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Editors

# Logistical Asia

The Labour of Making a World Region

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## Asia's Era of Infrastructure and the Politics of Corridors: Decoding the Language of Logistical Governance

*Giorgio Grappi*

This story begins in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan on the shores of the Caspian Sea where, after the construction of the ‘flame towers’ in 2012, a large set of new skyscrapers is expected to transform the urban skyline (Skyscraper City 2016). They represent a new kind of development that is taking Azerbaijan by storm. In fact, the constant flow of financial activity pouring billions of dollars into the country is giving Azerbaijan a key role inside a new Asiatic geo-economy. The new forms that are casting their shadows on the Caspian Sea, and the renderings made available by promotion videos, are indeed the ‘markers’ of the appearance in Baku of what Keller Easterling has described as ‘the software of Extrastatecraft’ or a ‘transshipment landscape’ (Easterling 2014, 46). More than simple buildings, they send a message to the global business audience that the country is now seriously committing to its role within ‘global assemblages’ of power (Sassen 2006). The country is also taking other important steps to

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demonstrate its availability to be included in transnational infrastructural projects that focus on Central Asia as a new crossing point. As recently reported by the global consulting agency Information Handling Services (IHS), the projected Baku International Sea and Trade Port is expected to offer ‘opportunities in China-Europe overland links’ (Mooney 2015). The port, the Azerbaijan government says, expects to benefit from the overland links between China, Central Asia, and Europe related to Chinese initiatives to build a New Silk Road across Asia and will be built following the port-centric logistics corridor model promoted by DP World at Jebel Ali port in Dubai (Sulayem 2013). This model is implemented as a logistical manufacturing centre where all activities of finishing, processing, and packaging will be realized. The area will include a special economic zone (SEZ) and is designed ‘as a hub where companies use locally produced materials to add value to imported products before shipping them onwards to destinations in Central Asia, Europe, and Turkey’ (Mooney 2015).

Taleh Ziyadov, Director-General of Baku International, highlights that the whole project is clearly connected with the New Silk Road discourse and its position in the global logistical chain: ‘an important point about the silk road revival,’ says Ziyadov, ‘is that it works on the basis that all countries improve their infrastructure and want to harmonize policies across trade, customs, and transit procedures. If Georgia doesn’t have good ports and roads, then we cannot reach our potential. Likewise, if the links between Kazakhstan and China aren’t good enough, we will not benefit’ (Mooney 2015). This suggests that one hundred years after 1900 delegates from across Asia and Europe met in Baku for the Congress of the Peoples of the East in 1920 and committed to support anti-colonial movements, the city is finally becoming an intersection in the restructuring of Asian political space. In fact, Baku is at the crossroads of different infrastructural projects, promoted by a variety of state actors and international institutions, that are converging around the idea that logistical corridors connecting Eurasia will bring a new era of development for the region and the world.

Despite their very different political and institutional genesis, projects such as the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI) or ‘One Belt, One Road’ (OBOR)—the Chinese official name of the New Silk Road, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridor (CAREC)—initiated by the ADB, and the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA)—a side project of the European Union Trans-European

Networks (TEN) reveal how 'Asia's Era of Infrastructure' (to quote the title of a panel organized during the World Economic Forum held in Davos in January 2016) is more than a simple proposition of regional development. These projects, the way they are proceeding and the imaginary they mobilize, share an inner logic that views existing institutions, their territorial dimensions, and the temporality of institutional politics as embedded in the infrastructural and operational dimensions of logistics. In fact, if their economic justification is to cut transit times from China to Europe, and bring new economic activity along the way, what they show is an emerging reorganization of global political spaces that I propose to term 'the politics of corridors.' To observe the coherence of this reorganization is not to argue that a single model is being imposed across the globe. On the contrary, I argue that, against the background of a discourse that pretends to generate smooth and homogeneous dynamics, the 'politics of corridors' encounters obstacles, resistances, and frictions that result in variations of form and operation. Moreover, while such corridors are emerging globally, we must observe that while different corridor initiatives meet, overlap, conflict, and diverge, they are producing a variegated geography of logistical power. Nevertheless, with this proposition I aim to stress how a new political formation is emerging within and around these corridors. And furthermore, that this formation can be considered as a global logistical institution that constantly reckons with the state form, forcing it 'to negotiate their role with a multifarious array of agencies and reckon with heterogeneous legal orders, logistical protocols, financial algorithms, and monetary arrangements that exceed the control of any state' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2014).

If the geopolitical scenario suggests competition between China and other regional players regarding the control of supply corridors across Asia, I argue that we must pay attention to the different logics at work in the *background* and that, through this analysis of global dynamics, the very concept of 'Asia' as a political and geographical unity begins to blur. Logistical operations along global supply chains have reshaped the processes of production. They are also contributing to the formation of a new type of hybrid political discourse, which operates behind the technicalities related to the promotion of intermodal solutions and the removal of *bottlenecks*. This discourse finds a synthesis around the image of 'corridors' that is giving rise to new political forms that are transforming relations between private economic activity, state intervention, and international institutions. While the 'supply chain' refers to the production processes

that exist behind the pervasive presence of logistics, the language of ‘corridors’ refers to the materiality of infrastructure and the so-called soft infrastructure of governance that makes logistical operations possible at a larger scale. As we will see, while different actors with different geopolitical and economic interests are at play, a new consensus presents corridors and their operations as structural priorities.

