

The Belt and Road Initiative in China's Emerging Grand Strategy of Connective Leadership

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Abstract

As Chinese leaders endeavor to maintain the international environment aligned with their strategic aim of realizing the “dream of national rejuvenation,” the remarkable increase in China’s capabilities, coupled with uncertainty in the global economy and the ambivalent attitude of the USA toward the international order, poses fresh challenges to Beijing’s foreign policy. The present paper argues that a lexicographic preference for the mitigation of the risk of pushback against China’s core interests underpins the Belt and Road Initiative. Pursuing a strategy of credible reassurance commensurate to the shift in the distribution of power in China’s neighborhood and globally, President Xi Jinping’s administration has been cultivating a form of connective leadership that commits China to the encapsulation of the Belt and Road Initiative for transregional connectivity into its own national development strategy, generating an octroyé, non-hegemonic, type of international social capital, and integrating the existing order without corroborating the position of its founder.

Key words: Belt and Road Initiative, China, connective leadership, grand strategy, international order, social capital

JEL codes: E60, F01, F50, F55

I. Introduction

The US-led liberal-multilateral international order, around which the expectations of the key actors in the international system (states) have converged for decades, is in a state of flux. While the principles, norms, rules and regimes which structure a multilateral order are naturally prone to change over time, concurrent shifts in the commitment of

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the hegemon, in the concentration of material and ideational power within the system, and in the grand strategy of the leading rising power appear to be paving the way for a structural, if incremental, realignment in the political topography of the order itself.

The 2016 elections in the USA have upended a long-standing foreign policy tradition of global engagement and liberal order building by handing the presidency to a candidate running on a Jacksonian platform (Mead, 2017). President Trump has expressed strong skepticism of multilateralism and international institutions as a means to secure national interests, signaling that under his stewardship the USA is likely to be “far less willing to lend its still-significant resources, both material and ideational, in defense of the liberal international order” (Ikenberry and Lim, 2017, p. 17).

Contextually, the remarkable preponderance of power underpinning US hegemony (Clark, 2011) has become increasingly diluted. “The diffusion of power among states and from states to informal networks will have a dramatic impact, [...] restoring Asia’s weight in the global economy, and ushering in a new era of ‘democratization’ at the international and domestic level” (National Intelligence Council, 2012, p. iii). For its part, following the traumatic clash with Western imperialism and more than a century of domestic disorder, China has since 1978 adroitly reverted to an age-old strategy of self-strengthening by pursuing accelerated modernization without antagonizing other units in the international system. Foregoing the logic of immediate relative gains to focus on the long-term accumulation of comprehensive national power (Yan, 2014), China has firmly established herself as an indispensable regional player in Asia (Buzan et al., 2004), while nurturing co-dependency with the USA as a middle course between balancing and bandwagoning (Leverett and Wu, 2016). Today, although Chinese officials still avoid describing China as a potential superpower for both ideological and functional reasons (Pu, 2017), there is broad consensus around the idea that China’s call for a “new type of Great Power relations” (*xinxing daguo guanxi*) rests on the assumption of a more symmetrical position vis-à-vis the USA (Zeng and Breslin, 2016).

In recent years, Beijing’s foreign policy posture has become increasingly assertive, as was shown by its reactions to a chain of events in 2010 (Wang, 2011). Following the 2007–2008 crisis of the US and European financial systems, as well as its own overtaking of Japan as the second-largest economy in the world, China’s new centrality in what David Lake terms the “international economic infrastructure” (Lake, 1993) appeared to modify Beijing’s demeanor in international affairs. Converting economic might into foreign policy influence, however, has proved insidious. Pulled in opposing directions by its long-standing counter-hegemonic foreign policy orientation (Leverett and Wu, 2016), and by the need to preserve the “twenty years’ period of strategic opportunity” (*zhanlue jiyuqi*) for national development as envisaged by then general

secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Jiang Zemin in 2002, Chinese authorities have so far had “little choice but to employ ‘weapons of the weak’: dissident rhetoric and cost-imposing strategies short of actual balancing behavior” (Schweller and Pu, 2011, pp. 70–71).

