

Chapter 6

The Long Road Ahead: The Challenges of OBOR

With an initiative so enormous, it is certain that China faces a long road ahead paved with numerous obstacles. How China tackles these obstacles will decide whether OBOR goes on to set the tempo of a new interregional integration paradigm or fizzles out to be nothing more than a grand idea. So although chapter five offers evidence that OBOR's intended functions are indeed different from those of the 'new regionalism' dialogues, it will be meaningless if China cannot actually accomplish – at least to a degree – what it has set out to do.

The current projects already underway are incredibly crucial for OBOR. The entire world is watching how China handles the first set of infrastructure projects along the belt and road. If China achieves early success, it will begin to earn the trust of the other OBOR participants and more people will buy in to the validity of the initiative. Conversely, if OBOR's first projects have a hard time getting off the ground, participants will quickly lose faith in the idea and step away from their commitments. Although there are only a few OBOR projects that have commenced so far, the challenges for China are already mounting. Now of course no one expected OBOR to be built without difficulties here and there, but the issue for China is whether or not it can overcome them. With that said, let us examine some of the early complications that OBOR is currently encountering.

For one, the new Yixin'ou cargo line that connects Spain to China has not provided the expected benefits for some Spanish producers. The longest railway line in the world was touted as a way for companies to cut costs by delivering their products to Asia much faster than sea transport. While the route does cut transportation time from 30 to 18 days, it still does not save Spanish companies all that much when considering that sea transport is cheaper than it has ever been.¹⁷² Not only that, but Spanish producers have found that the environmental conditions along the land route are not optimal for shipping their food products. For instance, olive oils and wines have had to be wrapped in expensive thermal blankets to

¹⁷² Matthew Phillips, "The world has too many ships," *Quartz*, March 17, 2016.

protect their products from exploding during the cold segments of journey.¹⁷³ Even then the blankets cannot guarantee the safety of their products. Additionally, the Yixin'ou cargo line is also plagued with compatibility issues. Along the journey, the trains must make at least two costly stops, once on the China-Kazakhstan border and once at the Belarus-Poland border. The stops are required because the China and Europe's rails, which use the international standard 1.435-meter gauge, are different from the wider 1.520-meter gauge used in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus.¹⁷⁴ At these stops the cargo must be switched onto different trains, thereby greatly reducing the time benefits of the railway. In the case of the Yixin'ou railway, we find that China has run in environmental, economic, and technical issues.

In March, China also hit a speed bump when it learned that not everyone would easily accept its financial backing. Thai Prime Minister Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha announced that Thailand would self-finance a high-speed rail project connecting Bangkok to the provincial city of Nakhon Ratchasima, after it could not finalize negotiations with China.¹⁷⁵ Thailand felt that the interest rate being applied to the \$5 billion project was much too high and not considerate of Thai-Sino relations. This is a major setback for China, which thought countries would be lining up to get a portion of infrastructure investment. The belt and road will be short-lived if more and more countries decide they do not need Beijing's money.

Indonesia's first high speed railway has also been marred by a plethora of political, economic, and technical errors. The \$5 billion HSR, connecting Jakarta and Bandung, broke ground back in January, but was stalled almost immediately after. The project was delayed for eight months due to complications in acquiring the necessary land, inability to get the required regulatory permits, and a lack of funds. Indonesia's Ministry of Transportation accused the joint venture managing the project, Kereta Cepat Indonesia China, of rushing the process so fast that it did not

¹⁷³ Begona Munoz, "It costs twice as much to export olive oil from Spain using China's "One Belt, One Road" railway," *Quartz*, May 18, 2016.

¹⁷⁴ Brendon Hong, "China's Plans to Railroad the West (Literally)," *The Daily Beast*, July 13, 2016.

¹⁷⁵ Nopparat Chaichalearmmonkol, "Thailand Calls Off Deal for China to Finance Railway," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2016.

even file the necessary paperwork for a public railway business license.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, at the time the KCIC broke ground on the project, it only had the permits to work on a few kilometers of the railway. This was due to the fact that the Ministry of Transportation decided to take extra precaution with this project since China's loan has a tenure of 50 years. Funding has largely been an issue because the Chinese banks were slow to release the funds. Although Chinese banks have promised to pay for 75% of the project, they withheld the funds because the land was not yet acquired.¹⁷⁷ On top of all this, development plans were drastically changed only a few weeks into the project. A last-minute design to widen the tracks from 4.6m to 5m was made so that the train speed could be increased from 250km/hour to 350km/hour.¹⁷⁸ The change will mean that the project will likely soar past the original \$5 billion price tag. As if that was not enough, five Chinese railway workers were arrested in April after they were caught drilling in an air base area.¹⁷⁹ This has caused Indonesia to tighten its security on incoming foreigners and increase the public's suspicion of Chinese workers. Lastly for the Indonesian high-speed rail project, it has been called into question as to whether it will even be cost effective for China. In order to win the bid from the Indonesian government, China agreed not to require Indonesia to assume any financial burden, meaning that if the project fails or takes a loss, the entire liability will be on Beijing and the KCIC.

