

# China's Higher Education Cooperation Within the Framework of "the Belt and Road Initiative"\*

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**Abstract**—Education cooperation within the framework of the China's President Xi Jinping "the Belt and Road" initiative is perceived as a key element of boosting comprehensive partnership between China and other developing countries. The initiative was announced in 2013 and has been placed among the top priorities of China's foreign policy. The article highlights Chinese vision, principles, and priorities of cooperation within the framework of OBOR initiative. In particular, the article highlights the importance of the project to China and the countries involved. The author of the article affirms that such cooperation plays an indispensable role in collaboration between the states and represents a new model of multilateral relations. The author calls upon China and other countries to broaden cooperation.

**Keywords**—higher-education; the Belt and Road; public diplomacy; people-to-people bonds

## I. INTRODUCTION

The educational sphere has always been one of the top priorities, as students in many respects will shape the character and type of future agenda including the sphere of international cooperation [1]. Educated people are one of the most important drivers for economic development. China's government is paying a lot of attention to education, which is part of public diplomacy. It is important to mention that public diplomacy is an important element of the modern China's policy, and the initiative (especially educational cooperation within the frame of the OBOR) can make a fundament of promoting such diplomacy. In July 2009, Secretary-General of the People's Republic of China, Hu Jintao, made a speech on Chinese public diplomacy at the conference of Ambassadors, which stressed the role of public diplomacy on the Chinese government's agenda. Public diplomacy goals were outlined during the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in the last month of 2012. The most important point includes: creating a strong social base among young people, making cultural industry a mainstay of the national economy, and strengthening the social cultural base [2]. Language conveys culture. The promotion of

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language for the sake of spreading culture is not unique to our time. The Chinese Government pursues the strategy of "going global and inviting in". Accordingly, China is holding many cultural programs, such as cultural weeks and years between China and foreign countries, competitions between Chinese-speaking foreigners, and Confucius Institutes classes. Confucius Institutes are non-profit educational organizations promoting teaching of the Chinese language outside China, and cultural exchanges between China and other states. Another goal is spreading the "correct" understanding of China [3].

Among Asian states' educational systems, China stands out for its academic cooperation and increasing of foreign students. Within the last years China's higher-education system has remained above average of the major Asian educational. For instance, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) China was one of the top-performing Asian countries in the 2015 [4]. China has stepped up its ascent of the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. According to the Times Higher Education Supplement Rankings of World Universities the Tsinghua University (China) has overtaken the National University of Singapore to become the best university in Asia and ranked 22<sup>nd</sup> in the world in 2019 [5]. The rise means that Tsinghua now also outranks Peking University for the first time in the global table.

Such results are mainly due to well elaborated domestic policy, which prioritized education in building both the economy and the moderately prosperous society. The moderately prosperous society is determined by the current leadership of China as an effective leverage to achieve social harmony and strengthen the international status of the state.

## II. BACKGROUND

During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Central and Southeast Asia in September and October 2013, he proposed to build the Silk Road Economic Belt (at Nazarbayev University in Astana (renamed as Nur-Sultan) during his visit to Kazakhstan) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (at the Indonesian Parliament in Jakarta during his visit to Indonesia). The proposal has evolved to become the "the Belt and Road" initiative.

During Xi Jinping's first visit to Central Asia, he announced that China will provide 30,000 government scholarships over the next decade to students from Shanghai Cooperation Organization members. He also invited 10,000 teachers and students from Confucius Institutes to research or study in China during the period.

In March 2015, after the endorsement of the State Council, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) jointly released the Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative [6]. China's President stressed five major aims of the OBOR, which includes: policy of coordination, financial integration, unimpeded trade, facilities connection and people-to-people bonds. People-to-people bonds of the Action Plan on the Belt and Road Initiative includes: carry forward the spirit of friendly cooperation of the Silk Road by promoting extensive cultural and academic exchanges, personnel exchanges and cooperation, media cooperation, youth and women exchanges and volunteer services, so as to win public support for deepening bilateral and multilateral cooperation. China should send more students to each other's countries, and promote cooperation in jointly running schools. China provides 10,000 government scholarships to the countries along the Belt and Road every year [6].

The importance of the initiative is stressed by the fact that China established a special leading group to oversee the implementation of the Belt and Road initiatives in March 2015. In author's opinion it shows the importance given to the OBOR initiative in modern China's diplomacy.

Talking about China's vision of the cooperation in frame of initiative, as noted by President Xi in his speech "Towards a Community of Common Destiny and A New Future for Asia" at the 2015 Boao Forum for Asia in Hainan, "They will be a real chorus comprising all countries along the routes, not a solo for China itself. To develop the Belt and Road is not to replace existing mechanisms or initiatives for regional cooperation. Much to the contrary, we will build on the existing basis to help countries align their development strategies and form complementarity." [7]

In July 2016 the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China released the Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative. According to China's vision of cooperation the countries along the "the Belt and Road" will learn from each other, to deepen and strengthen cooperation, to pursue common interests, shoulder common responsibilities, and work concertedly to build the OBOR educational community. To promote the development of education cooperation in frame of the OBOR, states will work together in an endeavor to:

- Promote Closer People-to-People Ties. China will broaden, elevate, and deepen people-to-people exchanges and promote ever-stronger understanding and bonds between the peoples along the routes.
- Cultivate Supporting Talent. China will spare no effort in cultivating the much-needed talent for the Belt and Road Initiative to support policy

coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, and financial integration among the Belt and Road countries.