### CORRIDORS, SUPPLY CHAINS, AND LOGISTICAL GOVERNANCE

The language and image of corridors is an emerging catchall in the discourses of logistics. From trade and investment corridors to freight corridors, from digital corridors to development corridors, from transport corridors to industrial corridors, it is difficult to avoid reference to this concept. As Deborah Cowen (2014) observes, ‘logistics corridor projects and their visual rendering in technical and popular cartography are popping up all over the world.’ These maps, Cowen suggests, ‘craft a different spatial imaginary than blocks of transnational territory’ and the image of corridors as physical infrastructures is insufficient to grasp their meaning. In fact, material intervention proceeds jointly with a relevant and increasingly sustained focus ‘on “soft infrastructure” such as the integration, standardization, and synchronization of customs and trade regulations, not to mention the entire realm of efforts to secure the actual space of these logistics corridors’ (65).

This section of the chapter digs into some of the documents that are trying to organize and develop the knowledge and concepts related to this ‘soft infrastructure.’ While ‘the corridor agenda is increasingly widely adopted by governments, the private sector, and development agencies,’ the *Trade and Economic Corridor Management Toolkit*, an extensive study on corridors published by The World Bank in 2014, argues that ‘there has been a lack of guidance on how to design, determine the components to include, and analyze the likely impact of corridor projects’ (Kunaka and Carruthers 2014, xiii and 1). This is reflected in the heterogeneous array of documents, guidelines, policy papers, and master plans that are produced by nation-states, regional cooperation organizations, and other international bodies worldwide. Only a few studies have attempted to outline a comprehensive understanding of corridors, and these have primarily been related to transport scholarship. However, corridors—whether devoted to physical distribution or data transfer—entail a direct role for the authorities ruling in the spaces

they cross or connect, including city councils, regions, states, and international organizations concerned with trade, development, and cross-border activities. At the same time, they produce specific governing dynamics and management agencies whose role is growing as a consequence of the relevance assumed by transport connectivity and logistical infrastructure for global exchanges.

While corridors alter existing patterns of territoriality, they also modify the functioning of existing institutions through the operation of technical standards, governance tools, and financial flows: policy papers, master plans, and international studies are part and parcel of the new 'managementese' that links policy-makers across different fields and sectors (Easterling 2014). The use of logistical concepts such as interoperability, multimodality, or *bottlenecks* is becoming increasingly relevant in the process of channelling political decisions and investment flows in certain directions. The binding of logistical concepts into the larger scheme of corridors and their circulation beyond the realm of transport specialists makes visible the relation of the corridor discourse to power and statecraft. As we will see, corridors, from a subterranean trend in the history of the relation between economy and space, are now emerging as a common-sense reference in discourses of governance and policy-making.

Before attempting a conceptualization of corridors as political forms, however, I will first analyze how corridors are taking the stage in current debates across logistics, particularly as a conceptual tool that is being mobilized with increasing persistence in the policy discussions involving institutional actors as various as China, India, and the European Union, as well as international financial institutions such as the World Bank, the ADB, or the newly formed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

As observed by Hans-Peter Brunner (2013), 'economic corridors connect economic agents along a defined geography.' Even if no standard picture of corridors exists, 'we can [...] speak of an emerging and fluid concept of what economic corridors are' in the literature and concrete case studies. Brunner highlights how corridors 'are not mere transport connections along which people and goods move' but are in fact 'integral to the economic fabric and the economic actors surrounding it.' As such, corridors must not be understood in isolation but rather 'have to be analyzed as part of integrated economic networks, such as regional and value chains and production networks' (1).

Business studies concede that freight corridors and logistics hubs shape the location decisions of many manufacturers or warehouse and distribution companies, and logistics is becoming the second criterion, after

labour's availability and costs, in locating manufacturing and distribution. It is replacing real estate. While, via dedicated software and techniques such as centroid analysis, big companies decide where to invest or locate their activity, new infrastructure and large projects such as highways, railways, and freight corridors add inputs and variables to the software algorithm to create a 'stream of products, services and information moving within and through communities in geographical patterns' (Luttrell 2015a, b; Ghani et al. 2016; Kunaka and Carruthers 2014, 15). Even if a corridor is 'at its core' about 'facilitating supply chains' and connecting locations 'using different modes of transport to link production and distribution centers,' Charles Kunaka and Robin Carruthers (2014), authors for the World Bank of the abovementioned *Toolkit*, concede that corridors also imply connections—between different kinds of actors, spatial settings, operations and decision-making processes—that seek 'to organize production, distribution, and supply to capture regional specialization' (23).