China has also run into some unique issues with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The parties within Pakistan are divided on the economic corridor and are seeking assurances from Prime Minister Sharif. Government officials from the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province have been especially vocal about the lack of transparency in the awarding of contracts and are worried that the prime minister will favor his own province of Punjab over the others. The issue of an unstable legal system and political situation in Pakistan has begun to worry China.

¹⁷⁶ Dewi Kurniawati, "Indonesia's Complicated Relations with China," *Asia Sentinel*, August 5, 2016.

¹⁷⁷ "Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project stalls," *Nikkei Asian Review*, July 28, 2016.

¹⁷⁸ Farida Susanty, "RI's first high-speed railway may be costlier on design change," *The Jakarta Post*, July 11, 2016.

¹⁷⁹ Arientha Primanita, "Govt to tighten supervisions amid arrest of Chinese nationals," *The Jakarta Post*, April 28, 2016.

In less developed countries such as Pakistan, regulations and restrictions on foreign investment can change on a whim. This makes political corruption all the more likely. Xu Ping, partner at the King & Wood Mallesons law firm, which advises clients on foreign investments, warns that untamed political environments “could expose Chinese investors to investment risks, so they must be treated seriously by Chinese businesses.”¹⁸⁰ So it’s no surprise that China is losing patience over the infighting among the various parties in Pakistan and has urged all “relevant parties in Pakistan to strengthen communication and coordination on the CPEC to create favorable conditions for the project.”¹⁸¹

The primary obstacle with the development with CPEC, however, is security. It’s no secret that CPEC’s flagship project, the Gwadar Port, rests in Balochistan, a province that has been plagued by a decades-long insurgency. In August 95 Pakistanis were killed in a suicide bombing in Balochistan’s capital, Quetta. Prime Minister Sharif labeled the attack as an attempt to sabotage CPEC.¹⁸² Unfortunately, Baloch rebels are not the only security threat. The Taliban, East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement, and various other terrorist groups have claimed lives throughout Pakistan. In May a Chinese engineer was targeted in a roadside bomb attack in Karachi. A note found at the scene read, “We will oppose every anti-Sindh project including the China-Pakistan economic corridor.”¹⁸³ Another major issue CPEC must overcome is the resentment and skepticism of everyday Pakistanis. Many do not feel that they are stakeholders in CPEC. Instead, they believe they are being pushed aside so that outsiders can reap the untapped opportunities that their country has to offer. Due to port construction in Gwadar, people have been dislocated from their homes and fishermen are no longer allowed to fish in or around the harbor that their livelihoods depend on.¹⁸⁴ Of all of OBOR’s early projects, CPEC presents the

¹⁸⁰ Shangjing Li, “One Belt, One Road, Many Risks,” *Asian Legal Business*, December 18, 2015.

¹⁸¹ Imtiaz Ahmad, ‘Pak-China economic corridor problems over disputed Kashmir region,’ *Hindustan Times*, January 11, 2016.

¹⁸² Usman Shahid, “Balochistan: The Troubled Heart of the CPEC,” *The Diplomat*, August 23, 2016.

¹⁸³ Jon Boone, “Chinese engineer and driver injured in Karachi separatist bombing,” *The Guardian*, May 30, 2016.

¹⁸⁴ Sattar Khan, “Gwadar – Pakistan’s impoverished colony or an economic hub?” *Deutsche Welle*, August 14, 2016.

most numerous and most severe. Achieving success in Pakistan would certainly demonstrate Beijing's resolve and conviction to see OBOR through.

