

The Belt & Road Initiative through the Lens of Urbanism

A brief introduction of China's Belt and Road Initiative for urban planners and designers.

Kseniya Otmakhova

4149297 – K.L.Otmakhova@student.tudelft.nl
Delft University of Technology, Department of Urbanism
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Abstract – this work aims to address the gap in the emerging body of literature on China's recently announced Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), covering this topic from the perspective of urban planning and design. The paper provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of the BRI and its instruments; explores the challenges relevant from the perspective of urban planning and design; and discusses BRI's possible role in a new wave of urbanisation. Existing body of urbanism literature offers useful concepts and tools to guide the BRI development, but the knowledge needs to be integrated into a practical system adapted to the BRI context. This introductory paper is a call for action towards further, systematic research of the BRI and the urbanisation it is about to trigger.

Key words – Belt and Road Initiative, Khorgos Gateway, Globalization-driven Urbanization.

Introduction

Since its announcement in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative has been an emerging topic of media coverage and academic research in the fields of economy (L. K. Cheng, 2016; Djankov & Miner, 2016; Y. Huang, 2016; Yu, 2017) and international relationships (Blanchard & Flint, 2017; Y. Cheng, Song, & Huang, 2017; Ferdinand, 2016; Liu & Dunford, 2016). Pioneering body of research on the BRI in these fields consists of comprehensive overviews explaining the initiative (Ferdinand, 2016; Shukla, 2015) and its impact on global geo-economics; as well as in depth analyses of China's motives (Djankov & Miner, 2016; Y. Huang, 2016; Yu, 2017) behind the BRI, its objectives and instruments (Swaine, 2015). Generally there is a distinction between political, economic and infrastructural elements of the BRI, but infrastructure is being mentioned only occasionally as an instrument to reinforce

connectivity for the sake of collaboration. Nevertheless, there seems to be an implicit consensus among the authors above, that the BRI will trigger more urbanisation to happen, put into words by Nalbantoglu (2017, p. 96). It is striking that over the past two years in which the BRI-literature emerged, this topic has not yet been discussed in the field of urban planning and design. The 'mega-project of the century' (Clover, Ju, & Hornby, 2017) has been widely covered in media (Z. Huang, 2017; Manuel, 2017; Ortolani, 2018; Wong & Lau, 2017; Yan, 2015) in particular for the transformative potential of its infrastructural component for the countries and cities involved.

This paper aims to provide urban planners and designers with understanding about what China's recent Belt and Road Initiative exactly is about and reframe it as

a set of problems that the field of urbanism should actively address.

First section of the essay will provide a comprehensive overview of the BRI, touching upon its set-up, goals, motives and instruments. It will also introduce Khorgos Gateway development as a study case in order to illustrate implications the BRI has on the local scale. In the second section I will discuss the meaning of BRI for urbanization, lay out the main challenges from the perspective of urban planning and design and advocate for the need to develop a system for spatial development in context of BRI. The third section concludes. The final section proposes recommendations for further research and describes my further plans for the thesis project.

1. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

2.1 Set-up, motives and goals

During his first state visit to Kazakhstan, in September 2013 Chinese president Xi Jinping held a speech at the Nazarbayev University with the title “Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future” proposing a vision of to create ‘win-win collaboration [... / and] new opportunities for

global development’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2013).

With this China puts forward a plan to revive the Ancient Silk Routes in a contemporary form of cross-continental economic collaboration network, in order to facilitate a new inclusive form of globalisation (Liu & Dunford, 2016). The ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI), also known as OBOR and the ‘New Silk Road’, consists of two parts: a network of logistic and economic corridors over land, and a series of sea-routes supported by new Chinese ports, essentially strengthening China’s geopolitical position on the continent. With this the initiative covers 65 countries across six regions and potentially involves 62.3% of the world population and 30.0% of worlds GDP (Chin & He, 2016).

To support the grand scheme the Chinese government founded the Silk Road Fund, the International Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NBD). However, so far the most funding came from the state-owned China Development Bank (CBD) and four commercial banks (Ma & Wildau, 2017).

