

International Workshop  
**China's Belt and Road  
Initiative: A Cross  
Regional Perspective**

November 2019, Bishkek  
Workshop Rapporteur: Niva Yau Tsz Yan

Academy Papers #5

Workshop

# China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Cross Regional Perspective

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Growing Chinese influence in Central Asia has quickly become a contested issue in the past 20 years. This has been especially escalated by Chinese President Xi Jinping's personal opening of the Silk Road Economic Belt (the Belt) during his trip to Central Asia in 2013. The Belt, understood together with the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (the Road), is an ambiguous Chinese Initiative on connectivity that has left Central Asians puzzled since its announcement.

On 8 November the OSCE Academy conducted the workshop on "China's Belt & Road Initiative: Cross Regional Perspective" in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Dr Sam Parker from Georgetown University in the United States, Dr Giuseppe Gabusi from University of Turin in Italy, Dr Nikola Zivlak from the Belt and Road Institute in Serbia, Mr Haakon Fossum Sagbakken from the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs in Norway, Dr Ming Yu Cheng from Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman in Malaysia, Dr Jun Kumakura from the Institute of Developing Economies in Japan, Dr Pham Sy Thanh from the Institute for Economic and Policy Research in Vietnam and Ms Niva Yau Tsz Yan from the OSCE Academy in Kyrgyzstan attempted to analyse and compare Euro–Atlantic and Asian views on the BRI projects in different world regions. The workshop was opened by Dr Alexander Wolters, Director of the OSCE Academy. Attendance included government officials, think tank representatives and local university students.

The workshop was divided into three sessions: the first two sessions were organized in a classical panel form with each featuring four presenters, whereas the last attempted to engage into an open discussion of current trends and challenges in studying China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Panels were followed by questions and answers sessions.

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Through the first two sessions, this comparison allowed for contrasting the different perspectives that underline the academic work done today on China and its (new) foreign policy. Topics of China's Debtbook Diplomacy; BRI and the European Union; as well as the development, implementation and influence of the BRI in Asian countries were elaborated in these panels.

In the third and final session, experts discussed the current state of affairs in BRI studies in Central Asia and the lack of expertise in researching China in the region. It is expected that the cross-regional exchange can be further developed into a stimulus for local academia's efforts to understand China's strategies and activities in the wider region of Central Asia, and to further substantiate and accentuate Central Asia's (academic) perspective of its Eastern neighbour.

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## Euro-Atlantic View on China's Belt & Road Initiative

The Initiative intends to develop and connect the landmass in between Europe and China. The landmass, spanning across more than 100 countries, has made Belt and Road statistics naturally impressive. The audience in the workshop voiced puzzlement regarding the official status of these self-proclaimed Belt and Road projects. Many odd projects, such as a Belt and Road immigration fast pass at airports, is difficult to be interpreted given a lack of official descriptions. In some ways, the lanes resembled a European Union style facility – but whether or not this can be understood as an attempt to create a connected, integrated Eurasia is subject to further explanations from the Chinese counterpart.

With impressive statistics, together with the lack of specific details reaching the public, the media has produced an imbalanced impression of the Initiative as immediately robust. The audience asked for more explanations on financial figures regarding the Initiative. This problematic level of transparency with Chinese deals has incapacitated research on the Belt and Road. Since 2013, the definition of the Initiative has been hotly debated. In 2019, still, no useful figures can confirm the true financial worth of the Belt and Road. While many countries in the developing regions have high hopes and expectations, others, especially those more active in the international community, have doubts.

## Debts and Central Asia

In this panel, the Belt and Road Initiative was closely examined from the perspective of debt diplomacy. One panellist used a list of Belt and Road projects in Central Asia to explain the perception of the Initiative. As China is growing more reluctant to write off debts, more than one panellist discussed the potential political implication of long-term severe debts owed, particularly to China, arising from Belt and Road infrastructure projects. How is China planning to request these loans back? What will China ask for in return if a country is not able to pay?

It has been recognized that the landmass in which the Belt and Road passes through has a high need for infrastructure development. Eventually, given a connected Belt and Road, the Initiative has in mind a land-to-sea, sea-to-land transport avenue where goods, energy and other resources such as gold and silver, can be brought back and forth from China. Essentially, the developmental path of the Initiative is holistic, in which its reach will touch the existing global trade route.