With the elevation and entrenchment of Xi Jinping at the apex of the Chinese polity, Beijing’s efforts in negotiating normative change for the international order to better accommodate China’s peaceful rise (Zhang, 2016) have become less reactive and more systematic. In October 2013, President Xi used an unprecedented Periphery Diplomacy Work Forum (*zhoubian wajiao gongzuo zuotanhui*) involving the highest echelons of the Chinese Communist Party to signal a shift in China’s approach to foreign affairs, away from strategic prudence (*taoguang yanghui*), towards active engagement (*fenfa youwei*) (Yan, 2014). In the president’s own words, “China follows the path of peaceful development, an independent foreign policy of peace and a win–win strategy of opening-up. One of our priorities is to take an active part in global governance, pursue mutually beneficial cooperation, assume international responsibilities and obligations, expand convergence of interests with other countries and forge a community of shared future for mankind” (Xi, 2016a).

To date, the most consequential output of this incipient “grand strategy for peaceful development” (Wang, 2015) is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a comprehensive project of transregional multilayered connectivity aiming to unlock the development potential of the Eurasian continent and its African neighborhood. Officially launched in 2013 as a signature foreign policy proposition of the Xi administration, the BRI has swiftly emerged as a ubiquitous research theme globally, a trend which itself reflects China’s growing discursive power. Analysts have approached the study of the BRI essentially from two sets of perspectives. The first focuses on the domestic factors underpinning the project, locating its fundamental impetus in the political economy of China’s “new normal” stage of economic transformation (Yu and Zhang, 2015), while identifying precursors in the “Western development” and “going out” strategies of the early 2000s (Yeh and Wharton, 2016), and even in the sub-national developmental policy networks of the 1980s (Summers, 2016). The second is a set of systemic viewpoints: it includes a constellation of scholars who look at the impact of the BRI on the international order. Unsurprisingly, their admittedly tentative conclusions vary widely: whereas liberal internationalists find no evidence of a weakening of the international order per se caused by policies connected to the BRI (Ikenberry and Lim, 2017), realists react to China’s new determination and capacity to pursue regime and institution building beyond the scope of Washington’s influence by advocating responses that range from containment through enforced reciprocity (Economy, 2017) to various

forms of balancing (Mearsheimer and Walt, 2016).

The argument offered in this paper takes as an independent variable China's need to "extend the major period of strategic opportunity for [its] development, so as to pave the way for achieving the two centenary goals and fulfilling the Chinese dream of national renewal" (Yang, 2017); namely, building a moderately prosperous society by the centenary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 2021, and turning China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious by the centenary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 2049 (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Success in this strategic endeavor can be expected to have profound implications on three levels: first, domestically it will strengthen the institutional role of the Communist Party as the legitimate political power in China, and give more ideological traction to the ongoing project of constructing a specific type of socialism with Chinese characteristics (Yang, 2017). Second, regionally it is likely to exacerbate "capabilities turbulence," a dynamic that has been argued to inhibit closer relations among neighbors (Grieco, 1997), and may, in fact, lead to fragmentation and even conflict. Finally, it is scarcely plausible that relations with the USA would spontaneously benefit from China's growing strength and prosperity, both for reasons of hard power competition, and for the likely widening of the ideational cleavage between the two countries, especially as seen from the US liberal elite (Owen, 2002).

