

China's New Silk Roads. Categorising and Grouping the World: Beijing's 16+1+X European Formula

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Abstract

In autumn 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping presented his Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe play an important role in this ambitious infrastructure and connectivity project. The analysis of the 16+1 cooperation format, established by Beijing in 2012, shows that Beijing is able to establish new regional groupings that have the potential to undermine the unity of a larger regional bloc. Yet, it also demonstrates that China lacks a coherent BRI master plan. Rather, it pragmatically adapts its strategies to challenges and external criticism. The European Union (EU), notably the European Parliament (EP), became since 2015 more critical of the strategic impacts of BRI on Europe. Austria, which recognised the economic opportunities offered by BRI only recently, supports a common EU position. While Austria plays a strong—if not a leading—role in two Central and Eastern European cooperation mechanisms that may in the future also address BRI, that is, the Salzburg Forum and the Central European Defense Cooperation (CEDC), 16+1 remains the key institution for multi- and bilateral agreements on the New Silk Roads in this region. Austria, however, will remain only an observer and thus an 'X' in the 16+1+X format, reducing Vienna's influence.¹

Keywords: China; Belt and Road Initiative; 16+1; Central and Eastern Europe; Austria



Gerstl, Alfred. 2018. "China's New Silk Roads. Categorising and Grouping the World: Beijing's 16+1+X European Formula." *Vienna Journal of East Asian Studies*, 10, pp. 31–58.
<https://doi.org/10.2478/vjeas-2018-0002>

¹ The work on this paper was supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project 'Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges' (CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791).

Introduction

In autumn 2013, both the European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) announced bold infrastructure plans in order to better connect existing highway, railway, port, and airport infrastructures and establish new lines of connectivity, including telecommunications and energy. While the EU presented a significant upgrade of the existing Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme, in place since 1996, Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The New Silk Roads with their land-based and maritime component, however, dwarf the EU's TEN-T in regard to geopolitical ambitions, geographic scope, the complexity of the infrastructure projects, and financial costs. As Nadège Rolland (2017: 127) has argued—a position shared by many analysts—BRI has “the potential to become one of the defining economic and political constructs of the first half of the 21st century.” Despite these qualitative distinctions, these two projects are at first view complimentary and could therefore form a base for closer collaboration between Brussels and Beijing. Yet, BRI does not only offer a frame for infrastructural and economic cooperation between China and the EU. More significantly, it raises fundamental strategic questions for the Union and its individual member states alike (Gaspers 2018).

The literature on BRI and the accompanying Silk Road narratives, promoted by Chinese officials and independent Chinese and foreign scholars, is vast and growing. While many studies focus on BRI's geopolitical implications in general (e.g., Chaisse and Matsushita 2018; Ploberger 2017; Dollar 2015), even more analyse its impacts on specific sub-regions (e.g., Jakóbowski 2018; Chen and Günther 2016; Das 2017). This scientific approach is fully in line with Beijing's *Realpolitik*: by utilising existing regional groupings and sub-groupings (for instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation [SCO]) as well as forming new ones (e.g., 16+1), China projects its influence to the neighbouring and more distanced regions. Within these regional groupings a political hierarchisation of the partners becomes visible (Kowalski 2018). Alice Ekman (2018: 12) identifies a “marked preference of Chinese diplomacy for the classification and ranking of countries.” Thereby, it deliberately excludes the more influential states from these groupings—for instance, Germany and France in Europe, and India in South Asia. In this regard, a rather undiplomatic statement made by then foreign minister Yang Jiechi in the context of talks on the South China Sea at an ASEAN security forum, in which both China and the United States (US) participated in 2010, was revealing: “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact” (quoted in Pomfret 2010).

This paper will examine a specific grouping created by China in 2012: the 16+1 format, since 2013 increasingly designed to deepen Beijing's cooperation in regard to the BRI with 16 countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Southeastern

Europe. 16+1 is currently “the largest and most complex international institutionalized platform focused exclusively on [Central, East and Southeast Europe]” (Vangeli 2017: 110). The analysis will include Austria, which is located in the heart of Europe but enjoys only an observer status in the 16+1 mechanism, transforming it into a format that could be labelled 16+1+X. The research questions are the following:

(1) How does the EU view China's BRI in regard to its strategic and economic impacts on Europe and in particular on Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe?

(2) Which effects has BRI already had in the Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) and Austria, and how do these countries view BRI?

(3) What kind of role can Austria play in the 16+1 mechanism? Can it become a bridge-builder or will its participation increase competition in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe?

This paper starts with an overview of BRI's main aims and instruments, followed by an analysis of the EU's view on BRI. In the subsequent section, the 16+1 format is scrutinised and afterwards Austria's possible role in this mechanism is discussed. Thereby other already existing sub-regional cooperation formats involving Austria and certain CEEC are addressed. Finally, the conclusions are drawn.

The Belt and Road Initiative and Europe

BRI: China's Official and Unofficial Aims

The New Silk Roads are a fundamental revival of the ancient Silk Road (Frankopan 2016) and a pet project of the Chinese General-Secretary and President Xi Jinping. He first introduced them to the world in two speeches in Astana and in Jakarta in September and October 2013, respectively. Initially labelled One Belt, One Road (OBOR), the project consists of a land-based route, the so-called Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), and the maritime connection, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Basically, Beijing's main objective is to increase the broadly defined connectivity in and between Northeast, Southeast, South and Central Asia, the Middle East, East Africa, and Europe to promote trade and overall exchange within a China-centred framework. Six large corridors will connect these regions and the more than sixty participating countries. In 2018, the Arctic route was incorporated as ‘Polar Silk Road’ into the BRI frame (State Council of the PRC 2018: §II; Suokas 2017) due to its potential to significantly reduce the duration and costs of maritime trade.