To realise this plan, one panellist detailed all the infrastructure projects China has in mind for Central Asia. Yet, these Chinese investments have thus far suffered, both in Central Asia and worldwide. Half of these projects worldwide generated negative effects without yielding profits, and at the same time many of the planned projects were cancelled.

However, as one panellist emphasised, a lack of alternative financing other than China's made its Initiative appealing for developing countries to join. Elites in Central Asia, as well

as many other developing countries, maintained a high desire for cheap Chinese loans, despite the backdrop of growing anti-China sentiment amongst the public. One panellist demonstrated this with using a collection of project examples in Central Asia. Suffering from the lowest level of labour rights, transparency and corruption, as well as a backlash from pollution, anti-China sentiments are on the rise as a result of more Chinese footprints around the world.

One panellist highlighted two main characteristics of these cheap Chinese loans on the Belt and Road. First, all of these loans have terms that appear generous upfront, especially with no conditional related human rights, which is in the favour of most leaders along the Belt and Road. For these leaders, the lack of transparency creates a favourable environment for them to feed into corruption from kickbacks, whereas the debt is the next leader's problem. In countries with high corruption such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the future debts to China are increasing at an alarming rate.

Second, these loans come with a condition to hire Chinese contractors. In reality, the conditions of these loan contracts have been set up to keep funds circulating in the Chinese economy. Taking into account the fact that most of these Chinese loans have never left the Chinese economy, the money has rarely ended up in the local economy. This has fuelled not only local discontent over unemployment, but an overall sense that non-Chinese's prospects of benefiting from the Initiative is low.

Chinese expectations of repayment are threefold. For countries along the Belt and Road, direct payment through rising taxes and shifting money from other priorities has been most straightforward. However, this process of diverting government funding to repay debts has led to a cycle of borrowing more from China or elsewhere to finance daily governmental operations. One panellist pointed out this trending practice in Pakistan and Malaysia.

Otherwise, indirect financial payment is expected in tangible goods, the classic example being the Sri Lankan leasing of the Hambantota port to China for 99 years. In Central Asia, this form of indirect financial payment is of high concern to the public. Already distrustful of local politicians, Chinese loans are perceived to be structured to sway these politicians to sell off strategic assets, such as land and gold. This causes anxiety in Tajikistan, a country with severe debts to China and where Chinese companies, including state-owned enterprises, own the majority of goldmines.

The last resort is to provide geopolitical support to China. Thus far, this has been made use of to shape international opinion in the case of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang. One panellist brought to light to an example in Ghana where politicians vocally supported China's response to anti-extradition law protests in Hong Kong. China was also able to exercise its geopolitical power to buy support for its policy in Xinjiang, demonstrated through the signatories. In Central Asia, Kyrgyz politicians have never openly criticised the Xinjiang policy, a gesture of implicit support for China.

In 2019, for the first time, China has responded to international concern for the Initiative. Chinese President Xi Jinping acknowledged that the Belt and Road financing must carefully examine the projects' sustainability. Since then, Belt and Road financing has decreased by 10% as Chinese businesses adjusted to tie up bad investments.

## An Order-Shaping Initiative

Finally, responding to the call to take international responsibility, the Initiative has perfectly signified China's intent to show and communicate the kind of role it has decided to play in the international system. Beyond fulfilling an infrastructure gap, the Belt and Road Initiative is offering developing countries a China-led, alternative path into the world economy.

China plans to neither assimilate nor challenge the Western international order. Thus far, this Chinese international vision of norm-building is largely embracing the world economy and the liberal order. Without drastically changing the Western liberal economy, utilising the same structural organisation, the Initiative is instead creating a hub with China at the centre. More than one panellist recognised this Initiative as a rules-based, community of practice advertised to bring mutual benefits to the developing world. Learning from the West, the Chinese effort in redefining the international order is using the precise instruments once applied to China in its early stage of economic growth, such as conditional loans.

