

**France and the Belt and Road Initiative:
Overcoming Distrust with Multi-level Coopetion in International Relations**

Emilie Tran

Hong Kong Baptist University

Email address

emilietran@hkbu.edu.hk

Abstract

Starting in the early 2010s, Europe has been a key stakeholder in China's global economic strategy. More recently, President Xi Jinping's recent Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a real test to Europe's cohesion. The European Union (EU) has refused, as a bloc, to join the BRI, considering China as an economic competitor and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. As it has been acknowledged by the Chinese and European leaders themselves, at the heart of the matter lies the question of trust, or the lack thereof that has fueled outright suspicion regarding China's broader behaviour and ulterior motives behind its BRI. France, a founding member of the EU and BRI-sceptic, has contributed to shape an EU alternative plan to China's multi-billion infrastructure programme. To what extent does the distrust expressed by European governments jeopardize what Chinese officials present as a win-win plan for economic development through the enhancement of global trade and connectivity? Are distrustful discourses actually fuelled by economic competition and geo-strategic considerations, leading to missed opportunities?

Taking the opposite view, world data and statistics have been showing ever growing transnational trade and global connectivity. As a matter of fact, 2018 opened a new era as the Belt and Road Initiative unfolded to conquer the ports of the Mediterranean Sea. Early that year, Marseilles was set to become the second largest Sino-European textile trading center in Europe, with the opening of the Marseilles International Fashion Center 68 or MIF68, brainchild and led by a Chinese immigrant entrepreneur. In fall 2018, the Chinese company Quechen Silicon Chemical confirmed the construction of its European flagship factory with the port of Marseilles-Fos. While being open to a transformational world design it cannot resist, France and the EU have also repeatedly expressed their reserves and concerns.

Therefore, adopting a multi-level approach, this paper contrasts the distrustful discourses of governments and policy-makers at the top, wary of China's global influence, with the actual developments that concretize the Belt and Road Initiative on the ground, arguing that France's relationship with China is a mix of competition and cooperation, or *coopetion*.

Bio

Dr. Emilie Tran is Assistant Professor and the programme coordinator of European Studies | French stream, at the Department of Government & International Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University. She researches on China-Europe relations, Chinese communities and Chinese investments in Europe and France in particular.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Trust and Distrust in International Relations

This paper addresses a central paradox. On the one hand, the highest level leaders from China and Europe meet relatively frequently. They maintain regular government-to-government dialogues and declare their intention to build a long-term constructive partnership based on a relationship described on both sides as mature. Recently, the European countries and their governments have become primary stakeholders in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). On the other hand, surveys demonstrate that a majority of European people have a negative view of China (European Commission 2016, p.18 & 2018, p. 73). China's multi-billion infrastructure plan has created fear, anxiety and ultimately distrust in China's true intentions. Trust, or rather
