

Ukrainian-Chinese Relations in the framework of Belt and Road Initiative: perspectives, problems, and cultures interactions

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The article is devoted to the disclosure of the main problems and the definition of prospects in Ukrainian-Chinese relations within the Belt and Road Initiative. The main emphasis is placed on the problems in the field of politics, economy, and infrastructure, as well as the place of Ukraine in the Belt and Road Initiative. Also, attention is paid to the development of cultural relations between Ukraine and China and the prospects that it can bring.

Keywords: China, Ukraine, Belt and Road Initiative, cultural interactions

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Introduction

As a part of Eastern Europe, Ukraine is located at the intersection of “paths” and interests of different countries that expect significant investment in the implementation of projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. For Ukraine, China’s new international policy is not only a certain amount of opportunities but also a serious challenge in determining its future foreign policy in the face of ongoing aggression by the Russian Federation. The Belt and Road Initiative has the potential to help the Ukrainian economy emerge from the protracted crisis by diversifying opportunities and development paths. For Ukraine, which has made its European choice and aspires to join the EU, it is important to take into account the strategic nature of European-Chinese relations and build its relations with China by achieving cooperation between European and Chinese projects. China’s development of economic and infrastructure projects in Central Asia means that traffic on the Europe-China route will continue to grow. But it is not necessary to speak unequivocally only about the prospects. It is also important to

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note what challenges Ukraine will have to take to achieve maximum efficiency within the Belt and Road Initiative and what it may face in the framework of this cooperation.

What the Belt and Road Initiative is and what is it for Ukraine?

In the fall of 2013, during his state visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced China's intention to create a global international project uniting the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – One Belt One Road (OBOR) or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2016, when Chinese governors considered that the concept of “initiative” would be more appropriate for understanding the essence of the project and would not cause misunderstandings and controversies. In November of the same year, the third plenary meeting of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party transformed the Belt and Road Initiative into a national strategy. In 2017, this initiative was included in the Constitution of the PRC (Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 2018).

As of March 2021, China has signed 200 documents of cooperation on the joint construction of the BRI with 141 countries (out of 27 European countries, including Ukraine) and 31 international organizations (Belt and Road Portal, 2021). The essence of this Chinese initiative is to find, form, and promote a new model of international cooperation and development by strengthening the existing regional and global mechanisms and structures of interaction with China's participation.

Based on the continuation and development of the spirit of the ancient Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative calls for the development of new economic partnerships, stimulating the economic development of the countries involved, strengthening cultural exchanges and ties in all areas between different civilizations, and promoting peace and sustainable development. In the preamble of “Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice, and China's Contribution.” It is stated that “The initiative is a Chinese program whose goal is to maintain an open world economic system, and achieve diversified, independent, balanced, and sustainable development, and also a Chinese proposal intended to advance regional cooperation, strengthen communications between civilizations, and safeguard world peace and stability” (Office of the Leading Group, 2017: 1-2).

Perspectives & Problems

The place and role of Ukraine in the BRI corridors being created today are unclear. Each of the three mainland routes – northern (China-Mongolia-Russia), central (“New Eurasian land bridge” through Kazakhstan-Russia-Belarus-Poland), and southern (“New Silk Road” through Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran) Turkey) – bypasses our territory. Ukraine can take part in them but as a voluntary investor.

One of the key problems in the fruitful development of mutually beneficial relations between Ukraine and China is military aggression by the Russian Federation. Given this situation, the issue of diversification of transport and transit connections for Ukraine has gained more than ever actual value. Therefore, the New Silk Road initiative offers Ukraine a very real alternative. But the Chinese side did not initially consider Ukraine as a participant in the project. And only in September 2015 in Beijing, as part of a meeting of the intergovernmental subcommittee on trade, the Ukrainian side managed to convince China to include Ukraine in the New Silk Road project.

The issue of Ukraine's participation in an alternative overland route to China bypassing Russia became especially acute for Ukraine in January 2016. In the conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian transit war initiated by the Russian side, Ukrainian transit through Russian territory was blocked on January 4, 2016 (Russia's "transit war," 2018).

That is why it is so important for Ukraine to support China's development of the Trans-Caspian route, which connects Europe with Kazakhstan and China through the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea. In 2017, a plan was signed between Ukraine and China, in which the parties agreed to jointly promote the implementation of cooperation projects and the BRI initiative within this route (Action Plan, 2017).