Beyond building networks between China and Belt and Road countries, many industry specific trainings have been set up to offer knowledge as to what are the opportunities and how to engage with the Initiative. One panellist diverted attention to a growing trend where non-state actors also rush to participate and affiliate with China's Initiative in Central Asia. Another panellist pointed at academic events worldwide as an example, highlighting many other events worldwide where China is the centre of discussion in other sectors. While this indeed creates confusion on pinning down projects and direction of Chinese strategic vision, in the long run what is certain is that China is preparing itself as a leader of an international community parallel to the Western order.

Putting ideas to governance, China is offering Belt and Road countries an alternative way to carry out the liberal order. Many countries have made the political choice to join China's initiative. Chinese proactiveness under the Xi administration is occupying and reorganising new territories of influence in a China-led multipolar world. With a disintegrated network of diversified actors, China's wishes to continue its influence with governmental changes will be politically challenging. Nevertheless, one panellist called to keep in mind the economic significance of the Initiative as related to Chinese commitment in solving its domestic problems.

It is precisely because of this order-shaping capacity that Europe, supposedly on the other end of the Belt and Road, is not fully committed to the initiative. Contemporary

developments in China-EU relationship rhetoric prior to the Belt and Road was driving towards cultivating a win-win environment with transparency. Since Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power with his Belt and Road Initiative, it has complicated matters and created more friction in Europe. The official narrative of the European Union partnership with China is far from improving collaboration between China and Europe. In practice, the sheer volume of Chinese companies going abroad, especially to Europe, is widely creating discontentment. In Europe, 80% of EU taxpayers money is paid to contracts for Chinese companies, instead of European companies. With huge subsidies provided by the Chinese government, China has been successful in eliminating competitors in Europe and beyond.

The deepening friction goes beyond business. The kind of leap of order China has in mind for the future differs vastly from the kind of democratic, humanistic vision Europe has in mind. For years, Europe has supported economic reform in China in hope of its eventual path towards taking seriously the human rights discourse. For starters, the Belt and Road Initiative evidently attaches no vocabularies regarding human rights. Also, seen through practice, China does not shy away from working with leaders of countries with worsening human rights crisis, such as Myanmar. In 2019, this European hope has completely vanished in light of the on-going crisis in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

Furthermore, the reality of friction and contestations come from the different approaches towards regionalism. The European approach to regionalism emphasises sharing sovereignty and norms. Chinese regionalism, on the other hand, is normative. Efforts are centred on creating a community of practice, deepening understanding of each other and progressing based on mutual political trust.

With a special historical friendly appeal towards China, Central and Eastern European countries have embraced this kind of Chinese regionalism. Before the Chinese intervention, countries in this region have existed alongside each other for years with an unwillingness to cooperate. Since 2012, China has served as a bridge to bring more positive interactions in this region, forming the now 17+1, including Greece. A successful regional division of labour have been established, for example, with Serbia being assigned to take charge of infrastructure development.

However, while China has successfully built a platform of cooperation within the 17+1 in the name of Belt and Road, business have lagged behind. Where or not it has been relatively easy for China to invest in the 17+1, it is almost impossible for Eastern and Central European export to enter China given the lack of logistical capacity. One panellist also revealed that Western education has remained first choice in the 17+1, despite Chinese effort to attract students from this region. Of those from the 17+1 who want to study in China, students have tended to view it as beneficial to their career and China has opened up more internship opportunities.

Preliminary observations of the Initiative since 2013 has seen the creation of people-to-people exchanges around the world, including but not limited to student exchanges. While the impact of this immerse volume of human exchanges is yet to be determined, it has



opened up many new opportunities for developing countries. Each year, China finances around 1000 Ethiopian PhD students, while the U.S. and Europe together finance only 100. Despite the lack of capacity for Belt and Road countries to send students to China in contrast with the mature structure in Western countries, one panellist has explained it as an increasing Chinese willingness to support students financially.

With a great volume of people-to-people exchanges, the impact of Chinese ideas are becoming intensified in the age of the Belt and Road. In 2015, the United Nations adopted China's concept of a common destiny of humankind. Future dialogues between China and Europe must begin on an equal footing by first addressing key questions regarding norms and regimes, and then decide on development priorities.

