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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Securing Local Effects in Globalization through Multi-level Governance: Evidence from Steering the New Silk Road

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**Abstract**
The New Silk Road (NSR), in combination with global challenges on climate action, trade wars, and the COVID-19 Pandemic, requests a new understanding of the "local" in more sustainable globalization. Being far more than an infrastructure initiative, China takes a leading role in future globalization. However, the NSR faces an implementation gap in sustainably generating local effects. In this line, experts call to implement joint governance, leading to the research question: how can multi-level governance assist in securing local effects along with the countries of the NSR? Building upon theories on governance and regionalism across spatial scales, this article introduces the results of a qualitative content analysis on international expert interviews. The analysis reveals the potentials and challenges of the NSR for local effects but also includes suggestions for transnational cooperation and governance, which finally leads to defining the role of supranational institutions and the necessity of local support in terms of a governance design.

**Keywords** Multi-level governance · Belt and Road Initiative · Globalization · Local effects · Local development · Sustainable development

## 1 Introduction

The New Silk Road (NSR) reflects China's globalization strategy (Carrai et al. 2020b) and the intention for a greater economic openness based on policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade facilitation, financial cooperation, and people-to-people contacts (Belt and Road Portal 2015). Although the initiative is partially successful, it requires further research on governance mechanisms for sustainable implementation. Such issues relate to the limited transparency and procurement,

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the need for standards, and questions on the regional effects of the NSR (Blanchard 2021; Pechlaner et al. 2020). Scholars indicate and criticize the quality of institutional governance structures (Öztürk 2019), the definition of ownership (Du & Zhang 2018), efficacy and China's leadership towards a new international order (Beeson & Li 2016) and the risk of investment returns and participation (Tianren & Zhang 2021). In fact, the NSR requires an effective model of multi-level governance to resolve disputes beyond the trade perspective (Feldman 2018; Kettunen 2019), to integrate member countries (Boamah & Appiah-Kubi 2019) and to raise environmental sustainability (Coenen et al. 2020). Sustainability governance, therefore, could act as a binding element across industries, combining supply chains and production networks to envision an international sustainable implementation of global activities (Bush et al. 2015) (Sect. 4.6). Sustainability along with the NSR is referred to as Chinas "green BRI", which is also widely present in the state policies (Coenen et al. 2020; Defraigne 2021). However, it seems unauthentic as China is reallocating heavy industry to NSR countries and pushing climate neutrality far into the future. In opposition, the principle of sustainable development should serve as a guideline for NSR countries (Feng et al. 2019), including in-person negotiations on eye-level, promotion of green energy, long-term oriented development plans, the establishment of sustainability standards, equitable funding, compliance with employee rights and regional integration.

Recent research opens up predominantly the regional diversity (e.g. Latin America) and critical discourse about regulatory quality, government effectiveness (Montoya et al. 2020), and the potential of innovation networks and entrepreneurial ecosystems in knowledge transfer (Chen et al. 2021). During the time of the COVID-19 Pandemic, China and the NSR received attention in international politics and cooperation. Although the health sector has always been a minor part of the NSR, Chinese leadership in this sector shaped the fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic. "China's health diplomacy is farsighted and strategic" (Rudolf 2021). The effective health aid in NSR countries has strengthened China's role in those countries and created geopolitical shifts for a post-pandemic period (Rudolf 2021).

Following the previous problem statement, we assume that the design of multi-level governance is beneficial to provide positive effects along with the NSR on the local level. This article concentrates on the Eurasian Landbridge of the NSR as a vital place for future globalization, in particular as Central Asia and Eastern Europe provide the potential for economic growth. However, the economic belt includes five key regions that cover Eurasia: Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Central and Eastern Europe, which require the linking of global and local development (Sect. 3). Against this background, we ask the research question: How can multi-level governance assist in securing local effects along with the countries of the NSR?

Thus, the paper asks for the potential of sustainability governance in the complexity of local development and globalization (Hale & Held 2011; Jönsson & Tallberg 2010; van Roozendaal 2020). In this regard, the discussion can be placed at the interface of geopolitics, geoeconomics, and local economies–admittedly from a western perspective. Governance mechanisms address this interface and are frequently under transformation and challenge research. Scholars explore complex

governance globally concerning new institutions, governmental officials, corporate governance, NGOs, or other players in an action-oriented approach (Hale & Held 2011; Jönsson & Tallberg 2010). In a world economy that intervenes in national economies and their politics increasingly (van Roozendaal 2020), new international agendas with rules and transnational modes of governance evolve (Sahlin-Andersson & Djelic 2006) and offer intriguing solutions to pressing challenges (Hale & Held 2011). Therefore, multi-level governance recognizes the interaction of all relevant partners across administrative levels and provides an analytical and problem-centered approach to regional integration, which has been little observed so far.