Because of its concern with national power and wealth, the Chinese leadership is acutely sensitive to the constraints and opportunities in the international system and to the strategic preferences of other countries. My argument is that, given the "propensity" (*shi*, Jullien, 1995) of the current environment, Chinese leaders' behavior is informed by a lexicographic preference that attributes the greatest salience to the mitigation of risk of assertive containment of China's core interests.¹

Decision-makers in Beijing are keenly aware of the inherent difficulties in ascertaining the intentions of great powers (Rosato, 2015), a structural constraint on international cooperation, especially when access to the political process of foreign interests formation of a state is unavailable to foreign agents (Cowhey, 1993), and the institutional framework of that state makes its leaders highly unconstrained (Papayoanou, 1997, p. 131). Given the magnitude of the challenge facing China (the need of shifting

¹The taxonomy of China's "core interests" (*hexin liyi*) has been at the center of vigorous debate. The most authoritative elucidation remains that offered by State Councilor Dai Bingguo during the China-US Strategic and Economic Dialogue in July 2009: defending China's fundamental socio-political system and national security, preserving national sovereignty and unification, and maintaining the steady and sustainable development of its economy and society (Da, 2010).

from the preservation of a peaceful international environment for economic construction to the advancement of one that is conducive to national renewal [Yan, 2014]), a foreign policy geared toward generating strategic trust through signaling (Rathbun, 2011) is inadequate.

The ambiguity of Washington's engagement with allies, partners and adversaries, enduring uncertainty in the global economy, and the remarkable increase in China's relative capacities "have made the fear of risk more vivid than the prospect of gain," increasing other countries' sense of exposure to China's actions (Womack, 2013, p. 912). Through the BRI the Chinese Government is, thus, actively seeking to project a new image and to establish a new position (*dingwei*) for China within the international order (Pu, 2017) by cultivating a form of connective leadership (Tian, 2010) that commits China to the encapsulation of the BRI policies for transregional connectivity into its own national development strategy: in the words of State Councilor Yang Jiechi, "pursuing a new round of opening-up featuring the Belt and Road Initiative" (Yang, 2017).

I argue that in so doing China produces a kind of *octroyé* international social capital, which it projects as being non-hegemonic in nature. This system-level trust-building effort through a foreign policy of "credible reassurance" (Womack, 2013), integrating the existing international order without corroborating the position of its founding hegemon, however, is only one component of China's incipient grand strategy of connective leadership building. At the regional level, the BRI also serves to socialize secondary states, whose "norms and value orientations may be altered before a substantial decline in the hegemon's wealth and military strength occurs" (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990, p. 286), to a new informal hierarchy reflecting China's rising status in its neighborhood.

II. The International Order and China's Emerging Grand Strategy

The century-long quest for an orthogenetic Chinese modernization that would herald China's re-emergence as a prosperous, strong country and enable its return to what its leaders consider the proper place in the global order (the essence of President Xi's "Chinese dream of national rejuvenation" [State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2015]) is the fundamental dynamic that renders China the "independent variable that could most impact [Asian] stability in the future" (Green, 2017, p. 544). As an inspirational vision articulated by a confident leader, this pursuit of a new age of "harmonious prosperity" resonates deeply among today's Chinese, "casting the nation as one that inspires emulation by the force of its advanced culture and economic achievements, while evoking memories of a time when China received tribute

from the rest of the world” (Economy, 2017, p. 141). However, what fundamentally anchors China’s development trajectory to the policy streams underpinning this political manifesto, including the 13th 5-year plan and the Made in China 2025 Program, is the understanding among Chinese elites that the specific configuration of China’s Party-State requires the Chinese Communist Party to spearhead substantial innovation in socioeconomic development, culture and ideology to preserve China’s long-term institutional stability while the country adjusts to the conditions of a “new normal” phase of growth (Hu, 2015).