The multi-billion-dollar BRI—the current estimate stands at US\$ 900bn—is based on a broad range of domestic, economic, and foreign policy as well as strategic motives of the Chinese leadership (Fallon 2015: 142; Swaine 2015: 3-9; Yu 2017: 355-358). The initiative links the development of the marginalised Western inland provinces (Makocki 2018: 21) with exporting excess production, such as steel

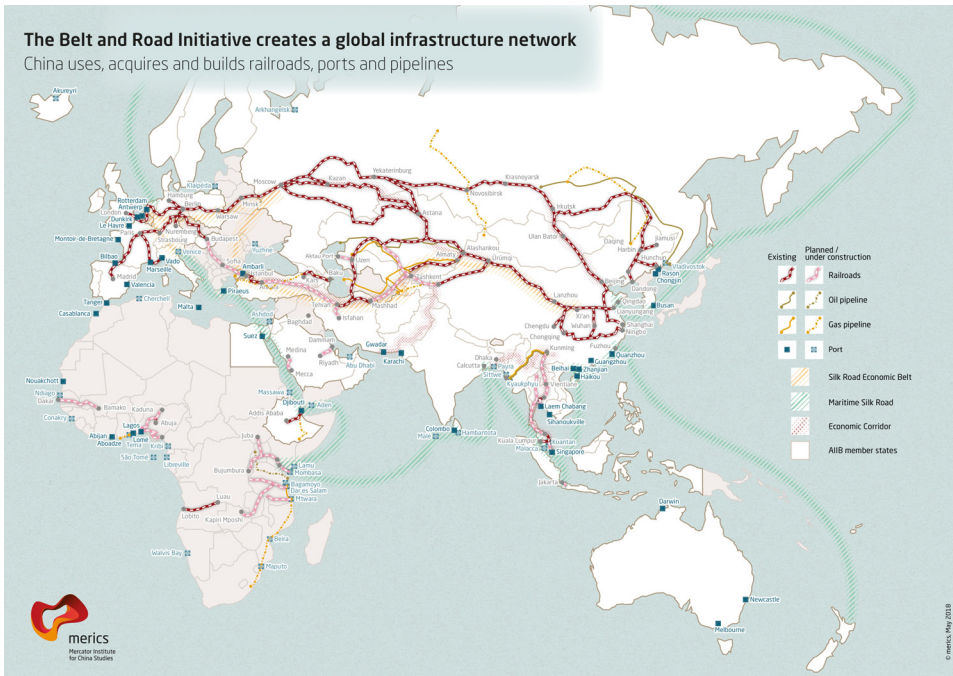
and cement, the building of new infrastructure in foreign countries with Chinese financial and personnel resources, the opening up of foreign markets for Chinese products ('going out' strategy), and the creation of trust to deepen trade, economic cooperation and, last but not least, policy cooperation in additional areas (State Council of the PRC 2015).

According to Xi (2017a), thanks to collaboration, "we hope to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity and thus build a new platform for international cooperation to create new drivers of shared development." In his speech at the Nineteenth Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, Xi stressed the 'priority' of the initiative, emphasising the dual dimension of "'bringing in' and 'going global'." Once again, he emphasised win-win-cooperation in his narrative (Xi 2017b: 30; cf. Holzmann 2018; Sidaway and Woon 2017). The importance of BRI for China is also reflected in the amended Party constitution, stating the pledge to "pursue the Belt and Road initiative" (quoted in Goh and Ruwitch 2017). Under the broad BRI frame, Xi also proposed a New Asian Security Strategy that shall promote inclusive, cooperative, common, comprehensive, and universal security for the partners (Xi 2014). Although the plans remain very vague, they are presumably directed against Washington's hubs and spokes approach and its traditional military alliances which Xi regards as outdated (Liff 2018: 154). Connecting BRI with a trans-regional security initiative reveals the underlying comprehensive strategic and foreign policy logic of the New Silk Roads.

There is no consensus among analysts and politicians whether BRI is solely an economic project offering positive partnerships for all participants or a strategic Trojan horse. From a purely economic perspective, however, the consensual view is that BRI is likely to benefit all participants (Heilman and Gaspers 2017). Due to improved infrastructure and connectivity, one can expect trade gains in particular for Europe and, notably, for landlocked countries, such as Austria (Garcia Herrero and Xu 2017: 6-8). However, many myths and exaggerated expectations surround BRI (Makocki 2018: 21). First of all, full-bodied investment promises need to be implemented in reality. Second, even projects that are not directly related to the initiative but are built by Chinese companies in BRI participant countries count as BRI projects, thus making the Silk Roads cake larger than it is in reality (cf. Godehart 2016: 21). Nevertheless, BRI is a fact, and being also a cornerstone of Xi's 'Chinese dream,' BRI is 'here to stay' (Klose et al. 2017: 1) during Xi's term in office and likely beyond. Yet, it is also work in progress, and both the Chinese government and the involved state-owned and private companies are in the middle of a learning process, in which they have to adapt their strategies that work in state capitalist China to different cultures and societies.²

² This was a key outcome the author gained at the International Expert Workshop on 'The new development of the Europe-China relationship and tripartite cooperation in 16+1 Cooperation.' It

Figure 1: The Belt and Road Initiative



Source: Eder 2018 (<https://www.merics.org/de/bri-tracker/mapping-the-belt-and-road-initiative>).

The main bystanders of BRI are the US, India, and Japan. Despite strong general reservations, New Delhi joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the main financial BRI body with an initial capital of US\$ 100bn. China and India have a strategic rivalry which is further aggravated due to Chinese investments in New Delhi's backyard, notably in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (partly passing through India-claimed Kashmir) is especially worrisome for India, and the port of Gwadar is a key node in Beijing's so-called string of pearls route (Singh 2018). Unlike the Indian government, Tokyo, which is also critical of China's long-term intentions, engaged in talks with Beijing about cooperation possibilities, at least via collaboration between the AIIB and the Japan-dominated Asian Development Bank (ADB) (Sano 2018).

