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Book Review

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

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The collective monograph *The Belt and Road Initiative: Past, Present, Future*, published in 2025 under the editorship of Chinese and European scholars, is a comprehensive and interdisciplinary study of one of the most ambitious strategies in the history of modern international politics and the global economy – China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The book examines the historical, cultural, economic, legal, and geopolitical dimensions of the development and implementation of the initiative, from its announcement in 2013 to its contemporary transformation into a global infrastructure and civilizational project. The authors analyze the Belt and Road not only as an instrument of China’s foreign economic policy but also as a vehicle for advancing a Chinese vision of global governance based on the principles of peaceful coexistence, mutual benefit, civilizational dialogue, and an alternative to Western-centric models of globalization. The book covers three major thematic sections: The first section is about a historical and cultural analysis of the origins and evolution of the Silk Road, as well as China’s civilizational mission. The second section is an empirical study of the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in various regions of the world. The third is a theoretical and prognostic section that examines the Belt and Road in the context of the transformation of global governance and soft power.

The first section of the book attempts to show the historical continuity between the ancient Silk Road and the modern initiative. Chinese authors, in particular Xiang Gao and Tian Deven, propose interpreting the “Belt and Road” as a revival of a civilizational route for the exchange of goods, ideas, and people. They focus on the key concept of the “Silk Road Spirit”, based on the principles of mutual respect, inclusivity, and peaceful development.

The chapter on the reception of Western knowledge in China during the 16th–18th centuries is of particular interest, as it explores cultural transfers and epistemological shifts within the Chinese tradition through the example of the activities of Catholic missionaries, particularly Matteo Ricci.

It is noteworthy that the historical part of the book is not turned into a glorification of Chinese history. Instead, the authors aim to show how Chinese society has maintained its flexibility of thinking and adaptability in the face of external challenges. This creates the basis for understanding modern China as a special type of state structure — a “civilization-state.”

The second section of the book is rich in factual content and specific examples. The authors analyze the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative based on several cases, ranging from the construction of railways in Central Asia to the development of seaports in Mediterranean countries. It is separately noted that since the launch of the initiative in 2013 and until 2022, China has concluded more than 200 cooperation agreements with 149 countries, and the total volume of trade with these countries has reached \$11 trillion.

The book focuses on cooperation between China and Southern Europe, specifically Greece, Cyprus, Italy, and Portugal. The authors show that the Belt and Road Initiative in this region is implemented in the format of logistics hubs, port construction and investment cooperation.

It is significant that the authors do not limit themselves to listing achievements, but also pay attention to potential problems, primarily legal and institutional risks. Thus, the chapter by Mo Jihong and Sun Nanxiang discusses in detail the legal difficulties that arise when concluding international infrastructure contracts, and also emphasizes the need to form an effective mechanism for transnational arbitration.

In addition, the book contains materials on the Digital Silk Road project, reflecting China’s strategy for expansion in the field of digital platforms, artificial intelligence and cybersecurity. This aspect is especially relevant against the backdrop of the digitalization of trade and economic ties, as well as growing competition in the field of digital sovereignty.

The final section of the book is devoted to providing a theoretical understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative within the context of international relations, global governance, and concepts of soft power. The chapter by Professor Kostas Guliamos is particularly interesting, where he considers the initiative as a tool of China’s civilizational influence in the Mediterranean, including the use of cultural diplomacy, educational programs and technological transfer as elements of a comprehensive soft power strategy.

The authors emphasize that the Belt and Road Initiative is not just a project to create trade and transport infrastructure, but a larger-scale attempt to rethink the foundations of the world order based on China’s vision of international justice, harmony, and hierarchy. In this context, special importance is attached to the concept of the “community of shared future for mankind”, which Xi Jinping consistently promotes on international platforms, including the United Nations and G20 summits.

From a theoretical perspective, this section is grounded in alternative Western approaches to international relations, particularly in the concept of multipolarity, which is understood not only as a distribution of forces but also as a reflection of the diversity of value systems. In this context, the Belt and Road initiative is contrasted with unilateral globalization and the unipolar model of the world order that developed after 1991, and is considered a possible alternative to the neoliberal architecture that dominates Western discourse.