## **Asian View on China's Belt & Road Initiative**

With China as the 'Middle Kingdom,' the Belt and Road Initiative seeks to connect and incorporate Central Asia into South East Asia's existing sea-based trade route. By land, a planned railway transportation structure is set to connect China's western periphery to Asia's Far East, en route to South East Asia. In recent years, leadership in China has shifted focus from forging strong relations with the few major powers to the periphery with its friendly neighbourhood diplomacy. As of recent, voices of Asian countries have been given greater importance in the international community.

In Central Asia, there has been a change in the nature of discussions regarding the Belt and Road Initiative. The public are increasingly becoming concerned about corruption, especially when a new government takes over, thus allowing space to criticise the old government. Regarding debts and corruption, China has in the past responded to strong voices of local civil society. However, given a weakening civil society in Central Asia, it is unlikely that there will be such a form of pressure on these governments to act against China.

Whereas it is rather new for Central Asia to manage Chinese affairs, South East Asia has had much longer historical ties with China. From being historically Chinese tribute states, to economies today supported by overseas Chinese immigrants, the Bamboo network had already built a foundation for Belt and Road investments in South East Asia. On the other hand, China's western periphery diplomacy had to be created from almost nothing.

## **Perception, Practicalities and Conditional Cooperation**

Despite having different experiences with China, when presented with the Belt and Road Initiative, South East Asian countries have individually spent a great deal of time focusing their efforts to negotiating specifics of projects. Financing is largest in Laos and Cambodia, as they are amongst the two least developed countries in the region. As a result, large debts are owed to China. Laos in particular owes the most, with its debt owed to China at 70% of GDP.

China's presentation of the Initiative has been perceived differently in Asia. The foundation of legitimacy has been broadly divided into either political or economic. Political concern over the Belt and Road originate from its financing system. As one panellist pointed out, 90% of all Belt and Road related projects pass by China's party banks, the big four state owned commercial and policy banks. While this has given strong financial support to the Initiative, it at the same time creates unease with regards to the political motive of certain Belt and Road projects.

Economic worries on the other hand come from the increase of Chinese funds into the hands of local politicians. As one panellist suggested, corruption is the culprit of high debt in Malaysia, as observed to be the case in other countries as well. There are also many concerns in practice. The much lower standard of environmental regulation has contributed to many social issues with Chinese investments in Vietnam. In sectors where there is Chinese dominance, such as the energy sector, locals are watchful of Chinese companies. For countries that also enjoy economic growth from Western investments, local governments in Asia are struggling to find solutions to manage these two different types of funding.

For most countries, the government's decision to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative is more political than economic. Japan, as an exception, have been reluctant to join the Initiative and support China's investments in South East Asia owing neither to political nor security concerns. Rather, it was further mentioned that many Japanese companies are wary of the profitability of Chinese projects abroad. An exemplary case, Japanese companies withdrew from a high-speed railway project to connect Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor.

With the goal of ensuring a free and open Indo-Pacific, connecting the two oceans requires the full willingness of South East Asian countries to include Japan in its developmental decision-making with China. Since China's announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, Japan has focused its efforts on introducing a practice-based conditional model of cooperation with China in South East Asia. This Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy has envisioned the inevitable expansion of the sea trade route once connected with the Eurasian land trade route across Central Asia. Unlike the European emphasis on shared norms and values, the Japanese model of cooperation desires to work with China to establish a set of guiding rules.

With either political or economic concern, more than one panellist pointed out the lack of transparency as responsible for the often-negative perception. South East Asian states have no consensus regarding what the Initiative is, and many debates surround what is the actual route connecting the region to Africa and Europe. Both China and local governments have not given out clear information about the Belt and Road Initiative. In both the public and the academic space, it is very difficult to define what exactly is the Belt and Road Initiative, let alone who is involved and what are the projects.

The lack of transparency leading to a skewed focus on infrastructure projects has led to many perception issues in South East Asia. In Vietnam, these infrastructure projects are perceived as one-sidedly benefitting China, as they make logistics more favourable for China. In Malaysia, the Initiative is politically entangled with a long-time conflict between the Malay indigenous population and the ethnic Chinese migrants that make up 20% of population in the country.

