China’s One Belt, One Road and AIIB Vision:
Implications for the Middle East

5 May 2016

President Xi Jinping’s One Belt, One Road (OBOR) vision is, according to Chinese media communiqués, an attempt to revive the pre-modern Silk Route. But whilst the former, according to historian Valerie Hanson, had primarily been a conduit of cultural and religious exchange, the modern-day iteration is meant to transform West Asia economically, and better tie it in with the Chinese manufacturing powerhouse through ambitious infrastructural projects. In fact, President Xi’s vision had been preceded in 2014 by Premier Li Keqiang’s statement at the Bao’ao Forum where he signalled China’s intent on “collectively forging Asia’s future development”. Chinese policy-makers have since gone to great length to explain that the OBOR would in no way overlap with China’s contribution to the SCO or its on-going collaboration with ASEAN, but in fact create an umbrella for multi-track business and security platforms.

Funding for fast-track rail links between China, West Asia (Middle East) and onwards to Europe is to be provided by the newly-established Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). Headquartered in Beijing, the AIIB has been initially endowed with paid-up capital of US$10 billion, almost double the amount of the Asia Development Bank, which is led by Japan and the USA. In October 2014, representatives from 21 Asian countries had signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Establishing the AIIB, and by the end of March 2015, almost 50 countries from all around the world had filed applications to join as founding members. These include arch-enemies Israel and Iran, with both of which Beijing currently enjoys warm relations.

Following the British lead in March 2015 to engage with this Chinese initiative, several Western governments (and also other pro-US allies) decided to defy Washington, and join the AIIB, including Australia, France and Germany. Even Vietnam and the Philippines, which share concerns over Chinese claims to large portions of the South China Sea, have joined in. For the time being, however, the United States and Japan have chosen to keep their distance. Middle Eastern states, however, have piled in and the list that are either members or would-be partners of the AIIB now includes Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, all of which share close security ties with Washington. China’s policies arguably are having an impact on the behaviour of neighbouring and other Asian countries.

So, in this context, the purpose of this international conference is to explore the implications of OBOR and the AIIB for the Middle East (West Asia) as a whole, and try and address a number of strategic questions arising from China’s policies. And ask in addition, do the strategic imperatives that underpin the OBOR and AIIB have anything to do with the political dynamics of Xinjiang or the spread of radical Islam in Central Asia? If so, how might that impact on Middle Eastern stakeholders’ attitudes towards China’s nascent global leadership narrative? Moreover, given that Russia sees much of Central Asia and West Asia as vital to its global interests, and has been promoting its own plans for an Eurasian Economic Union, the question should be asked, are these plans likely to clash or be subsumed by the AIIB?
Programme

Each presentation will last 20 mins followed by one key Chair question (text read in advance) for 5 mins and then free-flowing discussion for 20 mins. Chairs are to very briefly introduce presenters at the outset.

Invitation to paper presenters subject to submission of a chapter draft of no less than 4,000 words by 1 April 2016

Panel Chairs may wish to contribute instead a 500-word commentary broadly addressing the panel theme

Thursday, 5 May 2015, Jubilee Campus, Si Yuan Centre A18

09:00-09:05 Event Housekeeping – Prof. Niv HORESH (CPI Director)

09:05 - 09:10 School Welcome – Prof. Steve TSANG (SCCS, HoS)

09:10 - 09:15 Faculty Endorsement – Prof. Todd LANDMAN (PVC, Social Sciences)

09:15 – 10:00 Panel 1:

Prof. Guohua YAN (Vice President, Beijing Foreign Studies University [BFSU]) – "What role does the BFSU new Silk Road Institute play within the OBOR vision?"  

Chair: Dr. Hongyi LAI (CPI).

10:00 - 10:45 Panel 2:

Dr. Sara HSU (State University of New York at New Palz) – “Do AIIB financials and objectives stand up to a Western scholar’s scrutiny?”

Chair: Prof. Lina SONG (CPI)

10:45 – 11:00 Coffee Break and Light Vegetarian Snacks
11:00-11:45 Panel 3

Dr. Neil QUILIAM (Chatham House) – “AIIB, oil and the future of the Persian Gulf: Update version”

Chair: Mr Philip GATER-SMITH (Durham University).

11:45-12:30 Panel 4:

Dr. Guy BURTON (University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus) – “How do Palestinians perceive of China’s rise?”

Chair: Dr Scott PACEY (CPI).

12:30-13:30 Lunch at NCTL, Jubilee Campus

13:30 - 14:15 Panel 5:

Dr Michal MEIDAN (Chatham House) – “Will OBOR improve Chinese energy security?”

Chair: Dr Mohammed SHAREEF (University of Exeter).

14:15 - 15:00 Panel 6:

Prof. Yu WANG (Peking University) – “Israel and China: Possibilities and hurdles of cultural and economic interactions?”

Chair: Afzal ASHRAF (RUSI).

15:00 - 15:15 Coffee Break and Light Vegetarian Snacks

15:15 - 16:00 Panel 7:

Prof. Yitzhak SHICHOR (Hebrew University) "Reserves and Reservations: China’s OBOR and AIIB Offensives and Their Implications for the Middle East”

Chair: Ms Gemma O’NIELL (FCO).
16:00 – 16:45 Panel 7:

Prof. Andrew SCOBELL (RAND Corporation) – “What the Middle East means to China”

Chair: Dr Tim SUMMERS (Chatham House).

16:45 Concluding Remarks: “From the Silk Route to where?”

Prof. Anoush EHTESHAMI (Director, al-Sabah Programme).

17:00 Taxi Transfer to Train Station / Airport, or

[OPTIONAL] 18:00 Farewell Halal Dinner at Marrakesh in Town Centre and Tour of Old Town

http://marrakeshnottingham.co.uk/about.asp