China provides loans to help other countries develop infrastructural projects such as ports, oil pipelines, power plants, highways and railways as part of the BRI. Facilitating collaboration through infrastructure China also strengthens its economic and political position on the Eurasian continent. Another important motive behind the BRI is China’s

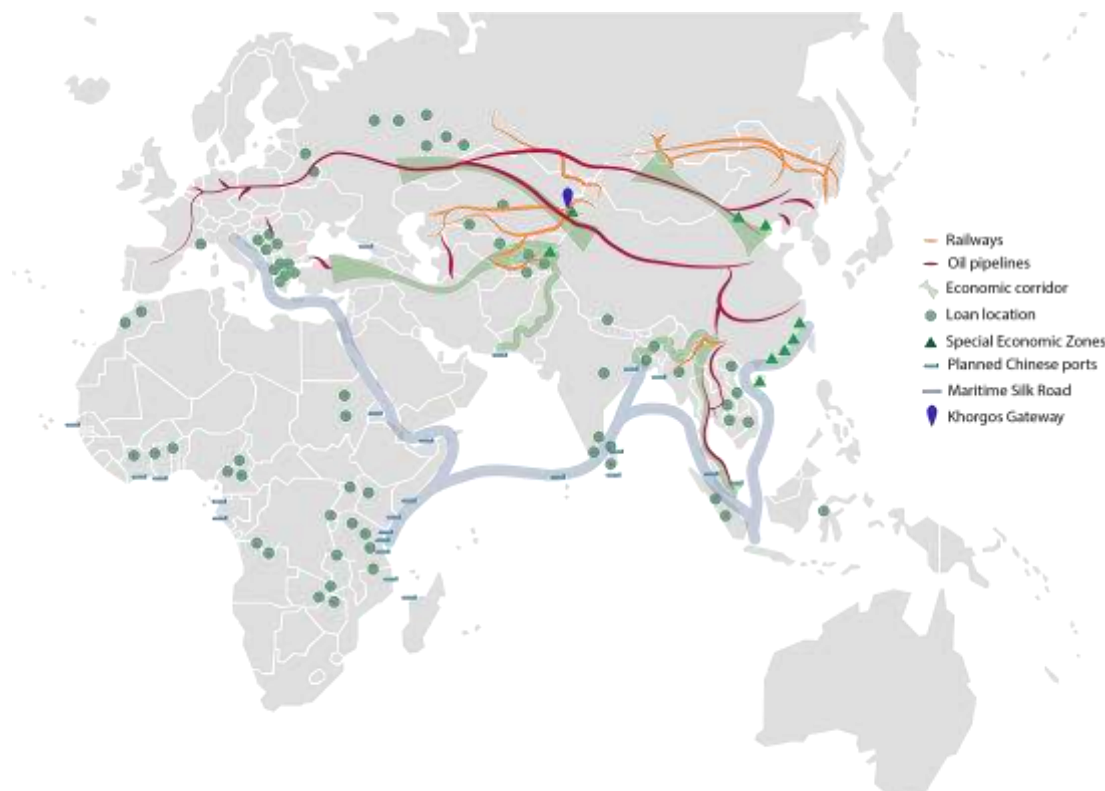


Figure 1: Geographical scope of BRI & position of case study. Image by author.

infrastructure and generate business for Chinese engineering and construction companies, to support its domestic market. Nalbantoglu argues that for this reason BRI is ‘essential for the survival of a stable China’ (2017).

Western politics and media face the BRI with lot of critique and distrust, fearing the BRI to be a sophisticated form of colonisation. Nevertheless China firmly promotes the BRI as a vision for a better future emphasising in its campaign the benefits of all partners joining forces. The five key goals BRI sets to benefit collaboration are: ‘policy coordination’, ‘facilities and infrastructure connectivity’, ‘unimpeded trade’, ‘financial integration and people-to-people bonds’ (Y. Huang, 2016). Media and academics are divided about the degree of altruism behind China’s initiative. In my opinion the BRI could definitely be of benefit to countries other than China, if the win-win principle can be secured by reinforcing it with concepts of complementarity for example (Dühr, Stead, & Zonneveld, 2007). Moreover, I think the success or failure of the BRI fundamentally depends on the way the initiative is translated into spatial terms and daily lives of people. Among BRI’s five goals there are two with this potential: ‘people-to-people bonds’ and ‘infrastructure connectivity’, however what needs more explicit attention is the urbanisation that will take place as a consequence of the BRI.