Within the political geography of BRI, China takes clearly centre stage. The main political questions concerning the New Silk Roads are the following: What does China aim to make politically and strategically out of BRI? Is it content to

was organised by the Austrian Institute for European and Security Studies (AIES) and, inter alia, attended by staff members of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies in Vienna on May 28, 2018.

create economic win-win partnerships for the participating countries and regions? Or is its objective to become the predominant norm setter for the economic and political rules of the BRI game (or even establish a new China-centred international order)?

The PRC is critical of the international status quo and International Law which are supposedly Western-centred and discriminate against China (Mardell 2018). According to Ekman's (2018: 8) critical assessment, "[f]or Beijing, the regional forums are tools amongst others for restructuring global governance, which has become more than ever a priority for China's diplomacy under Xi Jinping's presidency" (cf. Jakóbowski 2018). However, it seems as if these mechanisms are not yet strategically connected to a comprehensive master plan (Chaisse and Matsushita 2018: 184-185; Godehart 2016: 19; Arase 2015: 26). An example is China's approach to the Mediterranean region, where the European, Maghreb, and Middle Eastern parts are addressed separately.³ Another caveat, however, is that a key function of these multilateral fora is that they act as umbrellas for bilateral agreements. Thus, not all analysts go as far as William A. Callahan (2016: 228) who claims that "[t]he grand strategy is ambitious: to use economic leverage to build a Sino-centric 'community of shared destiny' in Asia, which in turn will make China a normative power that sets the rules of the game for global governance."

Yet, evidence for China's *divide et impera* behaviour can be found in Southeast Asia. In 2012, it became visible that China actively undermines the unity of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Gerstl 2017: 203-205; Gerstl forthcoming), using the economic dependency of Laos and Cambodia to promote its interests within ASEAN (Thayer 2018). For instance, the two major railway lines and hydro-power plants currently under construction in Laos with Chinese investments amount to more than US\$ 17bn (Zhang 2018). Moreover, from both a strategic and an economic point of view, an increasing number of ASEAN members regard the impacts of Chinese investments to be more critical. This holds especially true when Chinese loans with comparatively harsh commercial conditions are required, or the involvement of the local labour force is too low as Chinese companies usually employ Chinese labourers (Müller 2018). Since May 2018 and under the new leadership of Mahathir Mohamad—once a sworn opponent of Western dominance—Malaysia became surprisingly sceptical of China's influence. Mahathir already cancelled the crucial Kuala Lumpur–Singapore high-speed train connection (US\$ 37bn) that was planned to more efficiently connect the Malaysian capital with the city-state and, in the other direction, subsequently expand the connection with Laos, Cambodia, and Kunming in China (Hu Weijia 2018). He also pledged to

3 The China–South Europe Forum (Italy, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Cyprus, and Malta) and the collaboration with the Maghreb countries are still in a nascent stage. These mechanisms are also not exclusively BRI-centred (Ekman 2018: 7).

review the East Coast Rail Link project (US\$ 14bn) that would provide China and other countries an alternative shortcut to bypass the Malacca Straits (Bevins 2018).

In Southeast Asia, the litmus test for China's intentions is the South China Sea, where Beijing refuses to accept and implement the ruling of the Arbitration Tribunal of July 2016 (Gerstl 2016). Whether the same strive for setting the norms and rules applies to Beijing's approach towards Europe will be examined in section 3, treating Central Eastern and Southeastern Europe as the test case for China's intentions.

BRI: The European Union's Perspective

The European Community and China established diplomatic relations in 1975, followed by trade agreements in 1978 and 1985. Brussels severely criticised Beijing for the Tiananmen massacre in June 1989 and reacted with an embargo on certain weapons that is still in force. Since the mid-1990s relations improved despite different views on democracy and human rights, focusing instead on economic issues (Wong 2012: 203-205). In 2003, Brussels and Beijing agreed on the EU-China strategic partnership. Nowadays, the EU and China have comprehensive and institutionalised relations in the political, economic, security, cultural, and civil society domains. The two parties meet also regularly in multilateral mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). While the EU is China's main trading partner—in 2017 China's exports were worth € 374,6bn, whereas the imports from the EU € 198,2bn—China is the EU's second largest partner after the US (Eurostat 2018).

The establishment of the AIIB revealed a lack of coordination among those EU members willing to join the bank as founding members (Fallon 2015: 146) despite criticism from Washington. After the launch of the AIIB, the European Union took a more comprehensive and sceptical view on BRI. The European Political Strategy Centre (2015: 5), the internal think tank of the European Commission (EC), recommended: "Europe needs to keep a close eye on wider geopolitical and geostrategic trends, which suggest that instead of revising borders, China may use its economic and financial prowess to pursue its unilateral political and security interests." Although the EU addresses BRI more often, it still figures not very prominently in the policy papers, and the few paragraphs on BRI in the key strategic papers remain vague (Council of the European Union 2016: 5; EC 2016: 9-10). Obviously, for the EU the initiative is not yet the main narrative or key lens for viewing its relations with Beijing.

According to the EU's new China strategy: (1) the EU-China Connectivity Platform shall become the main vehicle for connecting the infrastructures; (2) BRI must become an open platform, adhering to market and international norms; and (3) people-to-people dialogue shall be broadened in scope (EC 2016: 9-10). The estab-

lishment of the EU-China Connectivity Platform was the most concrete outcome of the EU-China Summit in Brussels in 2015 (cf. EC 2015: 1). The aim of the platform is to identify areas of collaboration between the two ambitious European flagship initiatives, that is, the Investment Plan for Europe (Juncker Plan) and the Trans-European Transport Network, and the Chinese BRI. The TEN-T consists of a core and a comprehensive railway net to be upgraded or built until 2030 and 2050, respectively. It shall consist of nine corridors of which five pass at least partly through Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Baltic and Balkan nations (EC Website 2018a; EC 2011).

Connectivity between Europe and Asia in the fields of transport, energy, digital economy, and people-to-people contacts will likely become the key phrase in the EU's Europe-Asia Connectivity Strategy that will be elaborated by the EC and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and presented at the 12th ASEM Summit in Brussels in October 2018 (EC Website 2018b; Scimia 2018). (Already at the 11th ASEM Summit in 2016 the need for increased connectivity between the two continents was stressed.) Yet it remains doubtful whether Brussels is able to establish a strong or even counter narrative to China's New Silk Roads.