## 2 Literature Review

This article is embedded in political and regional science, where governance has become the central concept, aiming to provide direction and control for society and the economy (Peters 2011). In addition, this section focuses on the local–global interface, which broadly spans states, companies, and quasi-governmental organizations as actors (Montoya et al. 2020). In contrast, the NSR is often discussed from a state-centric perspective but impacts company and social activities on a local scale as well. Therefore, we will link governance to general approaches in economic development.

### 2.1 Governance in International Relation

Often perceived as a national issue, economic development also relies on international economic and social systems. Trade theories established by Ricardo and Krugman (Deardorff 2005) proposed a comparative advantage and implied a win–win situation for the countries taking part in a trade system. A broad theoretical set is summarized by Todaro & Smith, (2015) and includes theories on the international-dependence revolution, neoclassic and economic geography.

In contrast to the EU-driven research on regional integration, international relations took a stake in the broader concept of regional cooperation (Börzel 2016). The governance turn has stressed the potential of governance mechanisms in regionalism as it includes the informal process of political, social, economic, and cultural interaction beyond the state-centric view in a non-hierarchical mode of policymaking (Börzel & Risse 2016a). By definition, governance is a collective regulation of societal issues, including self-regulation through private actors as well as public authorities. It entails three general configurations: hierarchy, markets, and networks (Mayntz 2006). The related theories are manifold but are constituted mainly in a field of relational approaches, e.g. on transaction costs. Initially steamed from the political context of international relations, governance is used to compare and analyze the way governments exert political power in social interactions. For a long time, executing governance was dominated by the policy-making of governments (Kohler-Koch 2003a). However, governance has witnessed changes in its functional and territorial definition, which induced the rise of several sub-concepts and the

expansion towards public policy and public administration, organizational theory, international relations, and models of corporate governance (Brown 2018). Today, there exists a number of functional governance forms, e.g. in terms of security, trade, finance, development, social, migration, environmental or democracy (Börzel & Risse 2016b), but also concerning their territorial level: community, local, regional, global.

In a global context, governance summarizes the intricate patterns of authority in world politics with many institutions, networks, and actors (Jönsson & Tallberg 2010). Every state policy is therefore embedded in a global governance structure (Dingwerth & Pattberg 2006). Practically, more precise definitions were developed, which also differentiate between "governance that is global"–coordination and steering with the claim of global reach–and "governance in the global"–coordination and steering on all levels of interaction, including global (Latham 1999). By no means is globalization only relevant at the global scale and global governance is often not a reaction to the issues of globalization; rather, it stems from problems that challenge individual states on a national level. In addition, those issues need to be conveyed between global challenges and the local context (Voskresenski 2019; Woods 2013).

The impact of globalization on local economies and societies can be reproduced to a great extent by local actors, meaning that effects are spatially different and influenced by locals (Woods 2013). Local governance tries to maintain the local interests and rights in working and living in a region by providing local services and participation and thus increasing the quality of life of the residents, but basically, it remains local in its scope (Shah & Shah 2006). In these often small-scale structures, the term regional governance is often applied synonymously to the local governance, but also in a territorial approach to regional development. National governance still describes the same governance characteristics but is firmly bounded to the framework of a state, including the institutions, administration, and legal authorities (Kohler-Koch 2003a).

### 2.2 Transnationalism and Understandings of Regionalism

Although the literature has been collected on policymaking (e.g. Kohler-Koch 2003b), questions remain on how compatible different cultural notions of acting in foreign policy are and how actors behave in different understandings of regionalism. The popularity of multi-level governance evolved as it raises such questions about nation-states, central governments, and also about other levels and actors (Bache & Flinders 2004). Bache & Flinders (2004) conclude that governance in its complexity can no longer be considered as a central state task, although state-centered theories see governments as the key actors in regional institution building, e.g. regionalism (Börzel 2016). In a narrow understanding of regionalism, institutions are the key actors in these interactions. Evolving from social science, institutions "are sets of norms, rules, and procedures that enable as well as constrain actor behavior […] and may also constitute their identities and preferences" (Börzel & Risse 2016a). Formal institutions are organizations that act within the institutional setting. From a supranational perspective, regional organizations institutionalize cooperation

relations and constitute regionalism (Börzel & Risse 2016a). Popular examples of such organizations are the World Trade Organization or World Health Organization. Supranational organizations differ in their function and apply different degrees of institutionalization. For example, the roles of China, India, and Russia in international relations (Voskresenski 2019) are shaped by relatively loose alliances.

A multi-lateral world causes the interaction, overlapping or even clash of political and economic understandings. The handling of global issues, such as climate change, reflects the growing awareness of cross-stakeholder involvement in a complex global setting and the necessity of multi-level arrangements (Carmenta et al. 2017). Therefore, society-based approaches raise the importance of markets and civil actors in regional institution-building (Börzel 2016). In close relation to multi-level governance, transnational governance includes this market perspective. It highlights the participation of state and non-state actors in non-hierarchal governance (Ly 2019). Equal to transnational governance, transregionalism is a more flexible approach to understand and conceptualize regional organization and apprehending different levels of cooperation (Baert et al. 2014; Koller & Voskresenski 2019). This interface of markets and civil society is further expressed by public–private partnerships (PPP).