2.2 BRI Instruments

In existing literature discourse the complexity of the BRI is tackled by breaking it down into its political, economic, functional or strategic components. In my work I will explain the Belt and Road Initiative by presenting the various instruments that were designed to foster international collaboration and connectivity.

Swaine (2015, pp. 3, 4) distinguishes economic and diplomatic elements in the BRI. Liu and Dunford (2016) talk about channels of communication, nodal infrastructures and financial instruments. From

financial perspective, Yu (2017) distinguishes capital loans and technical services as means to facilitate infrastructure development. Huang (2016) highlights cross-border projects as a distinct feature of the BRI and lists railways highways, pipe- and electricity lines among it. Fitting in the same sequence are also the Special Economic Zones that China actively uses to strengthen its trading relationships with neighbouring countries.

Based on literature and my own understanding I distinguish three groups of instruments: ‘politico-economic’, ‘socio-cultural’ and ‘spatial’. While the politico-economic group of instruments contributes to success of BRI on the level of governance across various scales, the ‘socio-cultural’ and ‘spatial’ groups shape the physical manifestation of the initiative. Having said this I don’t want to diminish the relevance of the economic benefits for BRI’s success, but I would like to emphasise that ‘politico-economic’ elements concern the group of actors directly involved with the initiative more, while the remaining elements potentially impact a much wider scope of actors and users.

2.3 First results

Among the first and most important infrastructure projects initiated as part of BRI, was the establishment of the New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor. The new railway line made it possible to transport freight directly over land in 17 days, half of the amount of time than it previously took over the sea route (SCMP, 2017). What followed, was the development of the railway hub on the border of China and Kazakhstan into Eurasia’s largest dry-port and the creation of a new Special Economic Zone (SEZ), ‘Khorgos Gateway’. Other recent BRI projects include the development of Gwadar port in Pakistan, railway to Iran and pipeline network across Central Asia.

2.4 Khorgos Gateway as study-case

Although one development hardly can be representative for the whole BRI, the ‘flagship’

| BRI Goals | COLLABORATION | | | | |
|--------------------|--|---|--|---|---|
| | Financial integration | Unimpeded trade | Policy coordination | Connectivity | People to people bonds |
| BRI Instruments | Politico-Economic Instruments | | | Physical Instruments | Socio-cultural Instruments |
| | Capital loans, Technical financial in- struments | Economic cooridors, trading agreements | Diplomatic agreements, policy programmes | Nodal infrastructures: Roads, Railways, Ports, Airports, Telecommunications networks, Pipelines, Development Zones and Cities | Silk Road cultural legacy, Educational programmes, Cultural exchange programmes, Chinese Culture Institutes. |
| | | | Special Economic Zones | | |

Figure 2: BRI goals and instruments. Image by author.

(Z. Huang, 2017) project Khorgos Gateway illustrates strategic combining of various BRI elements, and as such the potential transformative power of the initiative and the scope of challenges the BRI might face elsewhere, serving as an valuable study-case.

Khorgos Gateway reflects the ‘thinking in opportunities’ spirit China puts forward with BRI. The BRI development, proposed by the presidents of China and Kazakhstan, touched the border region for the first time in 2010, when the New Eurasian Land Bridge Railway got realised. Before that, the region remote by definition, was untouched steppe landscape with a dozen small villages scattered around, with Eurasian Pole of Inaccessibility practically around the corner (Shepard, 2016).

‘Opportunity thinking’ reflects further in the multifunctional programme of the hub. Infrastructure wise, the dry port was an unmissable object for the transfer of goods across borders, as China and Kazakhstan use different railway gauges. The SEZ as an economic object, provides an environment with different trading laws, creating favourable business conditions for companies and industries. To exploit the full benefit of the central position, world’s first cross-border economic cooperation zone, the ICBC is added. With this trio ‘Khorgos Gateway’ already fulfils two of the core BRI goals – ‘infrastructure connectivity’ and ‘unimpeded trade’.