Despite the fact that 16+1 was already created in 2012, the EC initially seemed not much concerned about Chinese inroads to Central and Eastern Europe. Even in 2016, the 16+1 initiative was only briefly mentioned in the Council of the European Union's Conclusion on the EU Strategy on China: As a sub-regional cooperation framework it shall aim to generate "synergies in line with EU policies and legislation" (2016: §11). In general, however, the warnings of egoistic approaches of the member states are increasing within the EU, favouring an EU-wide position towards BRI: "The EU must ... project a strong, clear and unified voice. EU coherence and cohesiveness is vital on the big policy choices and on the maintenance of the rules-based international order" (EC 2016: 17). (This wording strongly resembles that of ASEAN.) At the BRI Summit in Beijing in May 2017, the Europeans (and India) demonstrated some scepticism, lobbying for more transparency and input (Heilmann and Gaspers 2017). The more pronounced critical view is also reflected in the European Parliament's (EP) review of China's Arctic White Paper (State Council of the PRC 2018) from January 2018. The EP (2018: 3) emphasises Beijing's intention "to shape positive perceptions of China as a peaceful and cooperative partner among a foreign audience"—an audience that is arguably not familiar with the Chinese discourse and policy, notably in regard to prioritising economic development over environmental concerns. A concrete example for growing distrust among EU members towards China is that, so far, Italy and Spain were reluctant to transform the China-South Europe cooperation in a formal mechanism similar to 16+1 (Ekman 2018: 11-12). However, the new governments in these countries may have a different view from that of their predecessors.

Outlining the geostrategic reach of BRI, the EP takes in general a more critical stance than the Commission, elaborating comprehensively on the EU-China relations. In addition to the trade, economic, and infrastructure dimensions of cooperation, it also stresses the need to include human rights in the dialogue (EP 2015; 2017: 11). Responding to criticism of European companies on the uneven playing field in China and strategic Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Europe, the European Political Strategy Centre (2016: 8) called

for a clear and effective review mechanism that screens non-EU Foreign Direct Investment against European security concerns. This is a desirable addition to the current negotiations of a Bilateral Investment Agreement, which addresses the question of greater symmetry in market access between China and the EU.

The EC's proposal for such a common European screening mechanism for FDI in sensitive technologies and infrastructure (Seaman et al. 2017: 13-14) is partly directed against Chinese investments. Basically, European firms should have the same rights in China as their Chinese counterparts in the EU (EC 2016). However, the required unity within the EU is endangered: "Chinese investments have already prompted individual 16+1 EU members to challenge the current proposal. Opposition is also building up among EU accession countries with sizable Chinese investments" (Gaspers 2018).

The 16+1+X Mechanism

CEEC and China

The 16+1 format was created by China one year before the launch of BRI, namely in 2012, in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis which was still then heavily impacting Europe. During this crisis, both China and the CEEC recognised their growing economic and strategic importance for each other (Li 2017: 159-160). Prior to collaborating with the Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European nations on a multilateral basis, Beijing first deepened its bilateral relations. First attempts were made in the mid-1990s—for instance, President Jiang Zemin's visit to Hungary in 1995. Due to their accession to the EU, the CEEC gained more importance for Beijing. Accordingly, in June 2004, President Hu Jintao travelled to Poland, Hungary, and Romania to improve the bilateral relations (Kowalski 2017: 4-5; Varga 2004). At this time, China's annual trade with Hungary amounted to only US\$ 100m. However, the idea of establishing Hungary as a hub for exporting Chinese products to Europe was already discussed (Neue Zürcher Zeitung 1995). In 2009 and 2011, respectively, China agreed to strategic partnerships with Serbia and Poland. At the very first China-Central and Eastern Europe Economic and Trade Forum, held in

Budapest in June 2011, then Prime Minister Wen Jiabo proposed a closer cooperation between China and the CEEC (Li 2017: 160). The 16+1 format was formally established at the subsequent China–CEEC summit in Warsaw in April 2012. Since then, annual summits were held in Chinese and European cities. In addition to the summits, both President Xi and Prime Minister Li pay regular visits to the region.

It was China that chose the participant countries of 16+1, thus drawing new institutional borders within Europe. This is a political, pragmatic, and highly symbolic act (cf. Vangeli 2018). The 16 European CEE members can be grouped into Central and Eastern Europe—Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia (all EU members and therefore full participants of the European Single Market)—and the Western Balkans, that is, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Montenegro, and Serbia (all EU candidate countries). The geographic area covered by the 16 European members can be described as a bridge, hub, or node between Western and Eastern Europe, Russia and Asia. Consequently, the EU, the US, Russia, Turkey, and China have overlapping and rivaling geopolitical and geo-economic interests in these parts of Europe (Tchakarova 2018).

Overall, 16+1 is a multilateral framework, but also an important umbrella for China's bilateral deals with the European participants (Gaspers 2018). Initially economically oriented, its policy objectives and mechanisms gradually expanded due to successful cooperation (Vangeli 2018). (This pragmatic pattern can also be observed in Southeast Asia.) Since 2013, however, the promotion of BRI remains the key goal of 16+1. In addition to the annual meetings of the heads of states and/or governments, it consists of regular structures such as meetings of ministers, the national coordinators, experts, but also civil society representatives as well as a business council, a financial holding company, a cultural cooperation forum, and a tourism coordination centre. The China–CEEC Cooperation Secretariat in Beijing's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for coordinating the activities and communication. However, "the absence of any significant political component" (Kowalski 2017: 5) is remarkable. Irrespective of whether such a dimension will be added in the future or not, 16+1 can already be regarded as a nascent sub-regional organisation.