How transnational institutions are formed is still an issue of current research (Seabrooke 2010). An interesting approach is the role of leadership in regionalism. Both governance and leadership share the goal-oriented alignments of people, structures, processes, resources, and place (Peters 2010). From a market-driven perspective, international lead firms bring forward globalization itself through the connectivity of global value chains. But leaders in the context of regionalism are primarily states that engage in concrete region-building. And the intention behind this kind of hegemonic leadership is frequently connected with strengthening military alliances to promote stability or access to new markets (Börzel 2016). However, the intentions to promote region-building are various and meet different regionalism configurations, for example, between European and Asian Regionalism (Voskresenski 2019).

### 2.3 Governance in Regional Perspective

At the interface between regional and global governance, research gaps about the systematic combination of different levels and forms of governance became famous, as well as the role of the legacy or the ability to act of the nation-states (Jönsson & Tallberg 2010; Mayntz 2006). Regionalism acts at this interface and faces the challenge to steer these concepts carefully and to mitigate between them (Voskresenski 2019). Although each governance type obtains specialties, tools and mechanisms within, the interplay of scales becomes more important.

The various governance concepts also entail the power to integrate the two perspectives of regional integration, state-led regionalism, and market-driven regionalization (Börzel & Risse 2016a). In this light, the objective of governance might be to achieve a configuration that includes the specialties of regionalism and regionalization, e.g. in the shape of good or effective governance (Boamah & Appiah-Kubi

2019; Meyer 2018), but also democracy or participation as well as directions in sustainable development.

The instance that regionalism requires multiple levels of governance is also expressed in the definition: "[Governance captures] various ways in which state, market, and civil society actors relate and come together in different 'formal' and 'informal' coalitions, networks, and modes of regional and multi-level governance" (Söderbaum 2011). Multi-level governance focuses on the decision-making processes and their coordination among several spatial levels (Benz 2004b). Thereby, it is not a division of responsibilities and tasks among several institutions. Instead, it is a kind of flexible setting consisting of competing, interdependent, and overlapping institutions and jurisdictions, which causes the necessity for negotiation (Benz 2004b; Mayntz 2006). Hence, multi-level governance is interested in "the manner in which societies and political systems are steered, authoritative decisions taken, and outcomes achieved […]" (Bache & Flinders 2004). Governance is thus an instrument to break with traditional functional/sectoral organization and to provide new ways of stakeholder involvement (Kohler-Koch 2003a). The concrete governance mechanisms are diverse, reaching from formal tools (e.g. definition of standards, roles, and contracts) to soft approaches (e.g. spread of information, mutual adjustment, negotiations). Finally, the mixture of those approaches is evident as top-down and bottom-up mechanisms meet, to achieve a decent cooperation of transnational institutions and local actors (Mayntz 2007). To understand these complex relationships, the research gaps in multi-level governance address the existing academic boundaries between domestic and international politics, the link between good and multi-level governance (Bache & Flinders 2004), and the need for comparative studies (Benz 2004a).

In the sum of the theoretical considerations, international cooperation shows its complexity across different spatial levels and disciplines. Against this background, regionalism needs to be supplemented by initiatives that link global impetus with local interests and, at its best, generate local impact. Multi-level governance implies a flexible approach to local economic benefits and diverts the attention from power-driven political supremacy in international relations towards sustainable development. In the case of the NSR, the balance between different spatial levels and various governance mechanisms becomes a crucial factor that also requests an integrated theoretical perspective. It is evident for the local level to mediate the effects of the NSR that may result in regional clusters around infrastructure, knowledge transfer or economic diversification.

## 3 Methods and Data

This article presents the results of a series of qualitative interviews that focus on the potential of multi-level governance while recognizing the particularities of the New Silk Road. In this regard, international research is necessary that also spans multiple disciplines. The research gaps in combining governance and regionalism in relation to the New Silk Road (Vangeli 2020), which challenge its local impacts (Gerstl 2020; Pechlaner et al. 2019), provide a good starting point to define an appropriate

methodology. As the governance modes within the NSR are still understudied (Carrai et al. 2020a; Gerstl 2020; Thees 2020), a qualitative approach (Carrai et al. 2020b) assists in exploring not only the gaps in cooperation and local impact but also in discussing appropriate steering mechanisms. In addition, an international study needs to recognize cultural differences in governance and power asymmetries regarding China (Chheang 2021), which calls for a sensitive research approach.