It is essential to note that the book devotes special attention to analyzing China's interactions with the European Union within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. The authors emphasize that this project is considered not only as an instrument of economic cooperation, but also as a space for a deeper civilizational dialogue. In Chinese discourse, Europe is portrayed more as a partner than a rival, and the initiative itself is proposed as a model of "integrative interaction" based on the principles of comprehensive partnership, mutual respect, and cultural enrichment.

At the same time, the authors do not ignore the problematic aspects of cooperation. The book highlights the growing contradictions related to the lack of transparency of Chinese investments, as well as the extent to which Belt and Road projects comply with the environmental and labor standards of the European Union. The increasing strategic skepticism on the part of European institutions is highlighted separately. In this context, the phenomenon of the so-called "pan-securitization" of European infrastructure initiatives is also being considered, which generates competition and a potential clash of interests with the Chinese model of transport and logistics network development.

Several authors emphasize the need to revise the established discourse about the "Chinese threat," especially in cases where it is supported by the opposition of alternative models such as "The West against China" or "democracy against autocracy." The book suggests considering the Belt and Road initiative not as an element of global rivalry between the blocs, but as a potential platform for dialogue between civilizations. This approach is becoming particularly relevant in the context of the increasing geopolitical polarization observed since 2022.

In general, despite its high scientific and applied value, the peer-reviewed publication is not without certain limitations. One such limitation is the ideologization of individual sections. Some chapters, mostly written by Chinese authors, largely reproduce the official narratives of China's foreign policy rhetoric. Formulations like "China brings harmony and justice to the world" or "the participating countries of the initiative are grateful for Chinese help" appear to convey unconditional approval of China's actions and lack analytical distance, which reduces scientific credibility and may foster skepticism in academic circles, especially outside of China. Another concern is the imbalance of regional coverage. Despite the stated global scope of the initiative and the book's ambitions to cover the entire range of Belt and Road member countries, the actual regional analysis in the monograph proves to be uneven. Examples from Central Asia, China, and Southern Europe are considered in the most detail. At the same time, key areas such as Africa, South Asia and Latin America are either superficially touched upon or remain completely outside the scope of discussion. This reduces the book's claim to universality and focuses primarily on the Sino-Eurasian vector. A further issue is the limited attention to risks and negative consequenc-

es. The monograph does not fully address the potential costs associated with implementing the Belt and Road Initiative. In particular, important aspects such as the debt burden on recipient countries, cases of corruption in the implementation of infrastructure projects, and violations of environmental norms and standards of openness are not adequately considered. There is also virtually no analysis of internal criticism from the societies of the participating countries — such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia or Kenya — regarding the terms of Chinese financing and the consequences of participation in projects. The absence of these aspects makes the analysis incomplete and makes it difficult to objectively assess the reliability and viability of the initiative in different regional contexts. Thus, the collective monograph “The Belt and Road Initiative: Past, Present, Future” is a comprehensive academic study that reveals the multi-layered and multifaceted nature of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. It harmoniously combines historical and cultural-civilizational approaches with an analysis of China’s legal mechanisms, economic processes, logistical decisions, and political and strategic orientations on the world stage. The work demonstrates that the Belt and Road should be considered not only as a geo-economic project, but also as an expression of a new concept of a global order based on the principles of mutual benefit, multilateralism and cultural diversity.

The book’s undoubted advantage is its interdisciplinarity, which incorporates elements of political science, international law, economic geography, socio-cultural studies, and international relations theory. The authors propose a wide range of analytical tools applicable to various regional contexts. Despite some ideologically tinged elements and a certain imbalance in the coverage of the geography of the Belt and Road, the monograph retains high scientific value. It can be used as a reliable source of academic knowledge, analytical conclusions and practical recommendations.

This book is of particular importance for Kazakhstan and the post-Soviet space as a whole. It not only reflects the growing involvement of the region in the processes of Eurasian and global integration, but also stimulates a rethink of its role in the emerging world, where the influence of not only the West, but also China as a carrier of alternative models of international interaction is increasing. Kazakhstan, given its strategic position, can be considered as one of the key participants in linking the Belt and Road initiative with other integration projects, including the EAEU and the Trans-Caspian Route.

Therefore, the monograph “The Belt and Road Initiative: Past, Present, Future” deserves the closest attention from both the scientific and expert communities, as well as from government agencies involved in the development and implementation of foreign policy and infrastructure strategies. It sets guidelines for future research and opens up a space for meaningful dialogue between China, Central Asian countries and Europe about the future of the Eurasian continent and the global order as a whole.