- Achieve Common Development. China will join hands in deepening educational cooperation and promoting mutual learning to boost the development of education in our countries and improve the overall leverage of the region's education [8].

### III. OBOR AND HIGHER-EDUCATION PRIORITIES

As each country along the "the Belt and Road" has its own education system. According to the Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative issued by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, China proposes a three-pronged framework for cooperation, which includes 3 areas:

#### A. *Carrying out Cooperation to Improve Educational Interconnectivity Which will Include the Following 5 Elements*

- Strengthening coordination on education policy.
- Facilitating smooth channels for educational cooperation.
- Breaking language barriers between the Belt and Road countries.
- Fostering closer people-to-people ties.
- Promoting articulation of criteria for mutual recognition of academic credentials.

#### B. *Deepening Cooperation on Cultivation and Training of Talent Which will Include Implementation of the Following 4 Programs*

- Silk Road Two-way Student Exchange Enhancement Program.
- Silk Road Co-operation in Running Educational Institutions and Programs Enhancement Program.
- Silk Road Teacher Training Enhancement Program.
- Silk Road Joint Education and Training Enhancement Program.

#### C. *Jointly Setting up Concrete Mechanisms of Cooperation Which Include the Following 4 Elements*

- Strengthening high-level consultations on people-to-people exchanges.
- Giving full play to platforms of international cooperation.
- Implementing the "Silk Road Education Assistance Program".
- Implementing the "Silk Road Golden Camel & Golden Sail Awards Program" [8].

#### IV. OBOR AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Currently countries along the routes mainly participate in China's scholarship programs. By the end of 2016, Chinese universities had established four Ministry of Education approved joint venture institutes and 98 education projects in 14 countries. By the end of 2016 China already established 134 Confucius Institutes and 130 classes.

It is important to mention that since that time around 60 per cent of Chinese Government Scholarships have been given to students from OBOR countries.

China started to pay more attention to MBA programs. For instance, executive MBA courses have also been launched by Tsinghua University for business leaders from OBOR countries.

To date OBOR education agreements have been signed by the Ministry of Education with Gansu, Ningxia, Fujian, Guizhou, Yunnan, Hainan, Xinjiang, Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Shaanxi provinces and Qinghai city.

Xi'an Jiaotong University (Shaanxi province) established the "University Alliance of the Silk Road" to serve as a platform to broaden and develop higher education cooperation in 2015.

To date the alliance's members includes 150 universities from 35 countries, covering universities from OBOR countries as well as 23 Russian universities, such as Bauman Moscow State Technical University, Far Eastern Federal University, National Research Nuclear University, National Medical University of Saratov, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University etc.

In July 2017 the Belt and Road Alliance for Industry and Education Collaboration (BRAIEC) has officially been launched. Huo Yuzhen, the special representative of the ministry of foreign affairs for China-Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) cooperation, said that the BRAIEC is indeed an opportunity to build a better platform for dialogue between China and other nations. "We are looking for opportunities to expand channels of cooperation. We will be holding education policy dialogues that will encourage institutions of higher learning to find ways of partnering with each other. The bilateral relation hinges on the cohesion between people". [9]

It is interesting to say that China paid huge attention to the improvement of human intelligence. It is one of the most important tasks nowadays. There are so many countries interested in attracting great talent people. They are the USA, the UK, Germany, Australia, Singapore, South Korea. And China is not an exception. China is paying more attention to human development, artificial intelligence and high technologies. It is important to say about South-South cooperation. Today, talking about insufficient research problem related to development activities is not necessary. The topic is interesting not only to Western scientists, but also becomes attractive to scientists from developing countries. At the same time, the study of South-South

cooperation can hardly be called irrelevant [10]. China also participates in development assistance activities. For instance, in the field of Good Governance Israel, China and Singapore helped Benin in resolving its technical and governance challenges affecting public institutions, management thereof, and providing results-based incentives to specific Ministries to be effective in management [11]. The China government provides grants for receiving education in the country, including through the South-South line. It is important to mention that countries that have not signed an OBOR agreement with China are not excluded from participating.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Giving brief examination of the priorities and results of the China's "the Belt and Road" initiative in the sphere of higher education, it is important to note that "the Belt and Road" is an initiative to learn from each other, to deepen and strengthen cooperation, to pursue common interests, shoulder common responsibilities, and work concertedly to build the OBOR educational community. In author's opinion, it is likely that Chinese education programs and grants under the OBOR initiative will increase. China has invested heavily in higher education as a government tool for public diplomacy. It boasts one of the world's best universities and several others with top education. China has invested heavily in higher education as a government tool for public diplomacy. Every year the number of participants to the initiative increases.

In author's opinion, all countries should pay more attention to the China's OBOR that has reached such high results and has been placed among the top priorities of China's foreign policy.

Accelerating the building of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road can promote economic development of the countries along "The Belt and Road", in addition it can improve regional economic cooperation, strengthen exchanges and mutual learning between different civilizations [12]. History is our best teacher. The silk route shows that geographical distance is not insurmountable. By and large, it can promote world peace and development. As a Chinese saying goes, "Peaches and plums do not speak, but they are so attractive that a path is formed below the trees". Six years later we can summarize that the initiatives of the Belt and Road are becoming a reality and bearing rich fruit. Overall, it can be predicted that the initiative has the potential to shape global trade and investment well into the future [13].

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