Dictated by logics that are intrinsic to the Chinese polity, such a process of domestic transformation can be expected to further expand Beijing’s material and ideational resources both absolutely and relative to its neighbors. This ongoing trend is already reverberating internationally: tensions in the trade and security realms (as in the past, reflections of heterogeneous needs and circumstances far more than evidence of deliberate adversarial postures [Drucker, 2011]) impact on China’s region first and foremost. In hard power terms, the strategic magnitude of the challenge facing Beijing is, thus, to effectively co-shape Asia’s eventual power distribution, which is “likely to lie somewhere on a spectrum between Chinese hegemony on one end and an unsteady balance of power on the other” (Campbell, 2016, p. 156). In the ideational sphere, the growing importance of recognition from abroad for the legitimating mechanisms of the Chinese Party-State (Holbig, 2013, p. 77) requires on China’s part a carefully calibrated agenda of normative entrepreneurship. Such an agenda entails a shift away from rearguard efforts of “norm subsidiarity” (Acharya, 2011) toward a proactive negotiation for mainstream normative change, to facilitate the accommodation of China’s peaceful rise (Zhang, 2016) within a “regional community of common destiny” (Xi, 2015a). As discussed in the next section, Beijing is now effectively proposing an updated *raison de système* to underpin the international system as it shifts away from its unipolar configuration.

The systemic implications of China’s re-emergence require that Chinese authorities be equipped with a proportionate template to make sense of the topography of the current international context and properly channel all elements of national power to achieve their long-term goals (Leverett and Wu, 2016). The current leadership in Beijing appears to have risen to the challenge by initiating an effort to draw the contours of a grand strategy that goes beyond defining the nation’s core interests to set out a vision for a more proactive regional and global engagement (Yan, 2014). The BRI is a key feature of this incipient strategy of connective leadership building, which pursues the integration of the existing international order rather than undermining it through counter-hegemonic institutions.

Four interrelated features define the physiognomy of the current order, in relation to which China negotiates its conduct and status: it is underwritten by a relatively declining hegemon; it is organized around a US-inspired multilateral system; it has been functioning as the vector of a pervasive process of neoliberal globalization; and it is rooted in a diverse set of liberal principles and discourses. China has mostly been on the receiving end of the outputs (more or less benign) of each of these components: the task of charting a new role within the order from a position of growing strength is unprecedented.

The most conspicuous quality of the current international order is that it shapes the expectations of states within a system defined by the presence of a hegemonic superpower, although in a process of transition from unipolarity to multinodality (Womack, 2014). The role and resilience of hegemonic powers have been explored in depth by scholars, emphasizing both the critical function of a “benevolent despot” for the provision of institutional public goods, including pressure for low tariffs in trade relations, acceptance of nondiscrimination and provision of stable monetary relations (Kindleberger, 1976), as well as the hegemon’s capacity to use its superiority to structure the order to its own advantage and distribute costs among other states (Webb and Krasner, 1989). In the latest hegemonic iteration, realized by the USA after the Second World War, traditional concerns about the dangers of international hegemony have been mitigated by a normative conception of non-selfish leadership (Snidal, 1985) that has greatly reduced the perception of exploitation among subordinate states.

Hegemony has a negative connotation in the Chinese context and China has a deep-seated “counter-hegemonic foreign policy orientation” (Leverett and Wu, 2016, p. 113), which advocates multipolarism as a preferable system with less concentration of power. Faced with the reality of an increasingly reluctant hegemon that has ceased to rise relative to the other powers in the system, Beijing knows that it is generally not in the best interests of rising competitors to support a declining leader: in theory, they would be best served by a strategy of relative gain seeking while the hegemon continues to bear most of the costs of system maintenance (Rosecrance and Taw, 1990). However, at a deeper level, Chinese elites are nervous at the prospect of the USA becoming a potential freerider and choosing populist nationalism over global engagement (Nye, 2016). Whereas the idea that China is a developing country and should, therefore, not take a leadership role in global affairs still has traction domestically (Pu, 2017), Beijing has been signaling its commitment to stepping up its contribution to the order. The BRI is openly construed as a tool to counter the underproduction of global public goods (Yang, 2017), and is expected to integrate rather than “unravel the entire system or start all over again” (Xi, 2015b).