However, one panellist addressed that lack of information as in fact a language barrier. In Central Asia, the lack of information persists as the biggest problem for the non-Chinese speaking public. In South East Asia, language familiarity has benefited the Chinese diaspora with a network advantage. It has been raised that many Malaysian Chinese chambers of commerce act as the first point of contact when Chinese businessmen arrive in Malaysia. One panellist also revealed this common practice elsewhere in Central Asia.

Joining the Belt and Road as a political choice, one panellist has described a willing leadership as a chief reason behind high level of Belt and Road cooperation. Malaysia, with Initiative supporter Prime Minister Najib Razak (2009-2018), settled many Belt and Road projects with China.

Since then there was a drastic increase in Chinese investment and joint venture Chinese companies, and a large influx of Chinese workers. In 2018, the Belt and Road Initiative was used as a political tool in the 2018 election discourse, which led to a government change away from Najib. Having China as a close economic partner, in turn, has made the situation in Malaysia very unstable after the government change, as seen through China-related controversies published daily in the media.

## What China Wants in Central Asia

The Belt and Road Initiative is China's primary diplomacy discourse in Central Asia. For leaders in Beijing, the interests of both Russia and the United States in this region have long held China back from deepening its much-needed ties with Central Asia. Despite many Chinese efforts to build good relations with Central Asian states in its immediate independence from Soviet Union in 1991, demonstrated through numerous highest-level visits, it was largely unsuccessful. Prior to the Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship in 2001, Sino-Central Asian exchange centred only on border disputes in China's Far West, at a time when Russia maintained presence at all high-level political exchanges between China and Central Asia.

Entering 2001, with Russian President Putin in power, a positive China-Russian relation in turn allowed China-Central Asia relations to drastically improve. It was at this time that China's domestic "Western Development" proposal begin to finally materialise. Since the western part of China is historically (and still is) more integrated with Central Asia than the eastern coast, the proposal has led to a rapid increase of China-Central Asia trade.

One panellist revealed statistics showing a significant increase of operating and registered Chinese enterprises in the region.

As China-Russian relations warmed up, the War on Terror has brought American military interest to Central Asia. With NATO at its doorstep, and a worsening ethnic conflict in Xinjiang, Chinese assertiveness westward has been moderately deterred. Yet, in the next 10 years forward, building relations directly with Central Asia was impossible since Chinese leaders in the Far East were still struggling to ensure their ground in the western region.

Since the Xi administration, China-Central Asia relations have been brought to a new height. The Belt and Road narrative by now, in 2019, is the prime cooperation framework between China and Central Asian states. More than one panellist provided lists of Chinese projects in Central Asia, showing the variety of focuses beyond infrastructure. People-to-people exchanges are very much prioritised in Central Asia, where different Chinese provinces and cities work to organise events, offering an occasion to bridge the language divide and communicate with local leaders. It is in the context of development that Central Asia has its hopes and dreams for the Belt and Road.

For China, the importance of Central Asia is geopolitically relevant to its domestic issues. Firstly, friendly relations with Central Asia cultivate the Chinese monopoly in solving the Xinjiang Muslim problem on its own. Repeatedly pointed out by many Chinese politicians, incorporating the isolated Xinjiang economy into the Chinese economy is believed to be a crucial step to induce interdependence, introducing incentives to deter separatist sentiments. One panellist has pointed out Chinese statistics, showing that in 2017, of Chinese overall exports to Central Asia, 62.8% comes from Xinjiang.

Secondly, a viable trade route westward is going to lessen commercial burdens arising from future conflicts in the Pacific Ocean concerning Taiwan and South China Sea. One panellist diverted attention to the timing of Xi's Belt and Road Initiative. In the midst of heated disputes in the South China Sea, Xi announced a Belt and Road strategy in Kazakhstan in September 2013. A land-based trade route westward is going to provide China capacity to withstand the consequences of a potential blockage of the Pacific Ocean, especially in light of US naval dominance in the South and East China Seas.

Thirdly, this land-based trade route, connected to the existing sea-based trade route, is commercially within Chinese interest to boost its economy. Accelerating globalisation, especially between developing countries, is a solution China sees itself offering to worldwide recession. Despite higher cost than the sea-based route, the land-based route is efficient and safe with trains. One panellist offered insights into an example. In January 2019, the effectiveness of the China-Europe railway through Central Asia was felt and celebrated in China, as the trains completed the import of a batch of three-port valves in two thirds of the time the sea route takes, which lowered by 50% the waiting cost for the China National Petroleum Corporation who urgently needed these valves from Germany for repairs.

