

The Geopolitical Economy of Energy Transition: Comparing China's Belt and Road Initiative and the European Union (2000 – 2023)

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Energy security, climate change, and energy transition are issues that can only be addressed by cooperation between two of the world's largest energy consumers and carbon emitters – the European Union and China. As we see it, the role of academics working on these issues is to improve our understanding of how conventional and renewable energy security and climate change, geopolitics, and international relations intersect.

In a series of successful joint research programmes since 2006, the IAS Energy Programme Asia (IIAS-EPA) has worked with several Chinese research institutions in cooperation with 11 national and other international research centres and universities in Asia, Europe, and North and South America. The main focus of these programmes was comparatively studying “energy, political economy, environment” in China and the European Union in the context of global politics. The research outputs of these joint research programmes have been published since 2007 in four edited volumes and three peer-reviewed special issues of journals, totalling 85 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters.

As Director of IIAS-EPA, I am pleased to announce the launch of a new joint research programme, titled, *The Geopolitical Economy of Energy Transition: Comparing China's Belt and Road Initiative and the European Union*. The period under study is 2000 to 2023. The programme will run as an interdisciplinary joint research programme between the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS)

and the Institute of European Studies of Macau (IEEM), China, in collaboration with the School of Government and International Affairs (SGIA), Durham University, UK. It brings together 25 researchers from 13 national and international universities and researcher centres who are experts on politics, international relations and international political economy, economics, law, energy, and security. The 13 institutes are: IIAS, Leiden University, University of Amsterdam, Utrecht University, Maastricht School of Management, Durham University, Lancaster University, University of Cologne, Free University of Brussels, Federal University of ABC (Sao Paulo), Institute of European Studies of Macau and both the Institute of World Economics and Politics and the Institute of Latin American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS; Beijing). Each of the 25 researchers is part of one of the following seven research groups: (1) Divergence and convergence in China's relations with West and Central Asian states: the cases of Kazakhstan, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Turkmenistan; (2) A critical evaluation of China's BRI in Central and Eastern Europe; (3) A critical evaluation of China's BRI in Brazil; (4) Geopolitical economy of energy transition and the role of hydrogen; (5) A survey of comparative energy transition in the European Union and China: policy, outcome, and challenges; (6) Belt and Road Initiative in West Asia: Strategic Partnership and its security challenges; (7) Energy security issues: the challenges of supply security and energy transition.

Background of research

In the last 200 years, fossil fuels have played a critical role in the rise and expansion of the modern state-system and the capitalist world economy. Technological advancements brought about machine-powered production, inducing a transformation in sourcing energy from wood and peat to coal, oil and natural gas. The fossil fuel consumption, mainly of industrialised societies, has created three major challenges: (1) fossil fuel scarcity; (2) import dependency in countries with a scarcity of fossil fuels; and (3) environmental degradation caused by, among others, greenhouse gasses, such as CO₂ emissions. To alleviate these problems, a transition from fossil to renewable energy sources is underway but far from complete. Carbon-intensity (CO₂/GDP) seems to have hardly decreased between 1990 and 2020, and several industrialised and late-industrialised societies have seen both their fossil and clean energy production increase. One of the main challenges of the energy transition is the timing of reducing fossil fuel consumption and the expansion of the clean energy sector without overstepping the limit of secure energy supplies in the main fossil fuel consumer countries and regions.

As major energy consumers and the world's largest fossil fuel importers, China and the European Union (EU) face the common challenge of catching up with the geophysical realities that threaten living standards. Both also attempt to escape the fossil fuel trap by developing clean energy sources. Within the context of

the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has increased its involvement particularly in energy and infrastructure sectors around the world, including in EU member states and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries.

Research purpose and aims

The purpose of the programme is to account for the dramatic transformations across Eurasia since 2000 and in the energy security strategies of China and the EU and the two sides' mutual interactions. It will study, firstly, their respective approaches to fossil fuel supply security, climate change and policies regarding the transition to renewable energy, and the challenges associated with moving to a clean energy-based economy and society. Secondly, it will look at China's Belt and Road Initiatives in the energy and infrastructure sectors of 29 selected countries and regions in Europe, Asia, Africa, and South America, and the related domestic, geopolitical, and geo-economic risks and challenges.

The programme aims to promote new insights and improve research by fostering the exchange of ideas through research-oriented meetings and workshops in the Netherlands and China. The second aim is to encourage further cooperation across this truly international research network, nurturing the participation of junior researchers and building research collaborations across the partnerships. Thirdly, the expected research output will include publications in the form of peer-reviewed monograph(s), special issues of key specialised peer-reviewed journals, and policy briefings.