Myanmar, a vital member of the Maritime Road, is also proving to be a thorn in China's side. In 2015, China was given the right to begin the early phase of construction on the Dawei deep-water port and economic zone. The deep-water port will provide China with another alternative route to the Malacca Strait and Myanmar with a much needed development and infrastructure. Stakeholders on both sides are cautiously optimistic about the project because the recent Sino-Myanmar relationship has not bode well for successful cooperation. The relationship began to take a rocky turn in 2011 after Myanmar's President Thein Stein suspended the \$3.6 billion Myitsone Dam because it was against "the will of the people."¹⁸⁵ The dam project had been met with fierce protests from environmentalists and local villagers, who were worried about the negative impacts that the project would have on their lives. Public opposition of Chinese development projects continued in 2014 when Myanmar's government cancelled a \$20 billion railway connecting Yunnan to Myanmar's western coast.¹⁸⁶ Once again government officials felt that the project had more disadvantages than advantages and that pursuing the project was not in line with the will of the people. With this new deep-water sea port it appears unlikely that China will be able to avoid public opposition. Locals are already speaking out against the Dawei port because many will have to be relocated and they do not feel they have been apart of the decision-making process. Surveys conducted by the Dawei Development Association found that villagers believe the compensation offered has been too low, construction could be harmful to the environment, and that families are being relocated to places with less arable farmland.¹⁸⁷

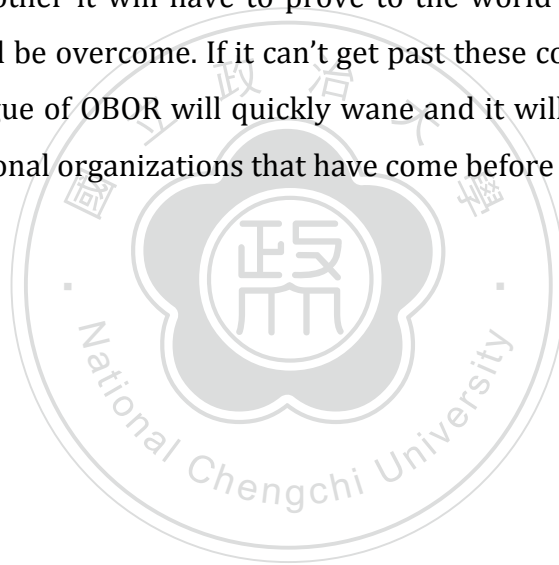
The troubled projects above present us with a better understanding of the current micro-level challenges that China faces with OBOR. On a macro-level we can

¹⁸⁵ Yun Sun, "Has China Lost Myanmar?" *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2013.

¹⁸⁶ Shannon Tiezzi, "Chinese Company Wins Contract for Deep Sea Port in Myanmar," *The Diplomat*, January 1, 2016.

¹⁸⁷ Jeremy Mullins, "Imagining Dawei," *Myanmar Times*, October 2, 2015.

see that Chinese enterprises are encountering a variety of potentially debilitating complications including those that are technical, political, environmental, economic, and concerned with security. Xu Fengxin, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, believes that the reason OBOR faces such a wide variety of challenges is due to “the unbalanced economic development of countries along One Belt, One Road,” each country is “opening to different degrees, and have different import-export trade and political situations.”¹⁸⁸ Having to adapt to and learn the intricacies of such diverse situations creates more opportunities for Chinese enterprises to make costly mistakes. While the projects above are troublesome, they present China with its first true test. For if OBOR is to change the way regions interact with one another it will have to prove to the world that these significant challenges can indeed be overcome. If it can’t get past these complications, then the excitement and intrigue of OBOR will quickly wane and it will merely fade into the alphabet soup of regional organizations that have come before it.



¹⁸⁸ Charlie Campbell, “China’s Xi Jinping Talks Up ‘One Belt, One Road’ as Keynote Project Fizzles,” *Time*, August 18, 2016.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

In the beginning of this paper, I embarked on a journey to explore the phenomenon of interregionalism, a field of study that most of its scholars admit is underdeveloped and lacking consensus. As discussed in the first chapter, researchers are hinting that there is a new paradigm shift currently taking place in the way countries and regions are cooperating. The most recent paradigm of 'new regionalism' is losing its relevance. At the same time, many prominent interregionalism scholars are now calling for the field of study to adopt a comparative lens through which we can search for new models and distinctive approaches to regional integration. To follow these suggestions of these senior scholars, I set out to use a comparative approach to discover evidence of whether or not a paradigm shift is truly upon us. To do this, this study focused its attention on OBOR as a potential symbol of a different 'New Classical regionalism' and aspired to answer the following questions:

- Is OBOR unique in its functionality as an interregional dialogue when compared to interregional agreements of the waning 'new regionalism' paradigm?
- Is OBOR just one of many new megaregional agreements – like the Trans Pacific Partnership – or does it possess distinctive qualities from its counterparts?
- Does OBOR signal a paradigm shift from 'new regionalism' to a contemporary 'New Classical regionalism'?