## Conclusion

With the Belt and Road Initiative, other countries can make use of the associated occasions to engage Chinese actors in issues such as the environment. But challenges to studying the Belt and Road Initiative are many. For starters, scholars have a much more diverse group of actors to examine. The Chinese private sector, which can become an instrument of the Initiative, will be amongst the most difficult group to make sense of. An index of Chinese influence to structurally measure regional trends was raised as a much-needed model of research on the topic.

Financial figures differ, and often reported as investment expectation, therefore not reliable as to reflect trade realities. It is more important to examine investment terms, such as comparing those made in Africa and Central Asia. Looking at Japanese and Korean investment history in South East Asia will also illuminate situations in countries currently being developed by China.

Understanding the magnitude of the Chinese mercantilist blueprint of the Belt and Road Initiative is a crucial step to making sense of the associated issues that will come along the way. Central Asia is only just waking up to the overwhelming influence coming from its Eastern neighbour. How central is Central Asia to the Belt and Road Initiative was a question that was raised by the audience and panellists, and this workshop has moved forward in the path to more clarity regarding the Initiative in Central Asia. Different regional views were compared, while similar experiences and narratives have been identified.

## Workshop programme

9:00–10:30	<b>Panel 1: Euro-Atlantic View on China's Belt &amp; Road Initiative</b> <b>Moderator:</b> Dr Emilbek Dzhuraev, Senior Lecturer, OSCE Academy
	<p><i>China's Debtbook Diplomacy</i>  <b>Dr Sam Parkers</b>, Blume Public Interest Scholar, Georgetown University Law Center, Washington DC, USA</p> <p><i>China's Belt and Road Initiative and the European Union: An Exercise in Order-Shaping</i>  <b>Dr Giuseppe Gabusi</b>, University of Turin and T.wai, Torino World Affairs Institute, Italy</p> <p><i>BRI's Impact in Central Asia from a Project-Level Perspective</i>  <b>Mr Haakon Fossum Sagbakken</b>, Research Fellow, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Norway</p> <p><i>The Role of Education in Developing China-CEEC (17+1) Cooperation Mechanism</i>  <b>Dr Nikola Zivlak</b>, Senior Vice President, Belt and Road Institute and Associate Professor, Emlyon Business School, Republic of Serbia</p>
10:30 –11:00	<b>Coffee break</b>
9:00–10:30	<b>Panel 2: Asian View on China's Belt &amp; Road Initiative</b> <b>Moderator:</b> Mr Haakon Fossum Sagbakken, Research Fellow, NUPI
	<p><i>The Development of BRI in Malaysia</i>  <b>Dr Cheng Ming Yu</b>, Chairperson, Belt and Road Strategic Research Centre, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia</p> <p><i>BRI Implementation in Vietnam: A Skeptical Approach</i>  <b>Dr Pham Sy Thanh</b>, Director of China Economic Program, Vietnam Institute for Economic and Policy Research</p> <p><i>Japanese Response to the BRI</i>  <b>Dr Jun Kumakura</b>, Research Fellow, Global Studies Group, Institute of Developing Economies, Japan</p> <p><i>Understanding the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia</i>  <b>Ms Niva Yau Tsz Yan</b>, Research Fellow, OSCE Academy, and graduate from the University of Hong Kong</p>
12:30 –14:00	<b>Lunch</b>
14:00–15:30	<b>Discussion of the Working Group on Cross Regional Perspectives and Comparisons</b> <b>Moderator:</b> Dr Alexander Wolters, Director, OSCE Academy