To support the development of the hub new urban developments on both sides of the border are planned. On Chinese side it’s a 200.000 people robotics hub, and on Kazakhstan-side a 100.000 town for the workers of the SEZ. In the future the hopes are for the towns to merge into one big mega polis, the ‘New Dubai’ of Eurasia (Shepard, 2016). This is where the BRI- dreams become to look slightly far-fetched. Looking at the current progress, in both infrastructure and urban areas, a big contrast is visible in the pace of developments on Chinese and Kazakh sides of the border. While the Chinese city adds buildings with the day, Kazakhstan managed to construct just one settlement of 1000 people so far. It seems there is no case of cross-border collaboration, both sides execute their part of the big plan independently according to their capability.

The problematic urban developments in Khorgos Gateway illustrate the focus of the current BRI approach to development; top-down and focused on economy and infrastructure. The underlying problem is that urban development is subservient to infrastructural and economic goals; this even reflects in the name of the project ‘Khorgos Gateway’ rather than ‘Khorgos City’.

As crucial as economy and efficiency are for BRI in the politico-economic realm, as fundamental to its success is the quality of the built environments in the spatial realm.

2. Discussion

3.1 BRI as a carrier of urbanisation

Previously I identified the different political, economic, social and spatial instruments the initiative consists of. Precedents show that urbanisation and economic growth go hand in hand together. Historically, increasing trade would promote development of the cities, as happened in case of the Ancient Silk Route, the conceptual predecessor of the BRI. However nowadays, the reverse happens too, where new urban developments are used to attract investors and as such boost the economy of a certain region. Industrial and technological new-towns, like Konza Techno City in Kenya and Eko Atlantic development in Nigeria are just some examples of such practice (Marcinkoski, 2017).

The case of Khorgos Gateway shows how new trade agreements and infrastructure provide opportunities for development and growth of new places, but it also exemplifies the role of new urban settlements as facilitators subservient to these economic developments. As such it is highly likely that the BRI generated urban environments will be of the same kind as the large-scale urban developments that happened in China the past 20 years and are rising up across Africa, Asia and the Middle-East today. Habracken (2016, p. 58) criticizes such repetitive and uniform built environments to misfit the contemporary ‘society that prides itself on freedom of self-expression’. Taking into account that this social trend will continue and globalisation will diversify our communities even further, I would like to believe that by reviving the Ancient Silk Routes through the BRI, we can rethink current urbanisation to generate urban environments as vibrant and multicultural as the ancient megapolises the Silk Road became famous for. To do so, first of all urban environments should be revalued as core *places* for human interaction. Social and spatial relations are mutually constitutive (Soja, 1985, p. 177). In one way space reflecting the social relations is produced and reshaped by social practice, in another way space itself, giving body to social relations creates a place for their existence. For example phenomena like slums, are a spatial reflection of polarization that starts in society and economy (Holston, 2001, pp. 333–340). We should know that space can support this polarization to develop further, but also that it can be the key to breaking out of vicious cycle and that we should anticipate this by creating fairer places.

The BRI bears the potential to carry this change, as good infrastructure and economic conditions provide a stable base to develop from. But urbanisation as a process needs a prominent place on the BRI agenda too, as there are various challenges the BRI might face.

3.2 Challenges for the BRI

BRI as a cross-continental megaproject (Gellert & Lynch, 2004, p. 15) aiming for improved connectivity and collaboration will fundamentally be challenged by tangible and intangible borders. As a spatial phenomenon, borders embody the fronts of less distinct differences between political, economic and cultural contexts. The research on the complex relationship between social and spatial problems of border regions has emerged into the field of border studies (Anderson & O'Dowd, 1999; Brunet-Jailly, 2005; Kolossov, 2005; Newman, 2003), providing context and frameworks for studying and developing border regions. In practice, when it comes to the challenges of cross-border cooperation, I find EU to be the most relevant precedent for the BRI. The case of EU spatial development shows how after the physical borders between the individual countries got alleviated, it took almost two decades to bridge different social, economic, political and spatial cultures in order to reach a deeper and more active level of collaboration. This happened through active development of collaboration programs among which INTERREG and large-scale spatial planning initiatives like ESPD (Dühr et al., 2007), through which collaboration manifested in space.