As observed by anthropologist Anna Tsing, the capitalism of the supply chain entails a model for thinking '*both* global standardization *and* growing gaps,' the use of 'preexisting diversity,' and the creation of 'niches and links' among differences. This leads to a global condition in which corporate governance coexists with 'contingency, experimentation, negotiation, and unstable commitments' (Tsing 2009, 151). Against this backdrop, corridors can be understood as the attempt to form logistical institutions, which makes them much more than just physical entities. The implementation of a corridor is generated by deepening infrastructural and economic integration that represents 'the strategic decisions and choices developed and made by firms, municipalities, and governments to attract increased flows of commodities to particular regions' (Kunaka and Carruthers 2014, 23). Such implementation is dependent on not only the 'coalitions' that parties form when attracting investments but also the involvement of institutional actors in a process of legal and territorial reorganization. 'Institutional and economic relationships are part and parcel of a corridor, especially in the presence of competing trade routes' (23). Corridors, in other words, do not simply connect discrete ribbons of infrastructure; they are constitutive of the dynamic political fabric of contemporary capitalism. Therefore, even when they serve a specific and localized need, the political meaning of corridors must be discerned through an exercise of abstraction.

Aspects of these localized, political, and infrastructural characteristics of corridors are reflected in debates between specialists on where corridors

originate. If the consulting agency PricewaterhouseCoopers seems to conflate corridors with economic activity, Kunaka and Carruthers mention two alternative bases for corridor projects: the following of historic routes and 'greenfield' developments. While, in the former, corridors correspond to interventions to improve connectivity and infrastructure along existing (historic) routes and connections, 'greenfield' projects create new connections. Nevertheless, as Arnold noted in 2005, existing corridors 'are rarely developed as Greenfield projects' as most of them evolve 'from existing land-based multimodal transport networks' (Arnold 2005, 1). While many greenfield projects have been launched since then, what remains clear is that corridors are conceptually situated between the existing and the new, and their performative role is precisely related to their capacity to translate and shift operations and assemblages into new frameworks, more than simply superimposing new structures over existing ones.

The experience of the New Silk Road, which can be related to projects in Africa as well as South America, demonstrates that the following of historic routes can take unforeseen twists and turns away from original locations. In this sense, the language of the New Silk Road serves a greater role as persuasive discourse than as a connection to real settings. Even when corridor projects try to take advantage of existing geographies and historic legacies, they simultaneously generate new geographies or divert existing paths towards other routes. This is reflected in the shifting relation between so-called path dependency and planning in evaluating the 'transformational impact' of corridors. Otherwise said, a corridor can be, at the same time, 'both a product and an instrument of spatial planning in a country and a region' (Kunaka and Carruthers 2014, 21). The same applies to the economy, where corridors produce a kind of circular dynamic: they serve particular supply chains, but they are also meant to reorient economic and administrative activities in order to integrate them into larger global value chains. In following specific trajectories, corridors are also instruments that can shape the direction and robustness of certain supply chains over others.

The harmonization between these different dimensions and meanings is far from given and is reflected in different definitions that exhibit a 'tension between transport functions, economic functions and spatial functions' (Priemus and Zonneveld 2003, 174). Priemus and Zonneveld, for example, identify three possible ways in which corridors function: as an *infrastructure axis*, as an *economic development axis*, and as an *urbanization axis* (2003, 174). As has already been discussed, the concept of cor-

ridor refers both to a ‘dynamic space’ and a ‘productive space,’ within which, as Chapman et al. (2003) note, ‘infrastructure may need to perform in a variety of different ways’ (189). For this reason, they argue, ‘conflicts may arise between the range of potential functions of these corridors’ at local, national, regional, and global levels (189). That is to say, there is often an unresolved tension between the spatial and institutional dimension of corridors due to their transnational nature in a world marked by national borders, and given that a corridor, by definition, ‘also implies physical and linear geographical form more than institutional structure, and homogeneity rather than distinctiveness’ (190).

### HETERARCHIES AND THE POLITICAL PRODUCTIVITY OF BOTTLENECKS

As evident from the above discussion, corridors are twofold. On the one hand, they are a spatial description of something happening on the ground. And on the other, they are a projection of something to be realized: instruments that anticipate a future through governance tools that synchronize the administrative time, procedures, and standards of bordered institutions. In this way, ‘a corridor is [...] a spatial structure for overcoming the fragmentation of legal, institutional, physical, and practical boundaries’ (Kunaka and Carruthers 2014, 23–25). In practice, however, Arnold identifies three different kinds of institutional formats that have been used thus far to realize and manage corridors (2005, 36–38):

1. The *disjointed incrementalism model* which promotes improvement along a route classified as a corridor based on local requirements, without a formal corridor organization. As in the case of the North-South Corridor in West Bengal, India, the corridor works as ‘a concept around which various projects are developed’ and ‘exists by virtue of its growing commercial activity rather than through any organizational structure.’
2. The *legislative development model*, such as the TEN strategies in Europe or the Maputo Corridor in Africa, uses regional legislation to design specific routes as corridors and to provide for the harmonization of standards, simplification of cross-border movements, and funding for infrastructure.