Furthermore and to link this study with existing ones, at least a minimal geographical focus was necessary. Therefore, Eurasia has been chosen as the study area. A mixed history shapes Eurasia in regional integration. Besides the many political influences from any direction, during the time of the Soviet Union, Central Asia witnessed high levels of interaction until its dissolution in 1991. Since then, self-organized attempts for regional integration in Central Asia were widely unsuccessful (e.g. Eurasian Economic Community or Central Asian Union) until the EAEU in 2015 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 were established (Godehart 2014; Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes 2020). The EAEU acts as a supranational organization to support the free movement of people, goods, capital, and services. However, still, tariffs evolve and the dependence on Russia is high (Krapohl &Vasileva-Dienes 2020). In cooperation with China, attempts arise to integrate the EAEU and the NSR and foster economic development in Central Asia, although the initiatives differ in their administration and investment policy (Defraigne 2021; Shakhanova & Garlick 2020). A central challenge of regional integration in Eurasia is to unite the different and even diverging forms of regionalism with different geopolitical approaches (Bossuyt & Bolgova 2019; Pieper 2020).

With international experts that are located and acting across Eurasia, the sampling of relevant experts was conducted according to the particular fields of expertise (Table 1). In sum, 15 interviews were conducted in 2019, representing the diversity of experts. The interviews were supported by a semi-structured interview guideline that included questions on context conditions, steering mechanisms, but also a narrative part on impacts and solutions. After transcribing, a qualitative summarizing content analysis was conducted through MaxQDA and the process that Mayring, (2000) has developed. Against this background, the qualitative content analysis builds upon the research questions and determines categories inductively from the empirical material. Those categories are defined briefly and frequently proven. In addition, a second researcher codes the material to achieve inter-coda reliability. Finally, the analysis needs the interpretation of the results against the background of the research question and the research object. As the research process and the available material are different to quantitative content analysis, the qualitative one includes conformability, dependability or credibility as quality criteria rather than achieving generalization (Prasad 2019). Against the background of the interview collection in 2019, additional literature was analyzed to reflect the actuality of the interviews. Of special relevance for this article are Blanchard, (2021), Coenen et al., (2021) on environmental governance, and (Gerstl & Wallenböck 2021) on strategic considerations. Where appropriate, insights into quantitative data were included (e.g. International Insitute of Green Finance 2021). Basically, those studies and articles show a similar direction to our interviews from 2019. Beyond that, we aim to explore underlying factors of governance, which are manifested in cultural practices

**Table 1** Interview partners (IP). Source: Own elaboration

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| IP1 | International Forum on the New Silk Road, Germany | IP6 | Professor in cultural studies, China | IP11 | German-Chinese Tourism Company |
| IP2 | Researcher in China Outbound Tourism, Germany | IP7 | Expert in a global mobility association, Spain & Russia | IP12 | International advisor, Germany & Spain |
| IP3 | Expert in Banking and Local Development, Austria | IP8 | Author and scientist, China | IP13 | Leader in recruitment in Fashion and Luxury, Germany |
| IP4 | China-Expert and Journalist | IP9 | Professor in Crisis Society Studies, Russia | IP14 | Infrastructure service provider, Germany |
| IP5 | Analyst and professor for international relations and strategies, Italy | IP10 | Professor in tourism, China | IP15 | Professor in economics and cultural science, China & Germany |

that do not change frequently. Additional impulses from recent publications refer often to the Chinese role in the COVID-19 Pandemic and the cooperation and competition on health products. While countries initially stood against globalization and promoted more local production, over time this has reverted to business as usual.

## 4 Discussion and Analyses

The subsequent analysis builds upon the qualitative content analysis of the topics of effects, cooperation and governance, global institutions, and local support. Quotations from the interviews are used with reference to the interview number (IP1-15). For streamlining this analysis, findings from the literature are referred to when appropriate to find answers to the research question: how can multi-level governance assist in securing local effects along with the countries of the NSR?

### 4.1 Potentials and Challenges for Local Effects

The investments made by China, but also the joint consortia and additional international institutes, need to be evaluated carefully against the background of quantitative figures such as return on investment, value-added or created jobs. In general, Chinese investment in the NSR regions reached US$ 770 billion in 2021. Although the COVID-19 Pandemic challenged investments, huge investments were still made in East Asia and Africa (International Institute of Green Finance 2021; Chiyemura et al. 2023). In exploring impact and governance, the importance of a qualitative analysis of the NSR becomes relevant.

The conducted interviews show “enormous opportunities” (IP12), but dependence on Chinese efforts as well (IP14). On the positive side stands the agglomeration of investment capital, which especially suits Eastern Europe and Central Asia (IP2, IP3). In terms of transport and connectivity, the interviewees recognize the increase in transportation speed for high-quality goods and the potential for trade (IP2, IP3, IP7, IP10, IP12). Further on, IP11 named side effects for the mobility of people in the case of tourism. The role of sustainability comes into focus by implementing those investments locally (IP7). In addition, the exchange of expertise in infrastructure projects can be beneficial for both the investing and the receiving party (IP5, IP10). Nevertheless, the NSR offers fertile ground for increased trade which is a basis for further local development. Through the increased connectivity of the NSR, attending countries might benefit from access to new markets based on the export diversification type of industrialization. This is also closely related to the matter of upgrading.

