However, this case shows that change might endogenously take place in an international structure through its deliberative actors (nation states) once they acquire enough competence to achieve this. However, the study also acknowledges that deliberativeness itself is not enough to explain the nation state's behaviour; thus, we need deeper analyses to make it more knowledgable. In this respect, it might be a better idea to revisit 'agency-structure' problem in the IR discipline (Carlsnaes, 1992; Wendt, 1987). Particularly, as new institutionalists do, an individual-society analogy might be helpful in understanding the nation state behaviour in the international arena to some extent; however, any further obsession with this analogy might drive us into a fallacy as the nation state as an actor in the international arena is a *sui generis* entity, and more importantly, every nation state has also unique traits. This means that they might react differently under the same international conditions. As noted above, for instance, China and Russia have different reactions to the Western domination in the international system. As a result, this

study argues that more case studies focusing on different nation states might enrich our knowledge of the nation state behaviour since macro-level theoretical assumptions might prove limited in explaining the real life.

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