

China's Relationships with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus: Impact for the EAEU and the EU

The following post is a product of my preparations for [a workshop at UCL \(University College London\)](#) on China's new Silk Road—the myriad of infrastructure projects, bilateral agreements, and huge sums of Chinese financing that top Beijing officials say will lead to a “community of common destiny” that is “[g]uided by the [ancient] Silk Road spirit” ([Xi 2017](#); [Wang 2018](#)).

This post asks one central question, which branches out to two additional ones. (1) What are the characteristics of China's relationships with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus? Next, (2) how do these relationships affect the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)? Inaugurated 1 January 2015, EAEU is an international union building project. Membership is based upon legally binding international treaties, which empower regulatory institutions to encourage economic integration according to “universal integration principles” ([Russian Federation 2013](#)). Its main function is the coordination of macro-economic policy among members. The end goal of the EAEU is to lead to “a Russia-led political–economic bloc that would become a political–economic pole in the multipolar international order,” a Eurasian Union ([Kaczmarek 2017, 1029](#); [Putin 2011](#)). The EAEU has five members: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia. And the third question, (3) how do these relations affect Russia's, Ukraine's, and Belarus's interaction with the European Union (EU)? The EU is an economic and political union between 28 European countries. It is the largest trade block in the world ([European Union 2018](#)).

The Arguments

In response to these questions, this post argues China's relationships with Belarus and Ukraine are asymmetric. Ukraine and Belarus are more invested than China is in their relations. The Russia-China relationship is

one of caution and complementarity. Russia is cautious to not be overshadowed by China's gaining economic and political strength. At the same time, cooperation, particularly in Central Asia, suits both countries' foreign policy aims. A good example of how their relations complement one another is to assess the impact of these relationships on the EAEU.

Russia-China relations have the potential to make the EAEU stronger. If Russia can make that EAEU a forum where members' needs for relations with China are easy to conduct, then it is a stronger union. That is, if the EAEU is geared for business with China, union members will do more of that business with China in accordance with EAEU rules. Belarus's relations with China is an example of this issue. If the EAEU can reform to suit its needs for interaction with China, then Belarus supports it. Otherwise, Belarus is ready to negotiate EAEU rules to engage with China. Ukraine continues to be a stain on the EAEU's helmsman, Russia. If it can thrive outside the EAEU's orbit, it serves as an example to others. For China's part, its engagement with the EAEU is dualist. Beijing is ready to cooperate with the EAEU. At the same time, it is also ready to deal with states at the bilateral level, whether or not the outcome conflicts with EAEU regulations.

Finally, China's relationships with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have differing impacts upon the EU. Belarus is more inclined to establish better relations with the EU in order to have easier access to markets for Chinese goods. Ukraine wants to use its deepening ties to the EU to enhance its relations with China, but it is still unclear exactly how. The Russia-China relationship affects how Russia listens to the EU. If Russia gets what it wants from China—a good price for deliveries of its natural gas and financial aid—then EU efforts to leverage Russia will be less effective. If Russia does not get what it wants, then it will continue to rely heavily on its ties to Europe. Overall, an increased Chinese presence in the EU's borders may impact the spread of EU values and practices to its borderlands.

Relevance and Context

But first, why are these questions relevant? China's activities have current and future implications for foreign and domestic policy in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Russia's vast borders stretch from China, straddle Central Asia, and join with Europe. It sits atop the ancient Silk Road land route from China to Europe. By mere virtue of location, China's new Silk Road land developments, such as railroads and highways, will have political and economic consequences for Russia and its neighbours. For more than a decade, Belarusian officials have tried to convince their Chinese counterparts that Belarus is a gateway for Chinese trade into Europe ([Tozik 2005](#)). Not until Chinese President Xi Jinping's announcement of a new Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) in 2013 from China to Europe did Belarus make much sense as an outpost for Chinese business interests ([Witte 2013](#); [Braga 2016](#)). Since the 2014 breakdown of relations between Russia and Ukraine, the latter has made efforts to sell itself as “a significant element in the multi-vector railway network slowly emerging across Eurasia” as part of China’s new Silk Road, which Beijing now refers to officially as the Belt and Road Initiative ([Daly 2016](#); [Lyalikov 2016](#); [Goncharuk et al. 2016, 32–35](#)).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be summed up as an infrastructure mega-project. It is an ambitious, Chinese-led project to expand a series of rail links from China to Europe and coordinate them with international seaports and maritime trade (reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road). The oddly named “Road” component consists of ports and shipping facilities with East Asia as the central maritime trading hub. The vast trade from this maritime road is supposed to integrate with the railways of the “Belt” component, which will move goods overland rather than crossing oceans to reach Europe. The entire project is based upon China’s bilateral commitments with partner countries. The BRI has legal basis and there has been no institutionalisation. China has signed more than 100 memoranda of cooperation on the BRI with 86 countries and international organizations

([China Daily 2017a](#)). In practice, the BRI is “an umbrella term for what effectively is bilateral economic engagement on Chinese terms” ([Kaczmariski 2017, 1028](#)).