Challenges evolve at the interface of regional development and the unclear local effects, for example, in financing (IP11). Critics argue that the Chinese generate dependency by granting compelling loans for unprofitable infrastructure measures to the receiving countries (IP2). The receiving countries are under pressure through the perception of risk and unclear democratic systems (IP2, IP3, IP4). The second most relevant challenge is bringing in Chinese labor or assigning Chinese companies to

build infrastructure projects in the respective regions, which diminishes local effects and the population's approval (IP1, IP2, IP3). Various case studies from the literature support those insights focusing on majority-ownership mergers (Du & Zhang 2018), low returns of investment (Dimitrijević, 2017), preference for Chinese workers (Chan 2020; Githaiga & Bing 2019) or weak local sustainability (Thees 2020). The latter challenges meet the idea of a global sustainability governance that includes local interests and conditions.

As China gains power and the NSR spreads, it increases its impact (Chheang 2021; Scuttari et al. 2020; Pradhan & Mohanty 2021). As a direct consequence of the infrastructure projects, their effects are widely positive in terms of transport and trade but weak in relation to the local benefits generated (Thees 2020). A recent study (Chen & Guo 2020) evaluates the infrastructure investment efficiency of 20 countries along the NSR and indicates an average investment efficiency of 0.552. This reflects a positive trend, but regional discrepancy as the developed countries' investment efficiency is notably higher. In this evaluation, tangible and intangible contributions should be taken into account (Chun 2017). A broad set of effects was explored, for example, by Carrai, Defraigne, Wouters (Carraiet al. 2020a) and by Gerstl (2020) on Central Asia. In this regard, local fears arise towards the Chinese economic power and planning procedures.

In discovering the regional effects, it becomes obvious that time is needed to generate effects from infrastructure investments (IP1, IP3, IP15). The investments from China can be beneficial for receiving regions, especially in transport, education, and health infrastructure (IP3). Uncertainties emerge from potential counter initiatives and interests of other investing countries. However, effects must evolve for both sides, China and the receiving countries. In the meantime, transit countries claim to get benefits that also suit locals in a sustainable way (IP1, IP2, IP5, IP8, IP7).

### 4.2 Towards Transnational Cooperation

Regional cooperation is one of the essential parts of governance. Cooperation is perceived in many instances as necessary to implement transnational infrastructure projects successfully and reflects issues of multiple-party collaboration, local inhabitants, cooperation across branches, dialogs, PPP or research collaboration (Dunford 2020; Thees 2020; Yang & Zeng 2019). Cooperation is one of the most important keywords in NSR research (Thees 2020). In general, China highlights the openness and flexibility to step into new cooperation in its policy (Belt and Road Portal 2015). By 2020, China lists "201 intergovernmental cooperation agreements with 138 countries and 31 international organizations" (Ministry of Commerce PRC 2020), that bound the region through relatively loose memorandums of understanding. Although this state-led regionalism seems successful in numbers and is based on China's cultural roots in soft governance (Dunford 2020), experts call for better intra-regional cooperation (Schiek, 2017), as we also see struggles for region-wide initiatives due to the competition between the countries' political leaders.

The conducted interviews stress the relevance and the potential for transnational cooperation along with the NSR. Thereby we can distinguish different levels.

Starting from the normative level on win–win cooperation and peacefulness (IP5, IP8) towards the benefits of cultural exchange (IP6, IP8) and "partnership at eye level" (IP1). The connectivity, also reflecting a central component of regionalization, is mentioned as the output of international cooperation–especially for Eurasia; for Europe, the NSR "can be a chance to re-discover the former relations to China" (IP8). Nevertheless, the most intense cooperation in terms of investment volume and projects is in Chinese neighboring countries (IP3). Although China is interested in regional development, cooperation, and local support are also needed at the company level to use the catalytic potential (IP8). The chance for international companies to participate in NSR tenders is frequently criticized for a lack of transparency, competition with Chinese state-run companies and unclear standards (IP4, IP5).

Further challenges partially lie in the geopolitical positioning of respective countries but also in the conditions for investments, financing, and usage. Investments are "not without reward" to China (IP3). However, according to the above-mentioned impact, investments do not have to be non-profit, but reservations about China are still widespread even among the population. Those examples include the Stan-countries, but also Kenia and Pakistan (IP3) (Githaiga & Bing 2019; Menhas et al. 2019). Those disagreements between the regions or the nation-states are threatening trust for regional integration. The geopolitical positioning of countries has been an important discussion in the European Union as well, criticizing the NSR and launching counter-initiatives to weaken the Chinese influence in Europe (IP1).

### 4.3 Requirements for Governance

The subsequent discussion elaborates on the potential of governance to support the sustainable steering of the NSR. Following the interviewees, the need for joint governance grows to secure a successful and sustainable development NSR. Six criteria can be derived below, that build upon the Chinese soft governance approach that is based on dialog and negotiation.