Although the group of 16 European countries do share various similarities, they are politically, socioeconomically, and culturally diverse. Beijing seems to acknowledge these differences (Turcsányi et al. 2014: 127–128). Notably, the Balkan countries lack legislative and administrative capacities to implement the stricter legislative or infrastructure standards of the EU to receive higher funding or loans from Brussels. Diplomatically, Hungary, Serbia, and the 16+1 observer Greece entertain the friendliest relations with China. Economically and politically, the Visegrád Four (V4), all former Communist and successful transformation countries, are China's key partners within 16+1 (Benková 2018: 18). Strikingly, the V4 have

different political opinions from the European Union: while Slovakia is (currently) more pro-EU oriented, the Czech Republic is more distanced, and Hungary and Poland are very critical of Brussels (Fürst 2017: 44-45). Notwithstanding the importance of V4 within 16+1, the format is not labelled 4+12+1 or 12+4+1, as 16+1 underscores the equality of the 16 European partners—and China's leadership.

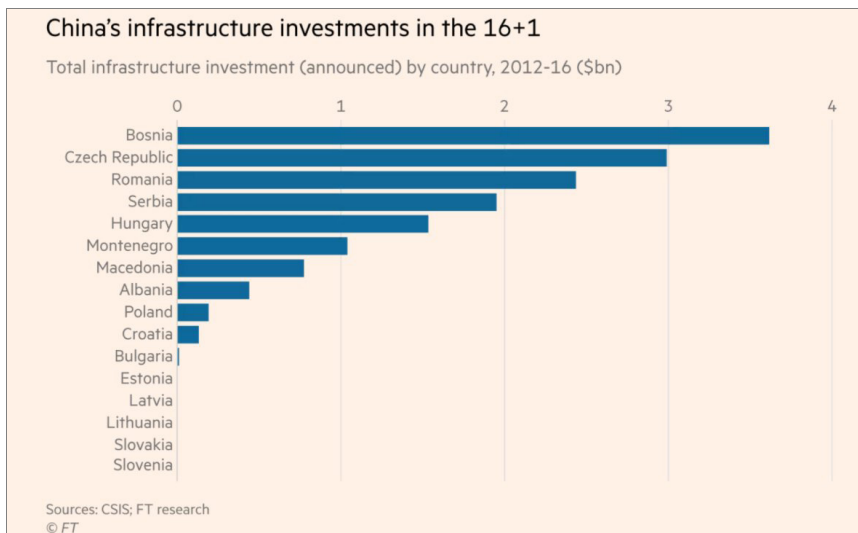
With BRI and the 16+1 mechanism China aimed to gain diplomatic ground and restart its relations with Central and Eastern Europe. Although the Eastern European nations had a Communist system after World War II and until 1989, they were nevertheless part of the Soviet Union's orbit, China's rival after the split in the late 1950s. After the velvet revolutions and during their transformation period, the nations looked to the West, not the East. China's rapid economic rise and surplus capital, however, made it in the last decade an interesting additional partner. Since the establishment of 16+1, China pledged US\$ 12.7bn in investments to the region, but also promised additional bilateral FDI (Gaspers 2018). Especially prominent are Chinese investments in transport and energy infrastructure—sectors that lack behind in CEE (Grübler et al. 2018: 2). As a funding mechanism, Beijing created the China–CEE Investment Cooperation Fund in 2013 and the China–CEEC Interbank Association in 2017. Key projects are the Piraeus–Belgrade–Budapest railway connection and the upgrade of the port infrastructure in Piraeus (Ekman 2018: 16; Fallon 2015: 146; Xinhua 2017). The railway connection Belgrade–Budapest, however, is since 2017 under investigation by the EU due to possible infringements of the Union's public procurement rules and doubts about the financial viability of the project (Gaspers 2017).

In late 2017, Chinese investment in the CEEC amounted to over US\$ 9bn, while the CEEC investments in China totaled US\$ 1.4bn (Global Times 2017). However, Richard Turcsányi (2017) puts these figures into perspective: “[T]he reality is that Chinese economic presence in the region is minimal from the perspective of both FDI and CEE exports, and little has changed in these regards since the founding of the 16+1 platform.” This holds especially true when compared to EU funding (Grübler et al. 2018: 3). However, 16+1 is still a rather recent initiative and China's small but strategically oriented investments in infrastructure and their integration in the New Silk Roads need to be considered in order to evaluate the overall impact of 16+1 and BRI on the CEEC. Bartosz Kowalski (2017: 9) risks “a comparison that China's relations with the countries of ‘16’ echoes a kind of tribute, in which China bestows upon its tributaries’ contracts and honours, skillfully stimulating competition for their attention.” Indications for this competition are that the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland all wish to become the main bridge for China's European endeavours.

The official discourse of the CEE governments regarding BRI is still positive but less enthusiastic than in the beginning (Pavličević 2018; Kusai 2017: 4). Nevertheless, there are more differentiated or even critical voices in the societies as well. To a

strong degree the quality of the relations of the CEEC with China depends on the political orientation of the governments and is thus subject to change after national elections. For instance, the bilateral relations of the Czech Republic with China improved significantly only since President Miloš Zeman took office in 2013 (Turcsányi et al. 2015: 130). Prior, Beijing was often irritated by comments of leading Czech politicians, notably former President Václav Havel, on human rights violations (Kowalski 2017: 10). In 2016, the Czech Republic became the first 16+1 member that Xi Jinping paid a visit to. A key outcome of the very first visit of a Chinese president in this country was the agreement on strategic relations (Tiezzi 2016). A year earlier, Zeman attended the Chinese parade to commend the seventieth anniversary of the victory over Japan—Chinese media acknowledged the fact that he was the only Western head of government in the audience (Qiaoan 2015). Compared to Japan and South Korea, however, the level of Chinese investments in the Czech Republic is still low, thus high growth rates—according to estimates, China is today a top-five investor—are misleading (Fürst 2017: 41-42). A problem recently addressed by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš is the trade deficit with the PRC (Bucán 2018). In general, Czech media are critical of the perceived growing Chinese influence, arguing that certain oligarchs are benefitting the most, not the society at large. In personal talks, many Czech academics uttered concerns about a growing Chinese influence on Czech politics and academia to frame BRI in a positive light.

