

The final motivation goes beyond the initiative's economic dimension and relates to China's role in global affairs at large. How China's central government can reconcile the embrace of economic opportunities that an interconnected world economy provides with the pursuit of centralized autonomy over most other policy domains remains one of the central puzzles of Chinese international identity formation and the study thereof. But besides the well-known Chinese emphasis on 'win-win' cooperation and terms that make for awkward translations into English (such as 'mutual learnings'), China also coins new concepts such as a 'community of shared destiny'. The term itself appears paradoxical in a Chinese context, as Chinese policymakers have tended to categorize their engagement with external powers according to the importance of foreign governments: Major powers are attributed more importance than states in China's periphery and 'developing states'. Different approaches to relations with Russia and other 'partner countries' of the BRI along the various economic routes are indicative of this discursive discrepancy, and will be the subject of the analysis in the chapters that follow. The nationalistic rhetoric accompanying the 'China Dream' (Zhongguo meng) and Xi Jinping's comments about 'the great resurgence of the Chinese nation' for which he has set a target date of 2049 – the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, begs the question how a domestic nationalism can be compatible with the rhetoric of an inclusive, inter-connected world where 'people-to-people bonds' are more than mere code words for the creation of a Sino-centric new Order in Asia. It is driven by an effort to make a distinctly Chinese contribution to 'globalization', and to thereby co-shape the global governance architecture.¹ On a discourse level, the Chinese emphasis on the 'win-win' character of this initiative is a way to convey the same message that Hu Jintao's concepts of 'peaceful development' in 2003 and 'harmonious world' in 2005 sought to get across, yet in a more comprehensive way that involves the streamlining of all government communications and policies. But attempts to quantify 'Country Cooperation' (as China's National Development and Reform Commission began to do in September 2016) and the socio-economic implications of Chinese investments for local agency may constitute a contradiction with the Chinese traditional insistence on non-interference. The heated debate in many Western countries over the potential involvement of Huawei in the development of the 5G bandwidth internet was indicative of their perception that Chinese pre-dominance in internet and digital technologies would have a lasting long-term societal and political impact on globalization on Western terms. Finally, the various 'Silk Road' offshoots in a range of policy domains (from health to the digital sphere) entail a paradox that hints at the link between the increasingly global dimension of the BRI and the possible diffusion of authoritarian standards. A strand of literature has emerged that couches China's motivation behind the BRI as a geo-strategic grand design to remake the Eurasian, and subsequently, global order, in China's image. Beyond China's publicly declared principled opposition to the use of sanctions as tools in international politics, case studies have to shed more light on the dynamics of how political realities on the ground may run counter to China's professed policy of non-interference in domestic affairs of neighboring states. China's public diplomacy hurries to stress the co-managed nature of the BRI and seeks to rebut the skeptical perception that the initiative is a unilateral Chinese strategy. An internal contradiction in China's ambition to make a distinct contribution to a 'community of human destiny' lies in its growing nationalism at home in a 'new era' of China's relations with the outside world that Xi Jinping ushered in at the People's

Congress in 2017. E-commerce and digital banking thus lend themselves as an opportunity for China to become a provider of public goods as it deepens its involvement in the capital structures of these countries. How will a Chinese contribution to a 'common destiny' look like if China's own development at home blends capitalist consumerism and nationalistic overtones with an all-pervasive techno-nationalism? The Chinese government is actively accompanying its financial investments abroad with systematic efforts to occupy new discursive spaces. Coining new discourses that might compete with the language, ideas and norms about 'globalization' that Western governments have used as talking points for decades is an ideational competition in the shaping of world order. While physical infrastructure investments in the wake of the BRI appear more tangible in the mid-term, it is the future of e-commerce and digitalization that creates the toughest challenge for the balance between data protection and customer transparency. The question 'what will China offer the world in its rise?', which not only Wang Yiwei, who served as a semi-official explainer of the BRI on various think-tank panels, asks in the title of his 2016 book on the BRI, has indeed puzzled many who try to make sense of China's new global strategy. China makes proactive steps to influence public opinion globally by placing its discourse increasingly also in Western media outlets and academia. China's discursive power (*huayuquan*), they find, seeks to provide an ideational framework for China's connectivity initiatives. As Ruchir Sharma, chief global strategist at Morgan Stanley Investment Management, writes in the *New York Times*: 'The Chinese government has carved out an alternative internet universe with its own brands, rules and culture.' He goes on to argue that 'technology will decide which country emerges as the world's dominant economic power in the long run', and sees the risk that 'a digitally interconnected world could die by a thousand cuts, and technoprotectionism may get a further push during the next global downturn'. China portrays itself as a provider of public goods in order to shed both the image of a free rider and of the all-powerful economic giant whose 'rise' threatens other nations. Fanciful analogies in Chinese media that likened the BRI to a 'Chinese Marshall Plan' have therefore been duly criticized by the authorities. Kohlenberg and Godehardt have written on a new proactive 'connectivity power' that China's foreign policy discourse has embraced. Trade relations will follow, and the Chinese government has understood how the connectivity vocabulary can become its distinctive contribution to shape globalization on its own terms. It is noteworthy that China uses language on financial investments that taps into a Western infrastructure development discourse. China continues to repeat that the BRI is an inclusive 'initiative', not a 'strategy' or a 'plan' over which China claims ownership. In March 2018, the National People's Congress formally added Xi Jinping Thought (a fourteen-point manifesto) to the Chinese constitution. The BRI has become President Xi's main foreign policy contribution which complements his domestic campaign to realize the 'China dream'. The BRI, according to this line of thinking, is also an initiative that is indicative of China's developing international identity. Tellingly, the BRI was written into the Party Constitution at the same time as Xi Jinping Thought. Issues of digital governance ultimately become a test case for the perseverance of open societies. In developing countries along the 'Silk Road Economic Belt', up to two billion people live without bank accounts, but in need of credits that their own governments cannot provide. Changing the course of world history always starts with powerful ideas.