1. *Openness & flexibility*: the fast implementation of the NSR causes uncertainty and aversion (IP4). This requests a cross-stakeholder and cross-cultural approach, including new investors (IP3). China itself is relatively open, as no concrete master plan exists (IP3). Throughout the last decades, global governance was required to democratize its processes through enhanced accountability and increased participation of transnational actors in policymaking (Bexell et al. 2010). In this regard, soft governance is strongly connected with the definition of responsible global leadership (Mendenhall 2013). Although, if not stated officially, "China is a leader of a new order" (IP8), which can be an obstacle to implementing wide-ranging governance systems (IP9). Confrontation with Western powers on the ground of the NSR should be avoided, but the integration at the local scale of different investors and donors is an important step to increasing the local effects.
2. *Responsibility and Standards*: claims were raised by various researchers referring to the responsibility and power of China to make a more significant contribution to global governance (Ly 2019). Although China is not clearly expressing

a detailed governance approach, the NSR will definitely shape global economic governance (Chun 2017), but can also function as a framework itself (Gerstl 2020). However, conflicts and rivalries arise between China and the participating countries that need more detailed governance (Öztürk 2019). This could also force China to open up and to collaborate closely with international law (Chen 2020) and ethical standards (Chun 2017). Such an opening would equal a more formal approach towards governance.

3. *Multi-lateral dialog*: equality of countries (IP9) on a multi-lateral basis (IP4). At the moment, China obtains the sovereignty to steer the NSR, but the governance may equal "a loose amalgam of bilateral relations tailored to China" (IP1). However, a variety of institutions, such as Think Thanks and NGOs need to represent different opinions from different countries (IP8, IP12). Discussing governance aims to find a suitable steering mechanism within the NSR, building upon the necessity to cooperate in a productive way and to include the interests of various stakeholders (IP8). Potential lies still in making contracts in-between the participating countries (IP1) and having dialog between different scales, institution and state authorities, companies, delegations, and regional chambers of commerce (IP5), either formal or informal (Wang 2019). In a regional perspective, engaging in multi-lateral relations would further contribute a regional integration.
4. *Transnational and policy coordination*: interviewees acknowledge that politics has a major responsibility to implement governance. However, the companies need to implement the projects (IP14) and act in the markets (IP1, IP3, IP13). The research field on transnational governance bridges different kinds of actors and questions effectiveness and legitimacy (Hale & Held 2011). Policies need new platforms with "very strict and transparent rules of making the decisions" (IP9) to meet the uncertainties and anxieties (IP2). There is general confusion in Europe as to how to deal with China (support, counter initiative, toleration, damaging), an ideal governance model is missing (IP1, IP2, IP7, IP9). Rhetorically China is very much actually emphasizing the absolute autonomy of the nation-state (IP1). The NSR policies are planned by the National Development and the Development Reform Commission, the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of International Issue for Internal Relationship (IP8) (Coenen et al. 2021). There is also an important discussion on the direction and level of planning. The Chinese perspective is top-down (IP4, IP10), but for regional integration, top-down and bottom-up should be equally important in the future (IP10). That means "open the door and also open the policy" (IP10). The relatively normative approach of the NSR as rather as a set of ideas than as a set of strategies and policies hinders its rationale in international relations (IP8). Nevertheless, there is a need for policy coordination at the state level, but local and regional monitoring is important to securing a high level of cooperation (IP3, IP4, IP7), especially considering the long-term perspective of the NSR and the geoeconomic range (IP4).

In sum, the governance needs reflect a multi-level and transnational type of governance. Various interview statements acknowledge the strengths of soft governance but request a more formal approach to developing cooperation in the NSR further. Especially in sustainability governance, China needs to establish itself as a

sustainability leader to become recognized and accepted globally. This is also supported by the next sections that focus on two important scales and success factors in governance: supranational institutions and local support.

### 4.4 The Role of Supranational Institutions

Going further to elaborate on the question of the design of sustainable governance, institutions came into focus. Scholars and interviewees evaluate institutions in the NSR differently. Why does the NSR need to be multilateralized towards a global institution? (Zhongying 2015). Instead, more flexible forms are requested, especially to integrate the NSR in the current frameworks (Gerstl 2020; King & Du 2018; Voskresenski 2019). Reasons to reject something like a Silk Road Committee or the Silk Road Government (IP1, IP14) lie in the diversity of strategy and its progress towards a multi-lateral initiative. Therefore, the NSR is also a melting pot for different forms of governance, e.g. the EU with relatively strict rules, the African Union as a relatively loose framework or the Eurasian Economic Union and ASEAN with a strong transnational focus (IP1). In this regard, global governance becomes closely linked with the international order (Zhu 2018), and China has different ideas of organizations (Dunford 2020). As long as China is a leading country in infrastructure investments, a central governance body seems unlikely (Zhang 2018). Although the existing supranational organizations, such as the UN or the International Court of Justice, seem to have no clear interest in the NSR, they are called to position themselves in global relations (IP1). At the same time, their experience could yield towards the development of a joint key vision (IP1). This is getting especially relevant as China is not clearly articulating a vision of institutions or structure (IP1). How should such an institution be designed? Above all, interviewees state that institutions need a certain authority to sign foreign policy agreements (IP1, IP14). Institutional architectures are, for example, discussed with the green BRI (Coenen et al. 2020). But finally, the quality of governance is an indicator (Öztürk 2019) that broadly affects standards as a central governance mechanism.