Figure 2: China's Infrastructure Investments in the 16+1 countries (2012–2016)



Source: Benková 2018: 17.

China argues that 16+1 supplements its relations with the EU (Kowalski 2018; Fallon 2015: 145). On many accounts, it has emphasised its support for European integration and unity (Schultz 2018; Global Times 2017). 16+1 is therefore framed as an initiative to assist the less developed EU members and candidate countries rather than undermine the EU's cohesion. For instance, Prime Minister Li Keqiang stressed the open and transparent character of 16+1 at the annual summit in Sofia in July 2018. Therefore, representatives from the EU, World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) attended the summit as well. Li also announced the establishment of the Global Partnership Centre in the Bulgarian capital, aiming to assist Chinese companies in getting familiar with the EU market rules. In accordance with the Chinese narrative, after the election of Donald Trump as US President, Xi Jinping portrayed China as a beacon of multilateralism and free trade (EURACTIV 2018). Often China also highlights the more or less comparable economic developments of the participants, labelling 16+1 as a blueprint for international South-South cooperation (Turcsányi 2017; Vangeli 2018). Overall, the experiences with 16+1 demonstrate that China adjusts to positive and negative new developments and criticisms from outside. This learning-by-doing approach is reflected in the Guidelines the politicians agree on during the annual 16+1 summits, which regularly establish new cooperation mechanisms and institutions, thus enlarging the collaboration to new policy areas.

Despite higher growth rates in Central and Eastern Europe, the socioeconomic divides between 'old' and 'new' Europe remain. More recently, the rise of illiberal democracies in Hungary and Poland, as well as ongoing question marks over the rule of law in Bulgaria and Romania illustrate political divisions—if not alienation among the EU members. In the Western Balkans, offering an EU membership perspective may not be sufficient anymore for Brussels to maintain its strategic influence. The PRC benefits already from the political gaps within the EU. According to the German daily *Handelsblatt*, twenty-seven of the twenty-eight European ambassadors in China warned in April 2018 that BRI "runs counter to the EU agenda for liberalizing trade, and pushes the balance of power in favor of subsidised Chinese companies" (quoted in Deutsche Welle 2018). Only the ambassador of Hungary did not support the text (Heide et al. 2018). Budapest already prevented an EU consensus on the response to the ruling of the Arbitration Tribunal in the Philippine vs. China case in the South China Sea, as it supports Beijing's refusal to accept the ruling. Jan Gaspers (2018) lists other examples and subsequently concludes:

As China seeks to expand its political footprint, the political damage to the European Union is already visible. For some time now, the EU has been unable to act cohesively towards China on what have been trademarks of EU foreign policy, namely upholding the international rule of law and protecting human rights. In March 2017, Hungary derailed the EU's consensus, re-

fusing to sign a joint letter denouncing the reported torture of detained lawyers. [...] Similar instances of CEEC blocking EU statements on China have occurred since (cf. Johnson 2018).

Austria in the 16+1+X Format

Austria and BRI

It was the largest delegation of politicians, business leaders, as well as cultural and scientific representatives (250 persons in total) that Austria ever sent to another country—in this case the PRC in April 2018. Apart from a meeting with President Xi and the agreement on a friendly strategic partnership, a highlight for the Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen and Chancellor Sebastian Kurz was an official farewell ceremony for the first freight train from Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan, to Vienna (Schnauder 2018; Zhang 2018). Currently, seven freight trains per week travel from China to Austria and back. The 9,800-kilometers long journey takes 13 days. Expectations are very high; however, the trains from Austria to China are not fully loaded yet. Chengdu is also the train hub for sixteen other major European destinations, including Lodz, Milan, Nuremberg, and Prague (Economist 2017).

During their state visit in April 2018, the Austrian leaders spoke favourably about increased cooperation, including Vienna's possible participation in the 16+1 mechanism (China Daily 2018). Compared to other European nations, notably the CEEC, Austria is a late-comer in seeking deeper relations with China in general and a stronger participation within BRI in particular. The Chamber of Commerce Vienna, though, highlights the economic benefits of a connection with BRI as an "essential impulse for the economy of our country" (Wirtschaftskammer Wien 2017: 4). The PRC is already Austria's fifth largest trade partner after Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and the US. The total trade value reached € 12.2bn in 2017, with Austria's imports from China amounting to € 8.5bn and its exports to € 3.7bn.⁴ China (including Hong Kong) is Austria's sixth largest investor: in 2016, Chinese companies invested € 4.3bn in Austria, while Austria's FDI in China reached € 3.4bn. In 2017, Austrian companies invested € 3.4bn (and € 874m in Hong Kong). This makes Austria the fourth largest investor among EU members. Conversely, Chinese investments in Austria amounted to € 641m (and € 2.8bn from Hong Kong) (Wirtschaftskammer Österreich 2018). Out of the four acquisitions made in 2017 by Chinese and Hong Kong companies, especially significant were the acquisitions of Tele2 by Hutchison (approximately € 111m) and of Diamond Aircraft by Wanfeng Aviation Industry Corporation (Ernst and Young 2018).

⁴ A striking comparison: Austria's trade with Russia is much lower. Vienna exported products worth € 2.2bn, whereas the imports were valued € 2.8bn in 2017 (Wirtschaftskammer Österreich 2018).

In the last decade, the typical Chinese investment and acquisition pattern became visible in Austria too: Chinese companies acquire shares of Austrian firms which possess technologies or know-how they lack. Conversely, the Austrian companies—some are hidden champions—benefit from a new or better access to the Chinese and other markets (Ernst and Young 2018; Bachler 2013). For example, in 2009 the Chinese Xi'an Aircraft (XAC) acquired 91,25 per cent of the Austrian FACC, a leading aeronautics company. During the Austrian state visit in China, about thirty business deals were signed aiming to boost the bilateral economic exchange (Wang 2018). A significant deal concerned the Austrian asset management company C-Quadrat. The heavily indebted HNA conglomerate, active in aviation, tourism, real estate, financial services, and technology acquired a majority stake (ninety-eight per cent) (Der Standard 2018).