The EAEU and the EU both hold potential promise and problems for the BRI. In turn, the fortunes of the BRI will impact bilateral relationships with China. The EU represents the largest single market in the world ([European Union 2018](#)). Additional trade routes to the EU are a driving motivation for the new Silk Road. In Beijing-official-speak, new trade routes falls under “increased trade connectivity” ([Xi 2017](#)). Although the EAEU does have its own markets, trade volumes are almost seven times less than within the EU ([Giucci and Mdinardze 2017, 7](#)). The EAEU represents more of a passageway for the BRI, rather than a destination. All the same, BRI developments will enhance intra-EAEU trade. The EU and the EAEU are normative—that is, rule making—trade blocs ([Kaczmariski 2017, 1031](#)). If regulations can be enforced within the two unions, they have the potential to enhance or hinder trade along the BRI.

China's Relationships with Ukraine, Belarus and Russia

China's relationships with Ukraine and Belarus are not unique. They are asymmetric relationships; both will progress at China's convenience. China's engagement with regimes in these countries is motivated by its core security concerns: (a) the securitisation of key resources (primarily energy) and (b) access to markets (foreign trade). Chinese economic success—and by extension much of the ruling elite's legitimacy—is built on open access to world trade and energy markets ([Zhao 2009](#); [Taylor 2017](#); [Roberts 2018](#)). A central role of Chinese foreign policy, then, is to maintain access to markets and strategic resources. Thus, Belarus represents a hub for BRI trade flows “at the juncture between the [EAEU] and the European Union” ([Xinhua 2018a](#)). However, there are other potential gateways, such as Ukraine, Georgia, Turkey, and Poland—an EU member ([Yeliseyev](#)

[2013](#); [Global Rail News 2017](#)). Ukraine is a source of military technology and food security for China ([Nanning Evening News 2014](#); [Ramani 2015](#)). Neither state is plentiful with strategic resources, such as Russia or Kazakhstan. In general, Ukraine and Belarus are of interest to China, but they are not vital, because there are alternatives.

It is Ukraine and Belarus that need China. Belarus needs China as a source of finance and as a market for its potash fertiliser ([Manyonok 2016](#); [Filipau 2016](#); [Reuters 2016](#)). In particular, Minsk hopes China will relieve over-reliance on Russia's market and financial support ([Wilson 2015](#)). And not all China-Belarus joint projects are trouble free. Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko spoke of dissatisfaction over some projects due to delays on behalf of Chinese contractors ([Yezhednevnik 2018](#)). There are recurrent issues over the quality of Chinese construction and industrial equipment ([Shraibman 2014](#); [Rudnik 2018](#)). But Belarus would be hard pressed to find a more willing lender elsewhere.

Ukraine needs China for financial assistance, but also as a market for military hardware and agricultural goods. Recently, doubts have arisen in Kyiv to how far cooperation with China will go. Likely as a symbolic gesture to Russia, China has excluded Ukraine from its 16+1 framework ([Przychodniak 2018](#)). The framework groups 16 Central East European countries to coordinate investment with the 1 China. This may be a subtle message to Moscow that Beijing still sees Ukraine as part of Russia's sphere of influence, rather than in the EU's sphere of Central East Europe. Ukraine made efforts to join the framework. However, China's ambassador to Ukraine said that Ukraine would feature as part of the BRI and would not be part of 16+1. All the same, Ukraine welcomes Chinese joint projects ([Kyiv Post 2018](#)). Therefore, Belarus and Ukraine need China more than China needs them.

By contrast, China's relationship with Russia is unique by definition. Russia shares a border and checkered colonial and Cold War histories with China.

The contemporary China-Russia relationship is cautious, but complementary; cautious on the part of Russia, and complementary for both partners' foreign policy aims ([Sangar 2018](#); [Kaczmarek 2015](#)). The challenge for Russia is to remain a relevant world power. The fear is becoming what former US presidential advisor and diplomat Zbigniew Brzezinski ([1998](#)) called a “black hole,” outshone by Europe (the EU and its allies) in the west and China in the east. Russia aims for China to become the eastern balancer to its over-reliance on European markets and for China to be its lender of last resort. After western countries imposed sanctions on Russia for aggression in Ukraine, Chinese officials said they would support Russia in times of hardship ([RT 2014](#)).