First, in order to design a comparative analysis, this paper chose to use Ruland's six functions of interregionalism as variables of comparison for their flexibility in comparing interregional dialogues from different time periods. Next, to find other interregional dialogues through which to compare with OBOR, three characteristics were sought out. First, we needed comparative cases that represent the paradigm of 'new regionalism.' Second, we needed interregional dialogues, like OBOR, that also

fell under Hanggi's 'megaregional' categorization. Third, it was necessary to have a megaregional agreement from the same time period as OBOR to discern how it compares with its contemporaries. In meeting these requirements, APEC and the TPP were chosen to compare against OBOR.

After assessing the comparisons between OBOR and the new regionalism agreements of APEC and the TPP in chapter five, we can finally answer our research questions. With regards to its functionality as an interregional dialogue, OBOR certainly differs from the past (APEC) and current (TPP) cases of new regionalism. The megaregional agreements begin to diverge when we observe the liberal institutionalist functions of institution-building, agenda-setting, and rationalizing. For starters, the institutions that have been created are quite different. APEC and the TPP have what can be categorized as soft institutional structures because they are made up of a series of forums including committees and working groups that make decisions by consensus. With OBOR, we see a hard institution in the AIIB, which is more structured and makes decisions by majority vote. The purposes of these institutions are also different. APEC and the TPP aim to implement new trade policies, while the AIIB serves as OBOR's main funding mechanism. The differences between the two groups continue when we examine their agendas. APEC and the TPP's agendas concentrate on advancing the software side of regional integration, whereas OBOR's agenda is heavily weighted on the hardware side. Lastly, as rationalizers, we see that APEC and the TPP seek to optimize the efficiency of multilateral forums. On the other hand, OBOR's rationalizing function emphasizes giving a larger voice to developing and emerging nations in multilateral forums.

The social constructivist function of collective-identity building presents interesting observations between the three megaregionals. Firstly, the TPP is the only agreement of the three that does not attempt to fulfill the identity building function. When comparing APEC and OBOR, both have had the same dream of building a community based shared interests and an idea of a shared destiny of their members. Both the United States and China have taken the lead role in pushing for a community in their respective interregional dialogues. However, the reasons behind building a community differ for the United States and China. The United States

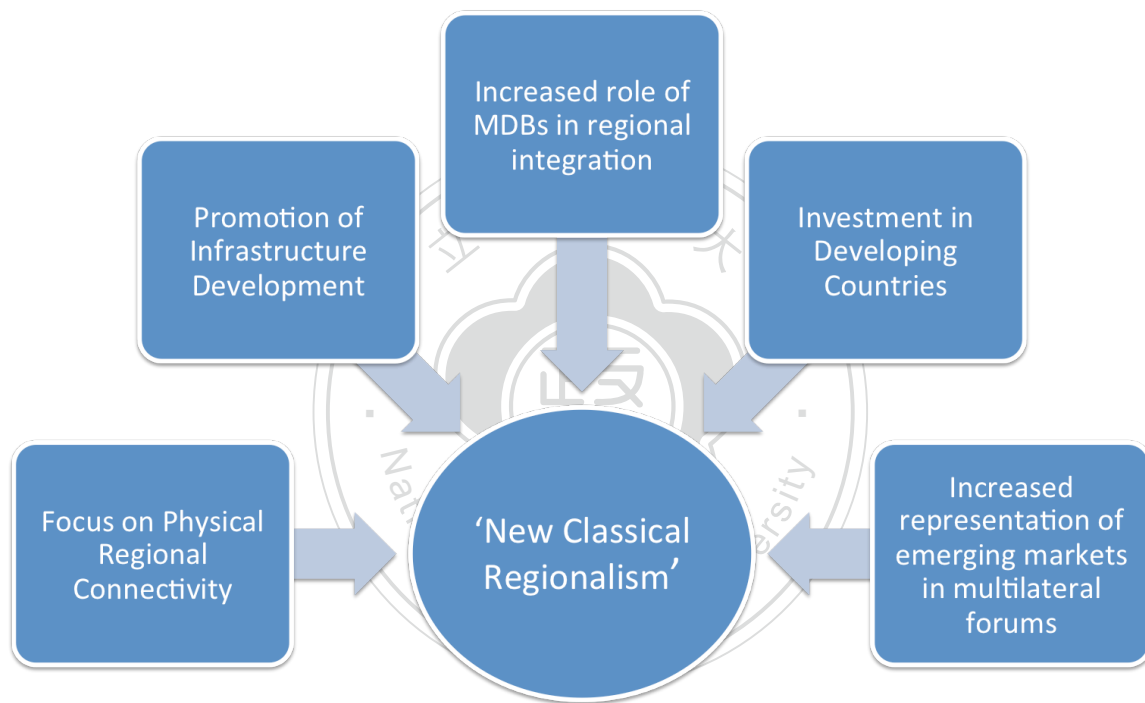
pushed for a 'Pacific Community' so that it could better institutionalize APEC. Now with the 'Community of Common Destiny,' China hopes to gain the trust of the other OBOR members.