3. The *consensus-building institutional model* which uses regional institutions to mobilize stakeholders and push for reforms in the fields of trade facilitation, border-crossing procedures, and infrastructure financing. This is the model closer to the experience of Eastern Europe and Asia.

Corridors seem, then, to develop as a product of economic and administrative activity and without any real and autonomous power. Nevertheless, a closer look to the ways in which the governance of corridors is organized and conceptualized reveals specific forms repeating themselves across different spaces and institutional settings. Formal corridor initiatives often include corridor management bodies whose main activities include planning, prioritizing, financing, advocating for legislative and regulatory reforms, monitoring corridor performance, promoting corridor use, and piloting trade facilitation and logistics reform (Kunaka and Carruthers 2014, 98). This list of functions shows how the managing agencies of corridor-related projects have grown to be much more than technical bodies. They use technicalities to advocate for specific reforms and priorities inside domains that were part of the sovereign capacities of states.

Since most of the transport and development corridors entail a cross-border dimension, these bodies become the connecting entities between political forms and administrative assemblages that have been historically and formally separate, albeit performing similar functions. Operating as a sort of intermediate and organized body of stakeholders in the global economy, these different groups—consisting of technicians, representatives of national governments and international institutions, as well as leading companies in the field of infrastructure, transport, and production—represent the institutional formation of the political economy of logistics. As the different texts and projects analyzed so far in this chapter clearly show, all corridor initiatives make direct reference to the principles and rules set in the existing international free trade agreements developed by the WTO and other institutions. As we will see later, even the new Chinese initiatives make a direct reference to what is today a shared consensus on the priority of connectivity and public-private partnership for economic growth. This is to say that corridor initiatives are part and parcel of an attempt to foster the global neoliberal agenda via the consolidation of a transnational discourse *and* material constitution that finds its basis of legitimization in logistical rationality. Their aim seems to be that of formalizing a third political space between the operations of private capital

and political institutions, where these blur in favour of a logistical polity that follows its own temporality, somehow free from the procedures of traditional politics. In this third space, different political systems—whether based on representative politics, state parties, or authoritarian regimes—can meet and share a common ground.

In this common ground ‘cooperation,’ the ability to build ‘coalitions’ and ‘trust,’ are considered even ‘more important than geography’ (Kunaka and Carruthers 2014, 24–25). Geopolitical considerations coexist with the need to produce a financial *hype* that is necessary to mobilize money. The implementation of an infrastructural corridor is somehow a bet on the capacity to produce a final corridor capable of sustaining investments beyond any specific actor. This also shows the relevance of how different agents can have a role in shaping the formation of a corridor. While policy papers refer mainly to stakeholder forums or institutional settings that bring people together in the building of consensus, other subjects can intervene and influence how a corridor develops. For example, private enterprises or state-controlled companies can intervene in operations such as the development of physical or financial infrastructure that can be more effective than forums or official initiatives in imposing a corridor agenda. In terms of the definition of corridors, we can thus observe a dynamic of ‘competitive alignment’ between different subjects, both public and private. This is reflected in the concept of ‘heterarchy’ which is defined by de Vries and Priemus as a ‘self-organized steering of multiple agencies, institutions, and systems that are operationally autonomous from one another yet structurally coupled as a result of their mutual interdependence’ (2003, 226). Given the loose political coordination at the transnational level, the realization of *core points* along projected routes can be used as a bridge-head to create the economic and political tension that supports corridor projects. In this way, the politics of corridors meshes different economic spatial schemes—a view of corridors as the natural development of existing trade and exchange, or as an instrument for planning something that does not currently exist—by creating the environment and levers for the restructuring of space according to logistical projections. Logistical connectivity produces splintering effects on the existing organization of space while creating, at the same time, its own paths of territorialization along infrastructure, trade, and supply routes.

While automation and the use of GPS data make possible the measuring of corridor performance, the assessment of the footprint of logistics in the overall economy remains more complex. The issue of monitoring how

logistics performs, even for industry itself, remains tricky, although different survey models have been used to target single-company performance or corridor-specific functions. Yet the industry seems to agree that the most important characteristic associated with “logistics friendly” countries’ is the level of sophistication of their service, which allows manufacturers to outsource logistics to third-party providers, increase their competitiveness ‘and focus on their core business while managing more complex supply chains’ (Arvis et al. 2014, 3). The role of logistics is widely considered to be crucial in order to connect global supply chains and thus take advantage of other parameters such as low labour costs or abundant natural resources. If physical infrastructures are obviously important, there is a growing understanding that infrastructure alone is insufficient in the development of better performance of the whole ‘transit system.’ This is indeed incorporated in a ‘transit regime’ which includes all the ‘infrastructure, legal framework, institutions, and procedures serving trade corridors’ necessary to make possible ‘the movements of goods from their origin (often a seaport) to their destination (such as a clearance center in the destination country)’ (Arvis et al. 2014, 33). The formation of transnational ‘transit regimes’ requires high degrees of cooperation at the level of governance, regulation, and standardization, and such coordination reveals the political layering of the technical practices central to logistics.