Chinese scholars see Russia as a declining, but still influential power ([Wong 2018](#)). This influence is of particular importance in Central Asia, which China still views as Russia's sphere of influence ([Sangar 2018, 208](#)). Central Asia is the location for much of the “belt” element of the entire BRI project. The region also contains the EAEU. In addition, Russia itself is a source of strategic resources. In this context, China wants Russia to be its political partner in Central Asia and a reliable, rear supplier—like Canada is to the US. This dynamic is such that in Central Asia, China accepts Russian political and military primacy, while Russia accepts Chinese economic predominance ([Sangar 2018, 208](#); [Lo 2008, 92](#)). Thus, while Russia is cautious of how to approach China and stay relevant, the relationship is complementary to either's foreign policy aims, too, because both are willing to cooperate along clear lines in the important region of Central Asia—China oversees trade and investment within the BRI, and Russia retains influence over politics and security throughout the EAEU.

How These Relationships Impact the EAEU

China's relationships with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus impact the EAEU differently. The Ukraine relationship strains the ties that bind the EAEU. The Russia-China relationship has the potential to bind the EAEU stronger

together. Belarus-China relations both test and support the EAEU. For its part, China sees the EAEU is only as strong as the sum of its parts.

The EAEU is Russia's pet project. Trade stimulus from the BRI may improve the EAEU's chances of longevity. Putin envisions the EAEU as a Russian vehicle for remaining a world power and for taking advantage of China's rise. Russia seeks to become an indispensable player—a vital middleman as Bobo Lo ([2015](#); [2017](#)) argues—for both China and the EU in the Eurasian region. Eurasia is loosely defined by Bruno Maçães ([2018](#)) as countries with one foot in Europe and the other in Asia; Eurasia includes all the members of the EAEU. This is the essence of the “Greater Eurasia” project proclaimed by Putin on 17 June 2016. It is to create a regulatory treaty framework—in which the EAEU plays a central role—to lock Russia into a “comprehensive trade and economic partnership in Eurasia with the participation of the European Union states and China” ([Putin 2016](#)). This way Russia becomes both a key Chinese and EU player and one of the permanent arbiters of Eurasian politics and trade. In such a scenario, Eurasian regimes get to participate in BRI trade, because Russia, the EU, and China say so.

The Ukraine-China relationship is an on-going demonstration to other EAEU members. When it comes to trade and investment, Ukraine serves as an example that China is always willing to engage bilaterally—without Russia. The 2014 collapse of Ukraine-Russia relations has halted deeper political integration, transforming the EAEU into a Eurasian Union, on hold indefinitely. Russian aggression towards Ukraine and its willingness to endure sanctions make a union led by Russia seem a potentially unstable one. Kazakhstan has called for a focus on enhancing economic interaction within the EAEU instead of pursuing political integration ([Sakwa 2015](#)). Ukrainian membership in the EAEU seems a distant prospect. Kyiv has tried to use its relationship with China to reduce its reliance on Russia. In the transit of goods to China, Ukraine has shown this is possible, but not ideal ([Lyalikov 2016](#)). Most importantly, Ukraine can interact with China on

trade and investment, yet Russia does not raise objections to China. [This is thanks to expert statecraft by China](#). It demonstrates to other EAEU members that relations can sour with Moscow, but the biggest economic player in Eurasia—China—is still willing to do business.

The Belarus-China relationship impacts the EAEU by exposing its strengths and weaknesses. The recent China-EAEU “Agreement on Economic and Trade and Cooperation” ([2018](#)), signed 17 May 2018, shows the advantages of the EAEU. The agreement is not a free trade agreement. [Professor Rilka Dragneva-Lewers](#) (University of Birmingham) and [Dr Amat Adarov](#) (Vienna Institute of International Economic Studies) took pains to point this out to me at the 22nd June workshop. It is more akin to a memorandum of understanding to strengthen cooperation and information exchange in areas such as customs cooperation, trade facilitation, intellectual property rights, sectoral cooperation, and government procurement. To this end, the agreement establishes a “Sub-Committee on Customs Cooperation and Trade Facilitation,” guidelines for communicating and explaining delays of goods held up at borders, and the use of electronic documents for e-commerce (*ibid.*). All the same, these are the first steps to a situation “where China's trade and economic cooperation with the EAEU [is moving from being] driven by projects to being guided by rules and regulations” ([Xinhua 2018b](#)). The agreement is more of a foreign policy win for Belarus. Russia is now more motivated to adjust its behaviour in the EAEU to one that is more welcoming to Chinese trade flows for all members, which Belarus wants. A good deal of Chinese westward overland trade to the EU is likely to route through Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus—all EAEU members ([HKTD 2018](#)). Whoever the temporary winner is, the recent agreement with China shows the potential benefits of the EAEU for its members.