Nevertheless, the NSR currently shows examples of institutionalization. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) aims to facilitate and accelerate infrastructure improvement in the region by providing capital loans and technical services as a "spearhead" of NSR (Coenen et al. 2021; Yu 2017). It also functions as a multilateral organization that negotiates standards. Additionally, NGOs are considered to provide more informal guidance, such as the UNWTO in tourism (IP10), and the Silk Road Summit as an event-based approach to policymaking. There is also cooperation with the IWF on training in macro-economic issues (IP3), and a couple of think tanks that engage in the NSR (e.g. Center for Strategic International Studies) (IP3, IP8).

### 4.5 Local Support as a Success Factor

Going down the spatial scale, the local support of the NSR becomes essential for generating local effects and regional integration. Globalization also provides the

potential for localization to develop further (IP6). The participating countries need to support the NSR by contributing their strength and capabilities actively (IP1). This also includes the preparation of projects, the development of concrete project ideas and the political discourse (IP1, IP4). To ensure that countries do not get lost in the complexity of NSR, they need to have their own clear vision for their economic development independent of the NSR (IP1). It is important not just to take the Chinese money and follow their ideas, but to embed the NSR-Projects in the country and provide linkages to their own projects (IP1). The regional breakdown depends on the political will of the industrial, commercial and trading activities at the national level and on the European level. For example, if the EU is undecided, countries with demand for financing and development may search for another financing (IP4, IP7). In countries with federal organizations, subnational regions can also shape the investment policy on their own (IP1). Interviewees also recommend contacts with China (e.g. state visits, contact between regional chambers of commerce) at this level as personal relationships and prestige gain importance in authority states (IP3). "The more people with concrete responsibilities and accountabilities meet, the more concretely and broken down projects can be tackled together" (IP1). This also negotiates different styles of policymaking and doing business. Finally, the municipality level seems to have a relatively weak position in implementing megaprojects and is therefore dependent on the surrounding region (IP12). "Acting as one region" (IP5) within a state is a precondition for which the participating countries are responsible as this is outside of China's reach (IP4). Even on the supranational level, claims were raised to have a joint European vision (IP5). From the industry side, claims are raised to implement an industrial policy as an instrument of governance (especially in Central Europe), which provides such a vision and security in investments (IP4). Finally, an industrial policy could speed up the process and strengthen the long-term orientation to keep up with China (IP4).

### 4.6 Combining Scales in Multi-Level Governance

The single spatial scales that were discussed previously need to be combined to define multi-level governance in the holistic setting of the NSR. Therefore, this section elaborates on the different patterns of governance in the example of environmental policies.

Extremes between bottom-up and top-down approaches are evident between the EU and its Connectivity Strategy and China and the Belt and Road Initiative (IP10). On the one hand, China initiates Memorandums of Understanding for participating actors of the NSR in the shape of contracts and incentives. On the other hand, we have this call for win–win cooperation, with China stressing positive effects through convincing, while the EU implements a participatory process in the beginning, but then also acknowledges a concrete rule-based approach (Baert et al. 2014; Bossuyt & Bolgova 2019). Finally, some kind of self-governance is also needed in such a complex system (Pechlaner et al. 2019; Zhongying 2015).

However, the environmental policy between the EU and China follows a joint narrative. In the EU-China environmental dialogue both regions stress the need

for climate action through transition and innovation in order to serve both national wealth and peoples' well-being. Both regions seem to acknowledge this goal, but the pathways are still different, although China is opening up to market-based mechanisms with fiscal policies, emissions fees and trading. Thereby China is witnessing a modernization of its governance system, which also includes the provinces. Mediums for this cooperation are annual summits, cooperation programs, workshops, projects, and study visits. Focusing on the Chinese role, the government displays a mixed attitude toward environmental actions. However, there is a tendency to give climate and environmental issues greater importance through new laws and regulations (European Commission 2021; Zhang 2021).

China is also claiming global leadership (Mendenhall 2013) in development and climate protection. Although China is participating in NGOs such as ClientEarth, it still hasn't reached the peak of its national carbon emissions. The EU, in turn, has long-established standards. Therefore, there is also a clash of political and environmental systems: China pushes mega infrastructure projects that interfere with the living space, while Europe follows more coordinated ways with long public participation. Both regions seem to fail in effective environmental governance, while in-between, in Central Asia, interests and initiatives meet. In this regard, the World Bank supports environmental improvements in Central Asia, while China itself is moving also its energy supply and resource extraction to neighboring countries–depleting natural capital and degrading their environment (Dunford 2020; Schiek 2017).