Commenting on the EU’s TEN policy, Opitz and Tellman observe that the ‘conceptual enfolding of the physicality of infrastructure’ becomes especially apparent when considering the concept of *bottleneck*. While the concept may seem simple, *bottleneck* ‘turns out to be a hybrid term that problematizes all sorts of different impasses in interconnectivity’ by turning ‘rather different issues into a similar problem: that of a barrier, which is to be erased by a physical-cum-economic connectivity’ (Opitz and Tellman 2015, 181–82). Together with other terms in the logistical discourse, the use of the term *bottleneck* is increasingly associated with a space of political experimentation. The definition of any point on a map as a *bottleneck* depends on causes that are both evaluated from past and present experience and foreseen by future projections regarding the performance of the related network. Different types of evaluations can enter the process: market conditions, traffic and demand data, environmental conditions, technical standards, and geo- and socio-political constraints. The consulting agency PricewaterhouseCoopers explains that while the term *bottleneck* is in common use at the policy level, ‘it becomes more problematic if a precise definition is required of what exactly is and is not a bottle-

neck and, more particularly, where bottlenecks might potentially occur in future' (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2011, 70). In practice, 'bottleneck identification will need to be pragmatic,' (9) and its definition can be considered as a performative act that lies between the technical and the political and across past conditions and future settings. This ambiguity makes the exercise of identification and definition of bottlenecks resonate with the cartographic practice of defining the world on a map (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 27–59). As PricewaterhouseCoopers explains, 'a bottleneck is [...] degradation in quality of service relative to some norm' but 'what the norm is,' as well as 'what constitutes a degradation of service of sufficient severity to justify "bottleneck" status,' can often be 'a matter of judgment.' As the agency concludes, 'there is no principled basis for drawing the boundary between bottleneck and no bottleneck. [...] The best that is likely to emerge is some kind of expert consensus about what profile of characteristics might reasonably permit a location on a grid to be regarded as a bottleneck' (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2011, 70).

Together with *bottleneck*, other concepts driven by logistics, such as 'intermodality' and 'interoperability,' reveal the impact on governance processes of logistical operations. While these concepts refer primarily to the technical problem of making possible and smooth the connections between different transport systems and networks, their role inside corridors is to 'reduce fragmentation of jurisdictional, infrastructural, procedural, management, and other boundaries [through] harmonization of laws, institutional frameworks, norms, standards, and practices based on internationally agreed standards' (Kunaka and Carruthers 2014, 19).

## ASIA'S ERA OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE POLITICS OF CORRIDORS

There is a long history of efforts to connect Asia along transport corridors. Plans to develop an Asian Highway (AH) and the idea of a Trans-Asian Railway (TAR), connecting Singapore with Istanbul, began to circulate in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet it was only in the 1990s, in the wake of liberalization processes and the development of transnational value chains, that the demand for physical connectivity to support export-led growth strategies and fragmented production networks grew extensively. In 1992, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) launched the ALTID project (Asian Land Transport

Infrastructure Development), promoting the realization of the AH and TAR. Since then, the AH and the TAR have become ‘major building blocks of the development of an international integrated intermodal transport system in Asia and beyond’ (De 2012, 157).

The argument behind the promotion of pan-Asian infrastructures resonates with mainstream discourse on development that includes infrastructure and logistical connectivity as the foundation for economic growth in a global world. This discourse considers the development of regional demand and consumption as key to overcoming the crisis that originated in 2008, and regional connectivity—including the development of ‘soft infrastructure’—as essential for its achievement (De 2012; Hoontrakul et al. 2014, 167–88). Following intense negotiation, intergovernmental agreements on the AH and TAR networks were adopted in 2004–2005, involving countries from Iran to the ASEAN nations, including India and the PRC (159, 174). It is against this background that China, after years of intense investment in logistical infrastructures across the world, officially launched the New Silk Road or Belt and Road Initiative (National Development and Reform Commission 2015).

An article published by the *Financial Times* in 2015 observed that the hype created by the Belt and Road discourse has not yet been met with concrete projects (Hornby 2015). Only a few investments, including in Pakistan and South Africa, have been directly connected to this plan. The article specifies that while the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) ‘could fill the gaps once it is up running,’ it is impossible to make serious provisions due to lack of details. A further observation is that China, like Western Europe after the fall of the Soviet Union, is now engaged in the development of ‘investment protocols’ to bridge legal and corporate norms between itself, Central Asian countries, and other countries (Hornby 2015). Yet, one should pay attention to the words used by Silk Road enthusiast Zhao Changhui, chief risk analyst at China Export-Import Bank, who stresses that the Belt and Road Initiative is more relevant as ‘a new method of development for China and the world’ than for the numbers it involves (Hornby 2015). The New Silk Road is, in fact, a particular articulation of the politics of corridors that is simultaneously distanced from, and intertwined with, the forms analyzed by Arvis, Kunaka, and Carruthers.