He has already allowed Ukraine to circumvent Russia's ban on the transit of Ukrainian goods by sending goods through the Black Sea, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. This indicates that BRI has great potential to develop markets, increase prosperity and strengthen stability throughout the Euro-Asian space. However, this route is not essential for cooperation between China and European countries and has low profitability and takes more time to transport goods, which slows down the development of trade and economic ties. Nevertheless, according to the Customs Service of Ukraine, in 2020, China became the leader in trade with Ukraine. Its share in foreign trade in 2020 was 13.1% or \$ 15.4 million in monetary terms. Thus, Ukraine imported \$ 8.3 billion worth of goods from China and exported \$ 7.1 billion (State Customs Service of Ukraine, 2021). This makes China our main economic partner. Fruitful cooperation can increase the volume of trade. According to the World Bank, in the long run, until 2030, by participating in the initiative, Ukraine will be able to increase exports by \$ 1.4-1.7 billion more than expected. At the same time, the additional increase in imports will be 4.2-4.7 billion dollars, which in turn will lead to an increase in the trade deficit (The World Bank, 2019).

Other prospects that can be traced include the expansion of access for Ukrainian agricultural products to Chinese markets, the promotion of investment projects for the development of transport infrastructure, the development of the energy and financial sectors, e-commerce, and tourism.

One of the possible future problems that may arise with the cooperation of Ukraine and China is that Ukraine may fall into a debt trap. China has repeatedly been accused by experts and governments of various countries of implementing debt traps to increase its geopolitical power. In this case, of course, it is important to note that the Ukrainian government should not consider Chinese investment as a solution to the budget deficit. It is necessary to establish cooperation on mutually beneficial terms based on mutual understanding, because only in this way will we be able to achieve success in the implementation of joint projects.

Also, the consequences of lifting the moratorium on land in Ukraine could be a serious problem. Even though this is a requirement of the IMF, Ukraine delayed this moment. In cooperation with China, this could attract additional investment and at the same time make Ukraine hostage to a situation in which the land will be in the hands of international corporations or Chinese companies and will no longer be the chief manager of its agricultural territories.

Cultures Interactions: Up-to-date Overview

Cultural relations between Ukraine and China have been developing since Soviet times. After Ukraine proclaimed its independence, these relations deepened. In 2001, after a meeting of the commission on cooperation in the field of culture, the result was the signing of a plan for cultural cooperation for 2002-2006. This was repeated in 2009 as well. (Embassy of Ukraine, 2020).

Now, Ukraine and China continue to actively develop mutual relations in the field of culture and education. The latter has been especially emphasized by both sides lately. On June 23, 2017, between the Minister of Education of China Chen Baosheng and the Minister of Education of Ukraine Lilia Grynevych, negotiations were held during the 2nd meeting of the subcommittees of the Chinese-Ukrainian Intergovernmental Commission on Cooperation in Education, as a result of which an agreement was concluded to develop bilateral cooperation in the field of education. Thus, the work that had begun between Ukraine and China was continued.

China's education minister stressed that "the development of cooperation between the university is very important." In turn, Lilia Grynevych emphasized that "the first direction is the development of direct ties between the universities of Ukraine and China. 67 Ukrainian universities have already signed cooperation agreements with more than 200 universities, institutes, colleges and enterprises of China" (China, 2017). One of these universities is the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, where the Ukraine-China Innovation Center has been operating since 2019.

On December 5, 2017, in Kyiv, the Program of Cultural Cooperation was signed between the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine and the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China for 2018-2022. The parties reached an agreement on strengthening cultural exchange within the BRI: supporting and strengthening direct contacts between cultural and artistic institutions of states, strengthening the development of bilateral cooperation in the field of film and television production, strengthening direct contacts between library and museum institutions of states, intensifying cooperation in the field of protecting cultural heritage, interest in the development of cultural and creative industries (The program, 2017).

In our opinion, an equally important element of cultural interaction today is the activity of Confucius Institutes – a system of research and educational institutions to promote the Chinese language, culture, and art – on the territory of Ukraine. This is one of the most promising areas of cooperation between Ukraine and China in the humanitarian sphere. They have established themselves as an effective platform for learning the Chinese language and cultural exchanges and providing an opportunity for many Ukrainians to receive education in China for free. In the context of deepening ties between Ukraine and China, the work of Confucius institutions is necessary. They are an effective tool for cultural diplomacy between China and Ukraine and the promotion of Ukrainian culture in the world. Confucius institutions not only contribute to the popularization of Confucian views in Ukraine but also improve understanding of China and Chinese culture. And this, in turn, has a positive effect on other areas of cooperation, such as economic, military-technical, political, and strategic (Sokol, 2016).

Conclusions

In conclusion, we would like to say that obviously cooperation between Ukraine and China promises many achievements and successes, but at the same time, it can lead to some negative consequences. It is necessary to thoroughly study the possibilities of cooperation with the PRC, consciously formulate a strategy and actively cooperate on a mutually beneficial basis. It should be noted that the development of cultural interactions between Ukraine and China is developing smoothly but steadily. We believe that improving relations in the field of culture and education will lead to the achievement of mutual understanding, and as a result, improved cooperation in other areas.

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