However, Beijing is not only strategically interested in certain Austrian companies. Austria's geographic position is a major asset, as the country is a regional hub for CEE and the Western Balkans, and three TEN-T corridors pass through Vienna (cf. Bures 2017). Baumgarten (Lower Austria) is a regional transfer node for natural gas from Russia via Ukraine and Slovakia, with Germany and Italy as the main recipients. Yet, there is also resistance against large infrastructure projects: the Russian broad-gauge railway is planned to pass via Kosice (Slovakia) into Austria, where the trains must be changed to the European standard gauge. The exact location of the train station in Austria, however, is still open for discussion after the mayor of Parndorf (Burgenland) opposed the plan that his small municipality—already a shopping paradise, not least for Asian tourists—becomes the main station (Orovits 2018).

To sum up: Austria's relations with the PRC are likely to further improve. However, while closer political, economic, and civil society engagements between Vienna and Beijing are certainly a desideratum, concentrating solely on China risks to neglect the geopolitically and geo-economically important sub-regions along the route to China.

Austria – The 'X' in 16+1+X Format

Dating back to the times of the Habsburg Empire, Austria traditionally enjoys close but sometimes strained political, economic, and cultural relations with the Central and Eastern European nations. As a neutral but pro-Western oriented country, Austria played a key role in mediating between East and West during the Cold War, notably in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in the 1970s. However, the high expectations of the Eastern European countries of Vienna becoming their advocate in Brussels after Austria joined the EU in 1995 were not fulfilled. For instance, the former Polish Foreign Minister Wladyslaw Bartoszewski criticised Austria's lack of leadership in steering the enlargement process (Kramer

2010: 5). Brussels, on the other hand, was disappointed as well, as Vienna was not willing to act as a bridge-builder between the EU and the Central Eastern European nations (Kramer 2016: 52).

Economically, Austria benefited from the EU enlargement process, as many Austrian companies increased their FDI in CEE, being often the main or at least among the top investors, especially in the Visegrád and Western Balkan countries (Grübler et al. 2018: 4; Grübler 2017). Austrian firms, for example, banks and supermarkets, are highly visible in this region. Yet, politically speaking, Austria lost sympathies when it opted for a seven-year-period to fully open its labour market for citizens of the newly admitted CEEC in 2004 (2-3-2 formula). This populist approach towards Eastern Europe reduced Austria's ability to form strong partnerships and alliances with these countries within the EU institutions. Due to political tensions, Austria was not invited to join at a later stage the Visegrád mechanism, a collaboration forum for the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia established in 1991. In 2015, however, Bratislava, Prague, and Vienna established the Slavkov/Austerlitz Format, a dialogue platform. Especially Slovakia has a positive image of Austria. For instance, former Slovak Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar praised Austria for its support both during Slovakia's separation process from Czechoslovakia and after its independence, as well as for initiating joint economic projects (Mečiar 2018). Concrete economic, social, cultural, and ecological cooperation between Austria and the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia occurs on cross-border, transnational, and interregional cooperation, promoted by the EU's INTERREG Programme. The connectivity between Austria and its neighbours still needs to be improved, for example, with the Czech Republic (Bundesministerium für europäische und auswärtige Angelegenheiten 2016: 88).

In the last decade Austria became better connected with its neighbours in the realm of security policies. The two main sub-regional security-oriented mechanisms that have a potential to increase trust and may spill over to coordination or even cooperation in other policy areas are the Salzburg Forum and the Central European Defense Cooperation (CEDC). The Salzburg Forum brings together Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia (all founding members), joined by Romania and Bulgaria in 2006 and Croatia in 2012. It was initiated by the Austrian government, and the first meeting of the Ministers of the Interior was held in Austria in August 2000. Initially, the two main aims of the Salzburg Forum were the strengthening of internal security in Central Europe (e.g., border control, police and asylum cooperation) and preparation of the accession to the EU of the candidate countries (Salzburg Forum 2018). After Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia gained EU membership, the group identified a new objective: to contribute "as effectively as possible to a coherent and credible EU external strategy vis-à-vis relevant third countries and regions in the security-relevant neighbourhood of the Salzburg Forum" (Salzburg Forum Vision 2020: 1.3). Especially addressed are thereby the

Western Balkan states. The partners in the Eastern Neighbourhood shall also get support in adapting to EU standards. The step-by-step broadening of the Forum's agenda is both a pragmatic and realistic approach to the ever-changing situation in CEE and the Western Balkans. As the Salzburg Forum's political importance for Austria to project its influence in its neighbourhood is in lieu of other institutions likely to grow, it can be expected that additional political topics will be incorporated in the upcoming years.

Partners in the CEDC are Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia—with Poland having observer status. It was established in 2010. Its objective is to strengthen security and defense cooperation among the members, including coordination of the respective policies and joint manoeuvres. In these areas, collaboration is very concrete and close, involving the exchange of ideas, information, and personnel. Due to the political *Zeitläufe*, domestic security and migration issues are predominant in the Salzburg Forum and the CEDC. Accordingly, the cooperation between these two organisations is supposed to be strengthened. Overall, cooperation within these two institutions “has led to the emergence of a collaborative network structure” (Müller and Maurer 2016: 6).

The Salzburg Forum and CEDC may develop in institutions dealing (also) with the underlying strategic threats and opportunities of BRI, harmonising national responses, or at least establishing a specific think tank. An indicator is that one of the objectives of the Salzburg Forum is “the implementation of a common foreign policy strategy on the Western Balkans” (Müller 2016: 24). Another is the growing geographic scope of the Forum: “In its ‘vision 2020’ the Salzburg Forum has committed itself to developing regular relations to frameworks such as the G-6 [Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and United Kingdom; A.G.], the Baltic and Nordic cooperation structures and the Benelux group” (Müller 2016: 29). Especially promising seems the collaboration with another interesting evolving mechanism in the European sub-grouping puzzle, the Three Seas Initiative (TSI), also known as Baltic, Adriatic, Black Sea (BABS) Initiative. Established in 2015 by twelve EU members, it aims to increase economic cooperation between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Sea countries (including Austria), notably in the fields of energy, transport, telecommunications, and environment. Both the US and China have shown interest in this initiative (Benková 2018: 6, 10-12; Kowalski 2018).