However, Belarus-China relations also illustrate what happens when the EAEU does not serve a member state's interests. When dealing with unions or blocs, China has a preference to engage one-to-one with regimes

([Zhao and Webster 2011, 82–84](#)). This approach gives China more options and partners—either it supports union regulations, or lobbies its partners to change them, or lets its partner sort out any potential conflicts of union rules ([Yeliseyev 2013, 8](#); [Fox and Godement 2009, 3–8](#)). The clearest example of this is Belarus's Great Stone Industrial Park (GSIP). The Great Stone Industrial Park is a massive Belarus-China manufacturing and logistics joint development project lying south east of Minsk. It is modelled on the China-Singapore Suzhou Industrial Park. China has pledged a large amount of aid and assistance for the park ([Shraibman 2014](#); [Manyonok 2016](#)), but not before Belarus uses its own capital to seed the project ([Sverdlov and Chalyi 2014](#)). Belarus's initial efforts to attract companies to the GSIP went against EAEU rules (coming in force in 2017) by offering tax breaks to non-EAEU member companies ([Shraibman 2014, 8](#)). This issue is in the process of being resolved ([Ernst & Young 2017](#); [BelTA 2018](#)). This shows a weakness of the EAEU, because members are more than willing to work outside the bloc and mend issues later.

China is happy to engage and work within EAEU frameworks as long as it suits the needs of the BRI. Beijing has shown cautious support for the EAEU since its inception ([Michel 2014](#)). Chinese officials understand that the EAEU is only as strong as the sum of its parts ([Wong 2018](#)). At present, these parts are often in disagreement, and so EEU regulations are ineffective. Member states, especially Russia, go against EAEU regulations ([BBC 2018](#); [Melikishvili and Kokcharov 2018](#)). So, China has nothing to lose by cooperating with the EAEU. The only way the EAEU is effective is if members, particularly Russia, put in the work to sort out their differences. Due to members' support for the BRI, China is likely to find an EAEU whose regulations suit China. If the EAEU remains in deadlock, then China will bypass it via bilateral relations—its preferred form of relationship.

How these relationships impact the EU

How China's relationships with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus impact the EU is unclear. EU representatives have been cautious of the BRI ([Prasad 2018](#)) and there is still no official dialogue between Brussels and the EAEU ([Pastukhova and Westphal 2018, 4–5](#)). EU officials want to observe the extent to which these projects materialise. By contrast, the EU's eastern neighbourhood is near and immediate—especially after the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine.

The Belarus and Ukraine relationships with China have the biggest potential impact for the EU. Russia's relationship with China can impact the effectiveness of EU sanctions. Overall, an increased Chinese presence in the EU's borders may impact the effectiveness of its Eastern Partnership programme, which aims to expand EU values and practices to its borderlands.

Belarus is eager to improve its ties with the EU for its Chinese funded projects to be viable. Pressure on the Belarusian regime for the GSIP to be an economic success is strong. Sizeable sums (for Belarus) have been invested by the domestic government to seed the GSIP ([Sverdlov and Chalyi 2014](#)). Therefore, Belarusian diplomats have to deliver on their talk of Belarus being China's gateway into Europe. The crisis over Ukraine has served as Belarus's way back in from the cold ([Foy 2015](#); [Shraibman and Tsarik 2016, 16](#)). Belarus has since worked to re-establish ties with the EU after it was ostracised for the Lukashenka regime's crackdown on 2010 election protests. Minsk officials have engaged in talks with EU representatives on economic reform and an end to the Belarusian death penalty in return for lighter EU visa restrictions, the lifting of targeted sanctions and a trade agreement ([BBC 2018a](#)). Although, there have been setbacks. The regime has detained protesters numerous times in 2016–2018 ([BBC 2018b](#)). So far, EU diplomats have managed to overlook these incidents ([OxResearch 2018](#)). Thus, the China relationship is extra incentive for Belarus to establish more lasting links to the EU.