Although progress is visible in environmental governance, Central Asia in particular faces systemic questions on different political systems, civil engagement and international cooperation. Here especially the local attitudes towards environmental and climate protection need to be taken into account. Voices are raised within the interviews to focus much more on the local level and build international cooperation also on a sub-national level (IP2, IP3, IP4). China itself struggles between domestic economic growth and international agreements on sustainable development. Focusing on the local benefits in a sustainable way may boost international support (IP1, IP2, IP5, IP8, IP7).

## 5 Conclusion

Concluding on the question of how multi-level governance can assist in securing local effects in the NSR countries, various potentials and challenges emerge that also contribute to the theoretical discussion. Throughout the last decades, global governance was required to democratize its processes through enhanced accountability and increased participation of transnational actors in policymaking (Bexell et al. 2010; Carrai et al. 2020a). The NSR, in combination with global challenges on climate action, populism, trade wars, and the COVID-19 Pandemic (Steger & James 2020), requires a new understanding of the role of the "local" in more sustainable globalization.

In particular, sustainable globalization has been central to the discussions around the NSR lately. In this way, the NSR landscape has changed significantly

since 2017, as the importance of sustainability and the connected efforts to develop the environmental sphere of sustainability have increased. In 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed an international coalition for green development he called the "green silk road" (Darby 2017). Also, the Ministry of Environmental Protection of China stated the importance of incorporating sustainable development requirements and integrating ecological concepts in the NSR construction, meaning that all the involved actors should promote participation in environmental preservation and pursue total factor production (Liu & Xin 2019). The authors' Ji and Zhang (Ji & Zhang 2019) emphasize the shift from an input-driven economy to an innovation-driven one with the promotion of green total factor productivity (GTFP) to effectively meet the needs of China's current economic transformation while reflecting the sustainability of economic development of the NSR construction. Current studies show environmental risks and permanent environmental degradation (Ascensão et al. 2019), whereas simplistic narratives such as "win–win" partnerships and "China as threat" do not show the complexity of the initiative (Rodenbiker 2022). Nevertheless, recent studies show a lack of environmental and sociocultural considerations and a strong focus on economic growth (Thees 2020). Therefore, further studies are necessary to examine how NSR infrastructure projects reshape development, societies, and environments in other partner countries (Rodenbiker 2022). For this underlying study here, the intention for green development needs to be re-evaluated against the background of current initiatives. Therefore, the study is limited to previous projects as the interviews were completed in 2019. However, a cross-media check and current publications revealed that the issues from Sect. 4 are still prevalent in the participating countries (e.g. Coenen et al. 2021; Gerstl & Wallenböck 2021; Rodenbiker 2022).

The NSR represents a normative approach to mutual economic and social benefits across Eurasia (Gerstl & Wallenböck 2021). Being far more than a mere infrastructure initiative (Cai 2023), China takes a leading role in shaping future globalization. However, the NSR faces an implementation gap in sustainably serving the countries' needs and generating local effects (Sect. 1). In this instance, the qualitative interviews of this article are in line with evidence from the literature to support local effects by promoting multi-level governance (Feldman 2018; Kettunen 2019). Defining such governance is an issue for supranational institutions, state-led policy, and companies' actions that could lead to an accepted and negotiated mode of operating and developing the NSR (Sect. 4). One major challenge is to balance the different forms of regionalism and capitalism between Asia and Europe (Pechlaner & Thees 2020). The state-led capitalism and rather informal regionalism in China oppose liberal capitalism and formal regionalism in Europe. Each has its right to exist. Two opposing systems that not only meet in the particular region but also in third countries across Eurasia. However, the interests of the receiving countries should be the focus of investment policies (Boamah & Appiah-Kubi 2019), also requiring governance that takes into account multiple levels and power asymmetries (Chheang 2021). The implementation of such governance goes hand in hand with regionalism (Voskresenski 2019) as the NSR emerges on a global ground and common factors such as multilateralism, dialog, policy coordination or responsibility.

From a practical perspective, dialog and trust between nations, institutions, companies and local authorities need to be the starting point to define governance actions. It is important to negotiate a joint direction. Even if China is rather defensive, its sheer economic weight shapes governance, even if it is absent in these discussions (Carrai et al. 2020b). In terms of governance design, appropriate tools (Carmona 2017) assist the implementation and provide flexibility to use different tools on different occasions, regions and scales of the NSR. This includes balancing soft and formal governance mechanisms, that especially need further concretization in the sustainable implementation of NSR activities. Future research may expand on the practical implementation of governance mechanisms, for example, in an experimental setting of single infrastructure projects at the local scale. In addition, there is still a theoretical gap in combining concepts such as governance and regionalism in detail. This requires an interdisciplinary approach, at least between economic geography, and international relations development studies (Blanchard 2021). Finally, the NSR possesses the narrative and the economic power to shape globalization in the long run. The rise of China and thus a different economic system is a challenge for established global structures but may be the opportunity to negotiate and design more sustainable and inclusive globalization that actively connects global, regional, and local scales. Only local benefits may secure the long-term success of NSR and China's positioning as a global leader.

**Data availability** The author confirms that most data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article. The data are, however, available from the authors upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** All authors have no conflicts of interest.

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