In all these fora, fighting illegal migration will remain a key issue in the upcoming years. Austria and Hungary are likely to play a leadership role in this matter. However, this controversial topic also demonstrates the limits of solidarity in Europe. Another dividing issue among the Salzburg Forum and CEDC members is the already mentioned adoption of the model of illiberal democracy in Hungary and Poland—and the perception of a similar political trend in Austria and Italy (Lloyd 2018), both also criticised by other EU members for their position to end the Western sanctions against Russia imposed after the occupation of Crimea in 2014.

While Austria's diplomacy can utilise these fora to discuss BRI with its Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European partners, only 16+1+X offers the indispensable comprehensive mechanism to coordinate and implement the Silk Road initiative. Vienna's role as an observer seems adequate, considering its higher socioeconomic stage of development. Nevertheless, there is also a risk that, even as the X in the partnership, Austria is increasing the competition between the CEEC for becoming the main transport hub. This could make Vienna's position within the regional groupings even more difficult and complex. As Patrick Müller (2016: 32) writes:

[B]oth its experiences in the Salzburg Forum and in the framework of CEDC testify of Austria's challenge to collaborate with partner countries that in many respects have closer and more developed political, cultural, and historic ties with each other than with Austria. Whilst committed to cooperation in Central Europe, Austria can easily find itself isolated in such an environment.

During Austria's EU presidency in the second half of 2018, one of the three priorities is upholding the EU perspective for the Western Balkan nations (Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2018). Stressing the commitment to multilateralism and a rules-based order, Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl (2018) regards this as a geopolitical necessity for the EU. Otherwise Beijing would further aim to fill the existing vacuum.

To sum up, there exist various institutions and programmes capable of discussing BRI from different angles and facilitate cooperation on transnational and regional level. Yet, in order to harmonise and coordinate the EU's reaction to BRI, an EU umbrella forum is required (cf. Casarini 2016). To better promote their interests towards China, but also for shaping the EU's policies towards Beijing, the 16+1+X members must speak in unison. During the state visit of high-ranking Austrian politicians in China in April 2018, they emphasised the need to agree on an EU-China memorandum of understanding on BRI only, not a bilateral one with Beijing (Erling 2018). Due to Austria's upcoming 2018 EU presidency, this had probably been a political decision.

Conclusion

Introduced in 2013, BRI is still a flexible, pragmatically used construction kit for the Chinese government to promote its national interests. Despite this makeshift character, BRI already matters in global and regional politics and economics—not least because it provides China a lens and tool to incorporate bilateral relations in a comprehensive strategic and economic framework (cf. Godehart 2016: 21-22). Within the political BRI geography, China constitutes the centre. To project its national interests, Beijing utilises existing regional groupings and sub-groupings or

forms new ones, for example, the 16+1. Overlapping memberships in these groupings are possible.

Since 2015, the EU became increasingly aware of the need to speak in unison in dealing with China's BRI. On the one hand, the economic benefits of increased collaboration, especially a potential linkage between TEN-T and BRI, are stressed. On the other hand, Brussels realises the danger that China, in line with its sub-grouping approach, establishes regional mechanisms with members chosen by Beijing in North, South, and Eastern Europe—countries that may pursue their own rather than common EU interests or become economically dependent on Beijing, thus endangering a consensus among the (future) twenty-seven EU members. Yet, concerning the 16+1 format, there is no official EU strategy that addresses Beijing's cooperation in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe in a comprehensive manner.

The CEEC forms no coherent economic or political block. Consequently, the interpretation of the opportunities and risks of BRI varies among the governments and the civil society, but it is in general still positive. Thereby the perception of receiving economic benefits plays the key role for assessing the relations. The same logic applies to Austria, although, compared to its Eastern neighbours, it was late in acknowledging the potential benefits of BRI. Despite Austria's considerable economic and growing political relevance in CEE, an Austrian leadership role in 16+1 is not realistic. Adding Austria in the form of 16+1+1 to the existing mechanism would be an affront for the other members and would reduce Vienna's capacity as bridge-builder, as Austria's '1' would equal China. Thus Vienna is likely to become, together with other observers, an 'X' in a formally enlarged 16+1+X format. Vienna's political leadership favours a common EU response rather than an individual one. This approach is not only due to the Austrian EU presidency in the second half of 2018.

Analysing and comparing China's BRI strategy towards the other regions involved in BRI, and the perceptions politicians and the civil society in these regions have, is a desideratum for further research. Building on Beijing's approach towards Southeast Asia, however, one can already critically ask if China plans to stick to the existing international rules and norms or it aims to establish its own regional governance order. The plans for Europe remain open, as there is no clear strategic tendency visible yet despite the 16+1 and the China–South Europe Forum. In addition, Beijing's political and economic influence in CEE, compared to the EU, is still rather limited. Lacking a concise master plan to implement BRI, China pragmatically pursues a learning-by-doing approach, adjusting to new challenges. This strategy gives its partner countries along the New Silk Roads time to adapt—but so will China, reacting to the responses of its partners and strategic rivals.

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ABBREVIATIONS

16+1	Cooperation mechanism of China with 16 CEEC
ADB	Asia Development Bank
AIES	Austrian Institute for European and Security Studies
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
BABS	Baltic, Adriatic, Black Sea
bn	billion
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CEDC	Central European Defense Cooperation
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CEEC	Central and Eastern European Countries
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Commission
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FYROM	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
G-6	Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom
HNA	Hainan Airlines
m	million
MSR	Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road
OBOR	One Belt, One Road
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network

TSI	Three Seas Initiative
US	United States
V4	Visegrád Four
XAC	Xi'an Aircraft