While China's public and authorities reject hegemony per se, Beijing's downplaying of its long-standing call to build a "new international political and economic order" indicates awareness of the protracted benefits enjoyed by China through its participation in the specific US-led multilateral arrangements since the 1980s. The challenge facing Chinese leaders at this juncture is to navigate the complex politics of grievance that have come to dominate debates in Washington under the Trump administration. Mitigating the perceived asymmetry in relative net gains by revising the proclivity of Chinese firms, especially state-owned enterprises, for practicing adversarial trade has become an urgent undertaking for Beijing, as was the case for Japan in the 1980s. Aimed at dominating industries, rather than competing for customers, adversarial trade drastically changes the basic rules of trade, with competition no longer assumed to be necessarily beneficial (Drucker, 2011). As it seeks to offset the ensuing risks of a protectionist turn in the USA, China's capacity to strengthen the multilateral order is being tested on two levels. At the regional level, Beijing is engaged in the process of concluding "open, transparent and win-win free trade arrangements [to foster an] external environment of opening-up for common development" (Xi, 2017). Whether these will prove to be building blocks (as opposed to stumbling blocks) toward progress in a new round of liberalization of trade in goods and services will be critical to the long-term credibility of China at a time when "momentum toward a unified economic system has clearly become congested" (Wang, 2015). At the global level, Beijing has yet to persuade many skeptical partners of its substantive commitment to making reciprocity an operative, integrating principle of the world economy (Drucker, 2011).

On the latter issue especially, striking a balance between entrenched corporate interests (as well as the Chinese Government's own growth targets) and a tangible limitation of China's options to preserve current asymmetries is politically consequential, for it impacts on the structure of China's domestic economy. This is where the contradiction between the Chinese leadership casting China as a custodian of globalization and the tenets of the neoliberal market economy (the third constitutive feature of the current order) is generally considered most striking. The uncertain implementation of the reform policies which should allow market forces to play the "decisive role in allocating resources" in China (as articulated by the CCP Central Committee in the November 2013 *Decision on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform*) has been widely quoted as evidence that Chinese authorities are becoming less amenable to further opening. However, at a fundamental level, China's continued underpinning of the material and institutional arrangements of neoliberal globalization (Saull, 2012) is in itself a potent integration of the current order. As it is still in the process of defining its identity and status, with

a political discourse grounded in several competing narratives (Pu, 2017), China could have leveraged its diverse ideological heritage to delegitimize the rationale of neoliberal globalization. To the contrary, President Xi Jinping's prominent speech at the 2017 World Economic Forum in Davos, calling for a more "inclusive" globalization, is a pointed reiteration of China's continued reliance on transnational market forces to reconfigure its society, in combination with state-directed economic policy (Wang, 2004). As they emphasize the "leading role of the state-owned sector," and pledge to "continuously increase its vitality, controlling force and influence" in the very same 2013 *Decision*, Chinese leaders integrate the existing order by pointing to its capacity to accommodate "more than just one path leading to modernization" (Xi, 2016a). Whereas the dynamics of transnational capital are known to be compatible with competition between nation states (Burnham, 1991), China's experience expands this notion to include the capacity of neoliberal globalization to sustain a plurality of national political economy systems.

The promotion of this pluralist agenda, which echoes the pervasive Chinese discourse of "non-reductionist harmony" (*he er butong*) in international affairs, is anchored to the principles of sovereign equality enshrined in the UN Charter. In this sense too, China is situated well within the broader normative coordinates of the current liberal international order. However, as the magnitude of China's success, with its unique blend of state and market, amplifies the twin risks of fragmentation in a more regionalized world (Zhang and Buzan, 2010) and neo-mercantilist backlash prompted by leaders in wealthier states reacting to pressures from disenfranchised social forces (Cox, 1981), the possibility that these tensions will escalate into the ideological realm remains real. When developmental market economies, such as Japan in the 1980s and China today, reach a level of competitiveness in world trade that exceeds the capacity of adjustment on the side of advanced economies, the incentives to pursue forceful containment against "unfair" practices based on culture or ideology can result in pressure for "reforms," inviting nationalistic resentment in return (Hayami, 1995).