Deeper ties with the EU will mean Ukraine has more options in how it can attract Chinese investment. This means Ukraine will be yet another country trying to be a passage for Chinese trade to the EU. Considering Ukraine's Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, deals struck in Kyiv may have wider market access. At present, the DCFTA only applies to “several industrial goods and agricultural products” ([European Commission 2018](#)). Ukraine's exports to the EU have increased by €3.9 billion between 2015 to 2017 ([ibid.](#)). Ukrainian exports and imports to China are recovering to pre-2014 levels ([World Bank 2018](#)). On 5 December 2017, Chinese Vice Premier Ma Kai announced plans for USD\$7 billion to fund 12 joint projects between China and Ukraine ([Kyiv Post 2018](#)). In early December 2017, Natalia Mykolska, deputy minister of economic development and trade of Ukraine, stated, “Ukraine can become China's gateway to the European Union (EU), and China for us—a strategically very important market and a source of investment” ([China Daily 2017b](#)). It is not yet clear exactly how Ukraine will take advantage of its growing ties to the EU. All the same, China appears to be open to the possibilities.

The only likely impact the Russia-China relationship has for the EU is that Western sanctions would be less effective. Russia would continue its behaviour. After the 2009 Russian financial crisis and especially after the 2014 deterioration of relations with the West over Ukraine, China has been an important source of loans for Russia ([Gabuev 2016](#)). Due to China's adept statecraft, it has managed to denounce Russian actions in Ukraine, lay the blame on the West and thereby ignore its sanctions, and remain partner for both Russia and Ukraine ([Baggiani 2015](#)). The price of gas via the Power of Siberia, a pipeline costing USD\$55 billion to pump reportedly USD\$400 billion of natural gas from Russia to China, is still not agreed ([Foy 2018](#)). The pipeline itself is nearly completed. A Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2017, which earmarks December 2019 as the date the taps go on, indicates both sides want an agreement ([Gazprom 2017](#)). Only in the case that Russia gets out-foxed by Chinese negotiators,

receiving far less for the Power of Siberia than it originally planned, might the EU get a Russia that is more willing to make concessions to the EU.

In general, an increased Chinese presence along the EU's borders carries uncertainty for the EU. It may increase the efficiency of trade. It may also hinder EU democratisation efforts in the region ([Yakouchyk 2015](#)). China is well-known for its politics-free engagement with foreign counterparts ([Bader 2015](#)). China may represent a source of financial assistance and future trade tariff revenues without political conditions attached. This may support the survival of nondemocratic regimes, traditionally shunned by the West, such as Belarus, most recently Russia, and perhaps a backsliding regime in Kyiv ([Braga 2016](#)).

Conclusion

Such a short post cannot do full justice to these broad and complex questions. It does, however, grant an impression of particular relationships surrounding China's rise and their consequences for the EAEU and the EU.

The central research question focused on bilateral ties. China's relationships with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus have been roughly sketched. China's relationships with Belarus and Ukraine are uneven. Ukraine and Belarus need more from China than China needs from them. The dance between Russia and China is a mix of caution mixed complementarity. Russia is cautious of China's gaining economic and political strength. Cooperation, particularly in Central Asia, complements both China's and Russia's foreign policy aims. This cooperation is seen in China's approach to the EAEU.

The two subsequent research questions sought to characterise the impact of these relationships on the multilateral blocs of first the EAEU and then the EU. This post has found the Ukraine-China relationship is a strain on the EAEU. The Russia-China relationship has the potential to make the EAEU more effective as a union building institution. Belarus-China relations

both support and test the EAEU. For China's part, its engagement with the EAEU is dualist. Beijing is ready to cooperate with the EAEU, but it is also ready to side-step the EAEU and work bilaterally with members. For their part, EAEU members must resolve internal conflicts. If the EAEU is geared for business with China, then union members will do business with China according to the rules. But the EAEU is often dysfunctional. As Putin's pet-project, it is Russia that must do most to resolve differences among EAEU members.

The impact for the EU is less clear. In the short term, the effects of the Russia-China relationship for the EU will largely depend on the price of gas for the Power of Siberia deal. In the long term, it will depend on how well Russia can negotiate and take advantage of China's growing presence within Eurasia. The China-Belarus relationship will render a Lukashenka regime that is more open to negotiate and discuss reforms with the EU. The regime's goal is for greater Belarusian access to EU markets. So far, a pragmatic EU seems receptive. Ukraine is seemingly in a position to take advantage of its growing connections to the EU. The extent to which it will use this position to improve relations with China is yet unclear.

An additional issue only mentioned in passing here is the potential for China's presence to support nondemocratic regimes or practices on the EU's doorstep. The instance of increased Chinese business and investments in the region may serve to reduce dependence on western financing, which often has political strings attached. A deeper discussion on this topic is best for another, more focused post.

Author: Peter Braga

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