The plan presented in the Chinese government’s *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building a Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* mixes the historical ‘Silk Road Spirit’ with what can be called a

‘supply chain vision’ that is built on the development corridor scheme (National Development and Reform Commission 2015). The document calls for ‘policy coordination’ and ‘new models of international cooperation and global governance.’ It has two aims: first, to guarantee ‘unimpeded trade’ without political or infrastructural obstacles; second, to bring development to inner China and the landmass of Central Asia through a coordinated and planned vision, where the new “green” components of China’s industry peek out from between the lines. The key aims read as follows:

1. Improve the division of labor and distribution of industrial chains by encouraging the entire industrial chain and related industries to develop in concert;
2. Establish R&D, production and marketing systems;
3. Improve industrial supporting capacity and the overall competitiveness of regional industries; increase the openness of our service industry to each other;
4. Explore a new mode of investment cooperation, working together to build all forms of industrial parks such as overseas economic and trade cooperation zones and cross-border economic cooperation zones, and promote industrial cluster development;
5. Promote ecological progress in conducting investment and trade, increase cooperation in conserving eco-environment, protecting biodiversity, and tackling climate change. (National Development and Reform Commission 2015)

The text also implies the ‘core’ concept found in other corridor projects, referring to a string of ‘core cities’ and ‘key economic parks’ along the route. While the OBOR initiative has its own map, its reach can potentially extend well beyond the selected areas and reach any point on earth, where a *bottleneck* must be removed or new infrastructure is needed. After a first round of investments along the way, including, for example, the COSCO’s intervention in the port of Piraeus, Greece (Grappi 2015), President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang announced the creation of the AIIB in October 2013. The AIIB begun operations in 2015 and is seen as a potential competitor with present international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the ADB. Maybe for this reason, the *Toolkit* published by the World Bank makes no mention of the role of China in infrastructure development, even if it was discussed at least since 2011 (Brown 2011). Casting an eye over the almost 60 members of the AIIB and the projects approved so far reveals a different story. At the time of writing, seven projects were

already listed on the AIIB (2016) website involving Kazakhstan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Tajikistan, and Indonesia. Of the seven, three are cofinanced with the World Bank, one includes the ADB, and one involves the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development—for an intervention in Corridor 3 of the CAREC initiative which in turn is an ADB initiative. These arrangements confirm the character of ‘competitive alignment’ on infrastructural projects mentioned before.

Deborah Cowen, in an analysis of the leading role of China in corridor and gateways projects, observes that ‘rather than a world factory, China might be better conceptualized as a logistics empire’ (Cowen 2014, 67–68). This ‘empire’ is nevertheless peculiar. While it surely reflects the economic priorities of China, including the relevance of the logistics industry in the country, it also reflects a friction between national interests, the ideologically cooperative form of infrastructure, and the strategic gaze of logistical power (Grappi 2016, 153–74; Neilson 2012). Gordon Orr, senior adviser at the McKinsey Consulting Agency, suggests that the Chinese economy ‘is today made up of multiple sub economies’ of which ‘some are booming, some are declining, some are globally competitive, and others are fit for the scrap heap’ (Orr 2016). Splintered infrastructures and urban congestion, together with the dependency on ports in the East due to lack of connections in the West, are among the biggest threats to Chinese performance in the future, and one of the main problems China already has to face. This explains the stress placed by the government on infrastructure. Yet logistical corridors are more than simply technical answers to economic questions. In fact, as we have seen before, through the corridor logic they are producing new political dynamics that link the economy and institutions as well as market behaviour and government planning. Even the famous Jing-Jin-Ji Project (Jing for Beijing, Jin for Tianjin, and Ji for the ancient name of Hebei Province), which is set to realize the biggest urban corridor in the world, should thus be understood as a way to address the disorderly urban growth of the region by government planning, instead of as a ‘fictional’ projection of Chinese gigantism, as is often portrayed in the West (Johnson 2015). In the PRC’s 13th Five Year Plan, it is not by chance that behind the language of decentralization, more centralization is to be expected from the implementation of the Belt and Road. This centralization may nevertheless take unexpected twists since it implies the implementation of the corridor logic on a wider scale, involving both the entire Chinese territory and Asia.