## List of Participants

**Alexander Rosenplaenter**, Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Foundation for Social Democracy

**Alejandro Marx**, Attaché/Junior Professional, Delegation of the European Union to the Kyrgyz Republic

**Assel Murat**, Student of Politics and Security Programme, OSCE Academy

**Elnura Omurkulova-Ozierska**, Director, Central Asia Strategic Center for Analysis, Dialogue and Development

**Jacob Mardell**, Researcher, Mercator Institute for China Studies

**Kemel Toktomushev**, Assistant Professor, University of Central Asia

**Mirgul Nizaeva**, Research Coordinator, Regional Institute of Central Asia

**Naoki Nihei**, Independent Expert on Central Asia, Japan

**Ryota Saito**, Attaché, Embassy of Japan

**Sherzod Shamiev**, Student of the Politics and Security Programme, OSCE Academy

**Srdjan Uljevic**, Associate Research Fellow, OSCE Academy

**Toktobek Omokeev**, Project Manager, Regional Institute of Central Asia

**Yazid Suleiman**, Associate Research Fellow, OSCE Academy

**Zalina Enikeeva**, Junior Research Fellow, Public Policy and Administration of the University of Central

## Bios of Speakers

### **Dr Sam Parker**

Sam Parker is a Blume Public Interest Scholar at Georgetown University Law Center. He previously worked as an Academic Fellow at U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, analysing Chinese economic efforts to displace U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific region. He is the co-author of a report entitled “Debtbook Diplomacy: China’s Strategic Leveraging of its Newfound Economic Influence and the Consequences for U.S. Foreign Policy”. The report was independently produced for the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff and published by Harvard’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

### **Dr Giuseppe Gabusi**

Dr Giuseppe Gabusi is Assistant Professor of International Political Economy and Political Economy of East Asia at the University of Turin, and one of the co-founders of T.wai, the Torino World Affairs University. He has been visiting fellow at the Australian National University in Canberra, the University of Warwick, UK, the East-West Center in Honolulu, USA, and Zhejiang University in Hangzhou. His research interests include China’s Political Economy, the Belt and Road Initiative and the future of the liberal order, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and Myanmar’s transformations.

### **Dr Nikola Zivlak**

Dr Nikola Zivlak is Senior Vice President and one of the founders of Belt and Road Institute in Serbia and Associate Professor at Emlyon business school in Shanghai, China. He originally comes from Serbia and he has extensively worked on China since 2007. He earned his PhD degree at Donghua University in Shanghai, as a researcher funded by a Chinese Government Scholarship. Before that Dr Zivlak obtained his master degree at the University of Novi Sad, Serbia. Nikola has an extensive academic experience of more than 14 years, working with students and professors from more than 90 countries and teaching at many universities in China and Europe. Besides his academic work, he also possesses practical experience as a consultant and an executive trainer for various industries. In his free time, he enjoys reading, meeting people, music, travelling and swimming.

### **Mr Haakon Fossum Sagbakken**

Haakon Fossum Sagbakken is a junior research fellow with the research group on the Research group on Russia, Asia and International Trade. He finished his Master’s degree in Russian & East European Studies at the University of Oxford in 2019, and has previously also studied the Asia Pacific region as an undergraduate at Brown University. His main research interests include the global energy transition, the political economies of Southeast and East Asia, as well as the economic development and trade of post-Soviet states. He has expertise in Climate, Energy, Russia and Eurasia, and Asia.

### **Dr Ming Yu Cheng**

Cheng Ming Yu is a Professor of Economics at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), Malaysia. At the same time, she is the Director of the Institute of Management and Leadership Development (IMLD), and Chairperson of the Belt and Road Strategic Research



Centre (BRSRC) at UTAR. Professor Cheng works on a number of projects related to economic development, particularly social capital, globalisation and human capital development as well as competitiveness studies. She is currently working on research related to talent mobility and networking, STEM education and Industry 4.0, regional economic development, global value chain and Belt and Road Initiative. Professor Cheng was a Visiting Lecturer at the Graduate School of Business, University of Newcastle, Australia, and a fellow for Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Fellowship (JSPS), a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Washington State University, USA, a research fellow at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore and a visiting professor at National Taiwan University. She is a member of Germany's DAAD Alumni Association, and one of the BMW Foundation Young Leaders. In 2011 she was honoured as the Young Global Leader (YGL) of 2011 by World Economic Forum (WEF). She is also the Founding Curator of the Global Shapers Community Kuala Lumpur Hub, an initiative of WEF.

### **Dr Jun Kumakura**


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### **Dr Pham Sy Thanh**

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