In case of BRI, the physical borders between partnering countries, are not to disappear anytime soon. Although BRI's infrastructural and political elements successfully cross the national borders, the non-physical, cultural in the broadest sense of the word, barriers may be stronger than the ones Europe dealt with. Exemplary here are China's own borders:

strictly controlled, impermeable boundaries protecting a culture and political system that puzzles the outside (western) world. With the BRI China aims to spread Chinese values and culture (Li, 2017), and as such demystify itself and become facilitator of international collaboration. However before getting there, the main question remains whether China can break out of its own boundaries, in a way that goes beyond business, through spatial expression that reflects the harmonious win-win approach.

Another great challenge lies in coordination of developments: horizontally between countries and vertically across the different scales. In its current proposals the BRI has a clear focus on horizontal coordination. In case of Khorgos Gateway coordination is visibly lacking in both directions. The big plan to jointly develop a cross-border hub, resulted in two groups of developments on each side of the border that are happening with contrasting speeds; fast on the Chinese side and slow on the Kazakhstan side. On the Kazakhstan side the challenges for vertical collaboration become vivid, as the separate objects of one plan, developed by different companies rise up in isolation from each other (Otmakhova, 2018).

3.3 Role of spatial planning and design in context of BRI

The strong focus on connectivity and collaboration the initiative carries, the main role of spatial planning and design in context of the BRI is to *facilitate collaboration* across boundaries and throughout scales. Visions, strategies, plans and programmes on transnational, regional and local scales are needed to direct the efforts, negotiate the conflicting interests and create cohesive environments (see *figure 3*).

When shaping urban environments and implicitly the social interactions that will take place within them, urban planners and designers take on the role


| BRI Goals | COLLABORATION | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|---|--|--|---|
| | Financial integration | Unimpeded trade | Policy coordination | Connectivity | People to people bonds | |
| BRI Instruments | Politico-Economic Instruments | | | Physical Instruments | Socio-cultural Instruments |  |
| | Capital loans, Technical financial instruments. | Economic corridors, trading agreements. | Diplomatic agreements, policy programmes. | Nodal infrastructures: Roads, Railways, Ports, Airports, Telecommunications networks, Pipelines, Development Zones and Cities. | Silk Road cultural legacy, Educational programmes, Cultural exchange programmes, Chinese Culture Institutes. | |
| | | | Special Economic Zones | | | |
| Spatial Planning and Design Tools | Trans-territorial Vision, Spatial Development Perspective. | | | | | XL |
| | Structural Visions, Polycentric Development Strategies, Cross-border Cooperation Programmes. | | | | | L-M |
| | Embedding Infrastructure | | | Placemaking | Urban Interaction Design | S |
| | | | | | | Spatial Cohesion across borders and scales |

Figure 3: Positioning of urban planning and design in context of BRI with some examples of tools. Image by author.

of mediators between the diverse stakeholders involved. The BRI involves an extremely wide range of actors, varying from national governments all the way to local users. Especially in case of BRI it is important for us to search for and maintain a balance between the global and the local forces as the city is an entity that is shaped by both (Wu, 2000).

Going further, urbanists need to develop new types of urban forms and configurations so that emerging BRI-developments can be more than industrial and logistic hubs but become qualitative environments of a new kind. Crucial here would be to understand and respect the local context, mixing different scales of urban developments according to function, local user patterns and landscape.

3.4 System for spatial development of BRI

As mentioned earlier the current urban design and planning research body contains various topics useful to the development of the BRI. Urban planning and design studies offer constructs, theories, frameworks and guidelines that can be applied to aid the development on various scales. However, the main problem of a mega-project like BRI, coordination, applies to theory as well. As spatial planning and design has the potential to support collaboration through space, it is especially important for the different theoretical constructs to be organized into a multi-scalar system.

Such a system needs to be more than an arrangement of abstract theories. The BRI is a complex enterprise aimed at collective profit. Therefore existing urban planning and design theories need to be applied on BRI case-studies (fitting precedents can be used as well), in order to pinpoint crucial aspects that need practical solutions.

Finally the system should aid urban designers and planners to balance between global and local aspects in planning and design and provide tools to adjust urban development real-time.