What China is promoting is thus something more than a new role; it is a vision, a sort of ‘logistical Confucianism’ that has absorbed the principles of the ‘logistical revolution’ and now invites all regional and global powers to cooperate in the name of economic growth (Grappi 2016, 173; Allen 1997). The logistical nature of this vision is reflected in what is considered to be the precondition: infrastructure. And, as Professor Shi Ze from the government think tank China Institute of International Studies articulates:

In accordance with the existing economic foundation and condition, and the pre-conditions of our cooperation, our efforts must first be put to energy resources, the transportation grid, electricity systems, communications networks, other such basic infrastructure platforms, and the networking together of such platforms. There is a saying in China, ‘to develop wealth, you have to first build roads.’ The development of the corridor’s economy can only prosper when human resources, logistics and economic flow have all been brought on-line and integrated. These basic conditions must be there. (Shi 2014)

Asked about the presence of many ‘geopolitical bombs’ along the Belt and Road in the course of a panel on ‘Asia’s Era of Infrastructure’ held in Davos, the president of AIIB Jin Liqun stated that the bank will not fund projects involving disputed areas—which is questionable—but that all countries should understand that connectivity is important. He added that a criticism of the role of China inside the AIIB means a criticism over any of the multilateral banks already existing, giving that in all cases there is a country that contributes with more funds and more initiative (World Forum 2016).

### ECONOMY, SPACE, AND HISTORY: CORRIDORS AS POLITICAL FORMS IN THE LOGISTICAL CENTURY

The ways in which the logistical centre of gravity of Chinese strategies is affecting the political formation of new governance instruments and institutional apparatuses shows commonalities, with other processes and experiences. As Deborah Cowen notes, ‘it was geographers who were debating (and mapping) corridors and gateways four decades ago in a disciplinary conversation [on urban systems] that has largely disappeared since’ (Cowen 2014, 63). The reference to this kind of debate is the starting point of a special issue of the journal *Transport and Geography* dedicated to the governance of corridors (Priemus and Zonneveld 2003). What is

relevant for our discussion is how the upgrading of corridors from essentially an urbanity problem to a larger concept related to economic planning and development has led, in Europe, to the definition of megacorridors or, later, trans-European corridors. These concepts stressed the role of the corridor as a 'planning concept' used by town planners since the nineteenth century, for example, with the Ciutat Lineal concept of Spanish planner Soria y Mata. In their introduction to the special issue, Priemus and Zonneveld argue that megacorridors 'should not be conceived of as an entity occupying physical space' because they:

comprise the arena within which an attempt must be made to arrive at an integration of a multitude of social interests. In this sense, a corridor is neither a sectorial nor a spatial concept, but rather the indication of a challenge: that of improving the governance of infrastructure and area development. (Priemus and Zonneveld 2003, 176)

Even the European Commission understands corridors as a comprehensive planning concept for spatial development with cross-governance implications—a conception that resonates in the *Vision and Actions* presented by the Chinese government to qualify the Belt and Road Initiative (CEC 1999, 36; National Development and Reform Commission 2015).

As already mentioned, when looking at corridors as a planning concept, two different implications must be considered. First, different models for corridor planning and corridor management exist, having different implications regarding the involvement of the existing institutional settings. Second, the design of corridors is the result of different streams of mapping and envisioning the economic spatial structure. Corridors can be the result of economic processes of concentration along certain routes and in certain kinds of clusters. On the other hand, the planning of corridors can create new economic flows. It is conceptually relevant to note that, in the discussion around corridors, a thinking space is created whereby distinctions—between the economic and the institutional, the public and the private, the national and the supranational, and the local and the global—tend to blur and even vanish. This highlights the inner nature of corridors as forms that stretch economic and political processes across and beyond the established maps, allowing peculiar forms of politics and economy to temporarily crystallize.

From an economic point of view, the spatial distribution of economic activities after the 'logistical revolution' took the form of firm-centred corridors along the territorial advancement of supply chains. The flows

created by the extension of the supply chain beyond the original reach of each enterprise's activity created a grid of connections within the form of loose corridors. Containerization helped to centralize these connections at the transnational level because carriers connected flows originated by different firms. In this way, containerization has helped forge powerful networks and pushed for a geographical restructuring of ports and related infrastructures. The growth of so-called third-party logistics services and their concentration around a few key global players is another factor that pushes the organization of otherwise disorganized inland transport activities, matching them with the internal organization of the assembly (or extraction) line.

Considering the logistical politics around corridors gives us the analytical capacity to connect, organize, and valorize a large spectrum of unbalances: between regions, within regions and countries, between labour conditions and productivity, around stability and mobility, and between extreme performances and sudden crisis. These dynamics are of great interest for a theory of the state form and its variations. A useful reference here is that of the 'global state': a concept proposed by Italian scholar Maurizio Ricciardi to describe the contemporary state as a 'critical actor' which derives political legitimacy from the capacity to act across different fields, rather than from the modern form of the social contract (Ricciardi 2013, 13). This state can assume different shapes but is always marked by a fundamental 'incompleteness' regarding its sovereign capacities and legitimacy (19).

This essay attempts to connect the scholarly debates and technical knowledge on corridors, with the dimension of logistical operations, to show how corridors may emerge as political formations against this background. If we consider the trajectories and transformations of the state and sovereignty, Lauren Benton (2010) describes the colonial expansion of European states as taking the form of 'corridors and enclaves' and argues that these should be considered part and parcel of the wider history of modern sovereignty, and as positioning the territorial state as a specific and situated experience. Even if the state form has in the twentieth century subsumed all other forms of political and institutional formations, leading to its proliferation, Saskia Sassen describes it as a particular assemblage of already-existing capacities into the institutional fabric of the territorial state (Anghie 2004; Sassen 2006). Does this mean that the corridors we are referring to are nothing new, or that they are just the contemporary expression of a longer history? The answer is twofold.