The inherent tension within the set of liberal constructs that define the normative contours of the existing order compounds this risk. The liberal pluralism of the UN Charter has long coexisted with assertive liberal agendas (Miller, 2010) that would integrate the order through narrower standards of rightful membership and conduct in international society (Clark, 2009). In this respect, the USA has a track record of behaving at once as hegemonic and revisionist (Lind, 2017), with Beijing reacting through pre-emptive revisionism (Andornino, 2008) to oppose the imposition of "municipal principles of legitimacy" on other states (Vincent, 1986, p. 117).

While the Chinese leadership remains alert to the threats of "hegemonism, power

politics and neo-interventionism” (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2015), Beijing has revised its traditional defensive posture, premised on sovereign equality and effectively summarized as “no rejection to those who come to learn and never go out to lecture others” (*laierbuju, buwangjiaozhi*, Yan, 2014, p. 162). By embracing what Zhang Yongjin terms the “liberal global governance order, which calls for leadership and responsible management on the part of Great Powers” (Zhang, 2016, p. 798), the Chinese Government is not merely responding to an ever-present desire for status. The “new type of Great Power relations” it openly advocates with particular reference to Sino–US engagement is instrumental in mitigating the concerns of those who equate China’s re-emergence with a decline of the domestic analogy underpinning the US-led liberal multilateral order, and fear that this might prefigure a lawless international sphere where specific rules are made to suit specific interests in specific circumstances (Burley, 1993). As an integral part of China’s emerging grand strategy of connective leadership building, the success of the BRI thus depends as much on its capacity to empower a plurality of political communities across Eurasia and its African neighborhood through open-ended, mutually beneficial arrangements, as it does on its being perceived as part of a global effort toward what has so far proved an elusive quest for a new ethical, institutional and social order (Halliday, 2009).

III. Advancing China’s Connective Leadership through the Belt and Road Initiative

In determining China’s international posture, Chinese leaders appear to be fundamentally informed by a lexicographic preference for the mitigation of risks associated with assertive exogenous containment of the Party-State’s core interests. The ensuing discourses and practices of reassurance, however, hardly amount to the totality of the systemic pursuits embedded in Beijing’s budding grand strategy: its most high-profile operational expression, the BRI, is as much a carefully calibrated response to dangerous misperceptions and expectations among multiple audiences, as it is a tool for advancing the national interest. My argument is that China performs this exceptionally delicate balancing act by cultivating a form of connective leadership which it will likely project more prominently in the years to come. Defined as “a power of social change that generates leader–follower relationships between/among nation-states through involving and empowering nation-states to change patterns of interaction between/among them, as well as the patterns of interaction between the nations-states and the global society” (Tian, 2010, p. 81), connective leadership reflects the kind of fluid, positive and relational understanding of power that is compatible with the new positioning that China seeks in

the international order.

Table 1. Functional Logics of China's Grand Strategy of Connective Leadership Building

	System level	Regional level
Key strategic pursuit	Mitigation of risks of assertive containment while advancing China's national interests	Socialization of secondary states to an informal hierarchy reflecting China's rising status in its neighborhood
Foreign policy approach	Discourse and practices of order integration while promoting an updated <i>raison de système</i>	Generation of <i>octroyé</i> social capital through open-ended multilateralism