Full information/inquiries:

www.iias.asia/programmes/geopolitical-economy-energy-transition-China-BRI-EU
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Launch of the River Cities Network: Engaging with Waterways in the Anthropocene

Paul Rabé

The River Cities Network is a new transdisciplinary and global network to promote the inclusive revitalization of rivers and waterways and the landscapes/waterscapes, cities, and neighborhoods that co-exist with them. The network is being coordinated from the Urban Cluster of IIAS and, as of December 2022, comprises 40 project teams from around the world, each of which critically examines a local river-city relationship (the ‘river-city nexus’). A board of advisors has been formed, which includes prominent people in their fields from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Please contact us if you are interested!

The River Cities Network (RCN) was formally launched in December 2022 via two online meetings that brought together—online for now—members of the project teams and advisors.

The urgency that brings together the River Cities Network partners is the degradation of rivers and waterways all over the world, particularly in urban areas, where most of the world's population lives. As stated by the international NGO *International Rivers*, “free-flowing rivers work like arteries, providing the world's ecosystems with critical freshwater resources that sustain a higher biodiversity per square mile than almost any other ecosystem”. Yet, the fragmentation, diversion, and pollution of these water bodies endanger the food security, livelihoods, and cultural traditions of millions of people. The effects of climate change exacerbate river degradation in the form of flooding, drought, and unpredictable water levels, temperatures and quality, made worse by other man-

made interventions. This trend is especially pronounced in urbanized areas, where the health of river ecosystems competes for attention with many other policy priorities.

The RCN was established to address this complex set of problems by contributing action research on the river-city nexus in different parts of the world through local case study projects of urban river disruption and degradation. The river-city nexus provides a lens through which to critically analyze relationships between human settlements and rivers over time and a platform to engage in collective action to revitalize local river ecosystems and the communities adjacent to these rivers.

Justice and Biodiversity

Across all the case study projects, the network partners are motivated by a central question: In what ways can rivers and waterways better sustain productive urban life and vice versa? Key indicators of a productive life are improved water quality and increased biodiversity, and socially, culturally, and economically vital and just communities. The approach of the RCN to river revitalization is to elaborate a theoretical framework, backed up by practical tools, to bring together the two pillars of ‘productive life’ in a river-city context. Namely, a socio-economic pillar aimed at transformational resilience (‘justice’) and a nature-based pillar aimed at biodiversity restoration. These two pillars of the RCN are considered critical to the restoration of the relationship between rivers and cities.

Many of the RCN project teams have as their revitalization strategy to reconnect communities to their local rivers and



Left: Information panel, Kamogawa, Kyoto, Japan (foto: P. Rabé, 2022)

waterways. Whereas rivers and canals were once at the center of urban life—economically, socially, and culturally—these connections have often been ruptured for a variety of reasons. This rupture, in turn, leads to further degradation, as local people no longer feel a connection to their water bodies. Re-establishing a connection to the rivers and canals can help communities better understand their history, rediscover connections with nature and with each other, and as a result, acquire citizenship in a broader sense.

Historical approaches are front and center in the River Cities network. RCN project teams will adopt a historical perspective to tell the story of rivers or sections of rivers and their relationship with human interventions over time. The rationale is that river disruption issues must be understood from a longue durée perspective to learn from the past and re-establish future connections between humans and nature.

Join us!

RCN is a peer-to-peer learning network, with learning taking place within project teams, between project teams, and between

the network and other networks and initiatives. Teams represent many parts of the world, with different water management traditions, in the global North as well as the global South. Over half of the river-city case studies in RCN are in Asia (covering East, South and Southeast Asia). RCN's regular events will include project team presentations, in-situ graduate schools, workshops and short-term research exchanges. They will all have this peer-to-peer learning relationship as a central feature. RCN recognizes that there is a crucial need for broad-based learning, including from societies whose traditional knowledge of water systems has been neglected.

Expressions of interest from project teams all over the world are welcomed, particularly on river-city case studies in Africa, the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East.

Please consult the River Cities page on the IIAS website, also for updates about regular events open to a general audience: www.ukna.asia/river-cities. For more information, please contact the RCN coordinators: Paul Rabé, Email: p.e.rabe@iias.nl and Satya Patchineelam s.maia.patchineelam@iias.nl.