Finally, with the last function of development promotion, we observe some of the most glaring differences between OBOR and the new regionalism megaregionals. The most important differences are that APEC and the TPP's capacity-building projects are more 'process' oriented, underfunded, and not really a priority of either megaregional dialogue. Thus, neither have produced many projects with visible results. OBOR, however, cannot afford to produce lackluster achievements in this area. Through the AIIB and other financial institutions, China is already putting hundreds of millions of dollars toward dozens of actual concrete projects. Another difference in development promotion is that the goals of APEC and the TPP – sustainable development, disaster preparedness, poverty reduction, and gender equality – must be a priority in order to pursue a capacity building project. Yet, for OBOR, its development projects are honed in on infrastructure without such binding conditions. Instead, China is more concerned with promoting development with the goals of physical regional connectivity and supply chain advancements.

With all of this, we now arrive to the last and most important question: Is OBOR signaling a shift from the current paradigm of regional integration? At this point in OBOR's short history, we cannot yet declare for certain. While OBOR clearly operates distinctively from the megaregionals of 'new regionalism,' it is still too early for us to measure the success of OBOR or the TPP like we can with APEC. For OBOR to truly serve as the spark that ignites a new paradigm, it will have to be successful in its endeavors, at least to a degree. In order for a new paradigm of thinking to truly be accepted, it must be convincing enough for others to adopt it and implement it themselves; creating a ripple effect that eventually leads to the new line of thinking being accepted as common practice. Without achieving some degree of positive results, there will be no reason for other countries and regions to pursue the same principles laid out by OBOR. However, as was observed in chapter six, OBOR is already encountering potentially crippling challenges in some of its early projects. If it cannot learn how maneuver past its technical, economic, political,

and security issues, then not only will OBOR likely fail, but other regions will be unlikely to follow in its China's footsteps. While this paper acknowledges the limits in the research due to the fact that OBOR and the TPP are still quite young, all is not lost. We are now able to theorize what a 'New Classical regionalism' might look like if OBOR does produce positive results in the future.

Figure 7. Prospective Characteristics of a 'New Classical Regionalism' Paradigm



Source: Created by the author

The promotion of infrastructure and physical connectivity is bound to be a major theme of regional integration going forward. It has already been found that the effects of a more efficient supply chain on the global GDP would far outweigh those of reducing all tariff barriers. Furthermore, the AIIB has already spurred the ADB and Japan to shift attention toward spending on infrastructure. If current OBOR projects produce positive results, we can expect other multilateral organizations to adopt this thinking. Driven by this demand for infrastructure, new and old

multilateral development banks will play a much greater role in the international financing system than they ever have. MDB's will serve as the primary mechanisms for the selection and financing of these projects. With regards to the projects that are chosen, the majority will be in developing countries throughout Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. 'New Classical Regionalism' will also be characterized by increasing the representation in multilateral forums. Once again, the AIIB is already stimulating the United States Congress to finally vote on governance changes in the IMF that will offer its emerging market members a larger influence.

While this proclamation of an impending 'New Classical Regionalism' is tentative, this thesis provides us with a starting point to build upon and further refine the characteristics of a new interregionalism paradigm. This paper has provided evidence that the potential for OBOR to change the narrative on regionalism already exists, but there is still much research to be done. Over the next two years it will be essential to monitor the developments along the belt and road. It is imperative that China achieve some early success in order to galvanize the trust of OBOR members to fully engage in the initiative. If China cannot produce some modicum of visible short-term results, OBOR will be at risk of being deemed a failed initiative and quickly fizzle out. Therefore, we must continue to update the OBOR's 'functional scorecard' to keep track of whether China's initiative has fulfilled the functions that it set out to do. With that said, the journey toward a new regional paradigm has only just begun. There is still a long road (and belt) ahead.

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