In this logic, summarized in Table 1, China's leaders have pursued the key systemic goal of risk mitigation through a foreign policy approach that entails integrating the existing international order (rather than undermining it or advocating its replacement, as discussed in the previous paragraph) while promoting an adjustment to its underlying *raison de système*. This is the generalized recognition by otherwise competitive or even antagonistic states that they have an interest in maintaining common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, so as to foster cooperation even without the assumption of ideological agreement (Watson, 1992). The historically most consequential instance of *raison de système* is that geared around the need to manage a shared global economy (Buzan, 2015). By projecting the BRI as a catalyst for a new "vision of global governance" (one that aims to "uphold justice" and rejects "zero-sum game Cold War mentality" [Yang, 2017]), Beijing does not engage in mere rhetoric. It seeks to enhance China's moral appeal by effectively suggesting that the diverse policy streams implemented under the BRI rubric respond to an updated *raison de système* that would be better suited for an international system moving past its "unipolar era" (Krauthammer, 2002, p. 17). Namely, one premised on the pursuit of an agenda of third generation "solidarity rights" as envisaged by Karel Vasak: "the right to development, the right to a healthy and ecologically balanced environment, the right to peace, and the right to ownership of the common heritage of mankind" (Vasak, 1977, p. 29). Seen in this perspective, China's effort to complement the development strategies of the countries involved in the BRI by leveraging their comparative strengths through policy coordination, infrastructural connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people exchanges amounts as much to an institutionalized provision of public goods to match such would-be *raison de système*, as it responds to the profit-seeking logics of the current international economic order.

This instance of system-level normative entrepreneurship, in turn, sustains Beijing's efforts in strengthening China's connective leadership regionally. The unusually conspicuous political investment made by President Xi Jinping with the high-profile

launch of the BRI is intended to augment China's normative traction among a vast audience composed of political elites, bureaucratic officialdom, businesses, intellectuals, media and the general public from the over 60 countries directly involved in BRI-related projects, and beyond. Beliefs about a state's status are updated sporadically and require some degree of consensus internationally: events are, therefore, not likely to change a state's position unless they are highly public, salient and conveying unambiguous information (Renshon, 2016). Casting the BRI as an operational agenda emanating from their redefined *raison de système* proposition, Chinese leaders attempt to mitigate the regional capabilities turbulences determined by China's re-emergence by soliciting confidence in their commitment to pursuing mutually beneficial arrangements. At the current historical juncture, this objective may well be considered more critical for China than the establishment of cumbersome formal alliances. In this context, multilateralism becomes more than just an institution: by committing to a multilateral ethos, the Chinese Government seeks to reassure its neighbors. Where bilateralism favors the stronger party by calling for the negotiation of specific *quid pro quos* at all times, open-ended multilateralism can be expected to yield a rough equivalence of benefits in the aggregate over time to all parties involved (Ruggie, 1992), without depriving smaller parties of possibly beneficial relationships with others. President Xi Jinping has insisted on this approach, for instance, when referring to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which is to remain committed to "open regionalism" as it complements other existing multilateral development banks (Xi, 2016b). The increasingly multinodal physiognomy of the international system facilitates China's endeavor in this respect, as it offers multiple exit options to secondary states and thereby guarantees competitive constraints on exploitation (Gowa, 1989).

Besides its emphasis on open-ended multilateralism, at the regional level China cultivates its connective leadership through a foreign policy approach that aims to generate *octroyé* international social capital. This variant of social capital can be described as the establishment of mutually enabling social connections among states. Just as with financial and physical capital, access to international social capital depends on a state's position globally and can have a profound impact on its security and development. The BRI operationalizes China's connective leadership by promoting the proliferation of empowering connections among the participants in BRI-related projects, thereby encouraging greater institutional density regionally. In turn, "the denser the institutional pattern in a region, the greater the possibilities of learning, and through learning states may enhance their capacity for power-sharing and power aggregation" (Pedersen, 2002, p. 694). While China's investments, of political, economic and financial nature, are universally understood to be the fundamental catalyst in the generation of

fresh international social capital across Eurasia and its African neighborhood, such social capital has an *octroyé*, rather than hegemonic, quality to it. While Beijing does define the main terms of the policy initiatives undertaken as part of the BRI, the partner countries (individually and in a vast assortment of collectivities) retain significant “voice opportunities” (Grieco, 1995, p. 34) as well as latitude in negotiating and implementing them. Put differently, material inducements on China’s part trigger socialization processes among states to begin with, but such socialization leads to outcomes that transcend the BRI framework per se, and generates a reservoir of social capital that is independent of China’s desiderata.