On the one hand, as we have seen, the history of sovereignty and of the state is marked by the corridor form. On the other, however, the global politics of corridors is a global institutional form that is organized and

conceptualized around the discourse of logistics and its operability. As the logistical politics of corridors is generating a new dynamic in governance that is creating its own instruments and political discourses, these are penetrating and imposing themselves in different ways inside the many sites of global politics. Unlike the ‘snaking pattern’ of jurisdiction traced by Benton, logistical mapping is not about control and authority building, but about projecting and pushing further—and rendering and visualizing hidden integration lines along global value chains. Even when geopolitical enlargement is the focus, this happens within a global grid of economic, financial, and commodity flows that reflect the conceptual shift produced by the ‘logistical revolution.’ These processes refer to different relations between power, politics, and space, rather than a global political authority over faraway territories, and the entity that is supposedly enlarging is, rather, an always uncompleted and transforming actor (Benton 2010; Cowen 2014, 64; Ricciardi 2013; Mezzadra and Neilson 2014).

If Benton distinguishes two kinds of corridors—as places where the movement of goods and people occur and as instruments in the process of imagining and constructing sovereignty—global logistical power sees corridors in still another way. In fact, they are conceived both as concrete networks of infrastructure and as governance structures that constitute centres of power. There is thus a difference between an understanding of corridors as the expression of fragmented sovereignties and corridors as political forms. Rather than consider logistics and corridors as functional instruments of a particular sovereign power, which is affected by their form but remains nevertheless the focus of the analysis, as in the conceptualization of the ‘logistical State’ advanced by Henri Lefebvre, I shift the gaze to corridors in order to observe the political dimensions of logistics (Lefebvre 2009; Toscano 2014; Grappi 2016, 25–28, 103–30).

## CONCLUSION

While corridors entered the economic and political debate as part of the promotion of the market economy that defines connectivity, accessibility, and infrastructure as a *conditio sine qua non* for economic growth and competitiveness in a world economy, the creation of development corridors is also related to the idea that balanced and sustainable economic growth can bring back the role of the state and its institutions. The very construction of infrastructure is a way to boost economies and create jobs. Large corridor plans can thus be considered a mix of neoliberal austerity policy and Keynesian demand stimulation practices (Albrechts and

Coppens 2003, 217–18). More widely, the ‘politics of corridors’ advanced in this essay has to do with two fundamental dimensions: the leading role of logistical operations and logistical rationality in the drawing, planning, and implementation of its material imagination; and the formation of new tools of governance that reshape the relation between assemblages of territory, authority, and rights. In creating its own logic and governing bodies, the politics of corridors is an emerging form of ‘global power’ where government and governance intersect (Schiera 2013, 34). By saying this I am not suggesting that the aim is to govern the global as a unique superstructure, but rather that the politics of corridors is a distinctive form of government *vis-à-vis* the global. As many have already observed, a distinctive feature of the global is that this does not imply the disappearance of previous forms. Nevertheless, the state is transformed by the politics of corridors. This politics should not be evaluated merely by its success, or by judging the adherence between master plans and their practical realization, but from its capacity to orient debates and decisions, and from the simultaneous dynamics of cooperation and competition it generates between existing institutions. We can in this way appreciate how the relation between regional and global dynamics reshapes not only spatial relations but also conceptual nomenclatures. If the world meets in Baku, as we say opening this essay, this means that we need to look beyond the matrix of pure economic interests that merge in the area: from resource extraction to tax breaks, from geopolitical realignments to the possibility to open new markets and find fresh labour force. What we need is to analyze how these dimensions intertwine, transform, and reshape the ways in which political power is being achieved and practised today, and how it pursues its unstable legitimacy. The focus on corridors suggests that the spatial reorganization they entail is accompanied by a transformation of the role institutions do and will play inside neoliberalism.

The politics of corridors, constructed by adopting the political discourse of logistics, is taking a step forward in terms of the political reorganization achieved through zones as well as in the servicing of global supply chains. It is creating enclaves inside the territories of the state and fragmenting its space, while at the same time reinforcing the role of the state and redefining its sovereign capacities. The need to understand more deeply how the different politics of corridors overlap, conflict, and diverge in specific places on the ground, and in relation to different institutional settings—as well as the trajectories of resistance and frictions produced through the emergence of the corridor form and its variations—suggests a

further direction for research. By proposing the concept of the 'politics of corridors,' my aim is to move our gaze from the single infrastructure, the singular point where logistical operations hit the ground, to the larger political rationality and variegated geographies of logistical power that are behind the realization of these projects, and behind their subsequent reorganization of political and social spaces. How to confront the politics of corridors, and how to organize the subjectivities that it encounters, generates, and puts into motion, is a major task for contemporary political theory.

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