3. Conclusion

The BRI is a geopolitical, infrastructural mega-project designed to promote politico-economic collaboration and improve connectivity across the Eurasian continent. The BRI is Chinese main foreign strategy to reach out to the West, Middle-East and Africa, strengthen its own position in Eurasia, and support its economy by providing loans and services abroad. The BRI has a wide range of politico-economic, socio-cultural and physical instruments to reach the five goals; financial integration, unimpeded trade, policy coordination, connectivity, people-to-people bonds – all of which contribute to a new kind of win-win collaboration.

In order to decompose the complexity of BRI and study its spatial effects on the local scale, I proposed the case of Khorgos Gateway, for its infrastructure driven transformation of previously remote and thinly populated border region.

This case illustrates my critique on the current infrastructure oriented approach and with it the subservient role of urban environments in BRI-driven developments. Taking a perhaps a naïve or idealistic position I argue that the BRI bears the potential to carry a change toward a more mindful and inclusive urbanization, and that the failure or success of the initiative depends for a big part on the quality of places that the BRI will generate.

Biggest challenges for the BRI are border issues and coordination of developments across scales. These can effectively be addressed through urban planning and design. However, I believe that to effectively deal with the complexity of the BRI, the existing urban theories and recommendations need to be developed into a system adapted to the specifics of this mega-project. Developing such a system we need to focus on the balance between the global and the local and approach urban development as a real-time process, rather than a fixed result.

The role of urbanists in context of BRI becomes that of mediators between clients and users, governments and locals, infrastructure and settlements. Finally, I would like to emphasize the significance of culture in context of the BRI. The initiative that is focused on reaching across borders and improving people-to-people collaboration, fundamentally depends on its ability to interact with tangible and intangible specifics of the local contexts.

4 Further research recommendations

4.1 Research recommendations

This work was a first introduction of the BRI for urban planners and designers. In all its broadness and incompleteness this essay is a call for further research as I strongly believe that this topic deserves active discussion in urbanism studies. All topics I touched upon in my discussion would need more systematic and fundamental research. I would like to highlight 3 possible directions for further research:

- 1) As I advocated before more research is needed in order to develop theoretical frameworks and potentially a systematic approach that combines concepts about cross-border cooperation, polycentric development and participation. Research is needed to understand the planning and organizational culture(s) of the BRI. Given the broad geographical reach of the

initiative it's possible that several region-dependent option will come up.

- 2) Comparative studies between relevant precedents like the EU, will help identify which of the existing models and practices can be applied or adapted in case of the BRI. More cases for studies need to be selected across the BRI network. Kashgar is another recently developed SEZ and a Silk Route Heritage city, Gwadar port developments in Pakistan tie the land and sea routes of the BRI together. It would be interesting to see how the BRI interacts with local context there, compared to the case of Khorgos.
- 3) In order to rethink the current urbanization processes we need a better understanding of how to respectfully embed the global developments like infrastructure in the local context. Local culture play an important role in this issue but is a very new not yet well defined topic in urbanism and environmental psychology. Among the first results, are concepts like 'place identity' and 'sense of place' (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). More practical is the emerging place-making movement (PPS, 2010). Currently it is developed for the neighborhood scale, but through a combination of theoretical and case-studies, the core concepts can be up scaled and applied in the BRI.

4.2 Thesis project

In my thesis project I will continue studying the Khorgos Gateway, focusing on the cultural aspect which I also mentioned in my recommendations. The International Centre for Border Cooperation and its direct surrounding on the Kazakhstan side will serve as research and design site, upon which I will use the concepts of place making in order to design an alternative transition between the border and its surrounding. I aim to create a vibrant environment that can facilitate interactions between local and international users.

5 Reflection

This essay came as a result of a long and iterative process of (re)framing the BRI as a set of problems relevant in urbanism. It took a while to realize that before researching applications of specific urban planning and design methods and theories on BRI, a more general exploration was needed to provide comprehension and overview. Zooming in and out I ended up with a lot more information than I could include in this short essay, making the task of organizing it the more challenging. Nevertheless this has helped me to grasp the wide scope of the problem and mindfully choose on which of the specific problems to focus from now on.

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