While connective leadership is intrinsically non-hegemonic, on a regional level too Beijing’s foreign policy approach (generating international social capital and supporting open-ended multilateralism) is not exclusively aimed at reassuring its neighbors. It is also a vehicle to socialize them to an informal hierarchy reflecting China’s rising status within its region. States seek status commensurate with their capabilities because it is a valuable resource for coordinating expectations of dominance and deference in strategic interactions (Renshon, 2016), and because elites in secondary states can internalize norms that are articulated by a leading state and, therefore, favor policies consistent with its notion of international order (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990). An informal hierarchy does not entail a shared system of governance and stops well short of a hegemonic design: it rests on a looser notion of superordinate/subordinate relationships that both sides recognize as legitimate (Hobson and Sharman, 2005). Within an informal hierarchy, “coercion” is expressed primarily through manipulating opportunity sets and providing incentives rather than by threatening sanctions, and so remains in the background (Mattern and Zarakol, 2016). This political project is made more realistic by China’s own “re-balancing” westwards: while East Asia (Beijing’s traditional geostrategic focus) is especially prone to great power competition, most countries in Central, South and Western Asia, as well as in Northern Africa, need to leverage regional and global resources to tackle chronic domestic instability stemming from ethnic, religious and social conflicts, and to address transnational challenges such as extremist movements, terrorism and drug trafficking. It is here that the BRI will face its more substantive initial tests as to its capacity to advance China’s connective leadership.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The main argument offered in this essay is that the full transformative import of China’s BRI is best captured by viewing it as a first operationalization of Beijing’s emerging grand strategy of connective leadership building. Such a strategy is premised upon

the fundamental need to extend the now decades-long window of opportunity that Chinese leaders have employed to peacefully grow China's economy, modernize its society and comprehensively enhance the capabilities of the Party-State. To this end, credible reassurance is sought by Beijing to mitigate the risk of assertive pushback against China's core interests on the part of the (relatively) declining hegemon of the current international order, as well as the danger of capabilities turbulence in China's neighborhood spurred by its burgeoning material and ideational resources. In the first instance, instead of delegitimizing the current order or opting for broader freeriding, Chinese Government has pursued a course of order integration, while articulating an amended *raison de système* proposition for the post-unipolar age. At the regional level, through the multiple policy streams constituting the BRI, it has been generating fresh international social capital, while emphasizing open multilateralism in its foreign policy approach.

Connective leadership, however, is not only about reassurance. It also aims to afford China greater institutional and normative traction in a shifting international environment. In this sense, the Chinese leaders' unusually high-profile political and financial investment in the BRI is consistent with the need to elevate China's status through sufficiently emphatic and coherent international signaling. The kind of social capital generated in its neighborhood through the BRI (and stretching westwards, in accordance with Beijing's own re-balancing towards Eurasia) naturally reflects China's growing centrality in this cross-regional space. Beijing's connective leadership, therefore, while non-hegemonic, aims to socialize other states to an informal hierarchy, a looser notion of superordinate/subordinate relationships that all sides recognize as legitimate, which is especially valuable for coordinating expectations of dominance and deference in strategic interactions.

While this political project is facilitated by the multinodal physiognomy of the international system, which offers multiple exit options to secondary states and thereby guarantees competitive constraints on exploitation, the development of China's connective leadership (as well as that of the BRI on the operational level) faces significant challenges. Not only do external structural factors impact on any major regional player's "power aggregation capacity", that is, its capacity to make a number of neighboring states rally around its political project (Pedersen, 2002). Psychological factors, personal skills of individual leaders, the level of constraint imposed on the leadership by the institutional framework of the Party-State, access to the political process of foreign interests formation, and China's own readiness to accept transformational power-sharing arrangements with neighbors, which change its own identity in the process, will also weigh on the credibility of Beijing's foreign policy

commitments, and, hence, determine the level of success of its incipient grand strategy of connective leadership building. As it were, this provides one more reason to study the long-term outcomes of the forthcoming 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party with great care.

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