



ARTICLE

The Silk Road: a political marketing concept for world dominance

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Abstract One Belt, One Road—the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road—was presented in autumn 2013 and has become the central foreign policy project of Chinese President Xi Jinping. It is a result of the ‘Chinese Dream’ and provides a China-led framework for economic and political cooperation that is based on a huge intercontinental infrastructural network. The New Silk Road would connect large parts of Asia, Europe and Africa. It is being propagated by China’s leadership and academic elite so as to have the greatest public relations impact possible. It is accompanied by new financing institutions and is being realised by political agreements on international infrastructural projects of strategic importance. The main global players—the US, Russia, India and the EU—have not yet found clear responses to China’s world power ambitions. Clashes of interests are foreseeable.

Keywords Silk Road | China | World dominance | Strategy | Geopolitics

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Introduction

At a keynote speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana in September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping presented the idea of taking an innovative approach and building an ‘economic belt along the Silk Road’ (Y. Wang 2015, 50).

This was not the first time that the vision of a new Silk Road had been formulated. Two decades earlier, Chinese President Jiang Zemin had set forth the same idea. In 2011, US Foreign Secretary Hillary Clinton had proposed a ‘New Silk Road’ that would better connect Afghanistan with Central and South Asia. What was new about Xi Jinping’s proposal was its geopolitical dimension. As he announced at the October 2013 meeting of Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders, it would see Central China joined with Central Asia, West Asia, Eastern Europe and Western Europe (Y. Wang 2015). Moreover, it included the ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’, which would connect China with parts of South-East Asia, South Asia, East Africa and Europe. And so was born the strategic concept of the Silk Road Economic Belt: One Belt, One Road.

New, too, was the intensity of the public relations campaign that accompanied the concept launch—although most of the details were still undefined or underdeveloped. Even today different versions are being heatedly discussed, even among Chinese academics and institutions. In the meantime, institutions for financing the project have already been established and funded: the new Shanghai-based BRICS New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The latter was an immediate, though unexpected, success.

The New Silk Road project has obviously become the central foreign policy undertaking of the Xi Jinping period. The *South China Morning Post* even called it the ‘most significant and far-reaching project the nation has ever put forward’ (Cooley 2015, 1). A project of such a magnitude—launched with such fanfare by China’s new, strong leader—certainly deserves to be analysed critically, with regard to both the general principles involved and its specific features.

The One Belt, One Road concept

China’s state-owned XinHua news agency has started publishing a series of articles called *New Silk Road: New Dreams* and has published a map of the route that has come to be called the ‘Xin Hua version’ (Xinhua Finance Agency 2015).

Figure 1 shows that the New Silk Road mainly follows the route of the historical Silk Road between Xian and the Mediterranean. However, it goes much farther and has to be understood as a belt of nations and regions stretching from China to the Baltic and the North Sea. Like its predecessor from the second century BC, it starts in the

Fig. 1 One Belt, One Road

Source: Xinhua Finance Agency (2015).

former Chinese capital of Xian (now the capital of Shaanxi province) in the economic and cultural centre of north-western China. From there it goes west via Urumqi and Khorgas in Xingjiang province and through Bishkek and Samarkand in Central Asia. Continuing through Turkmenistan to northern Iran and Turkey, it connects Tehran with Ankara and Istanbul, from where it proceeds north-east via Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine to Moscow. There it turns sharply to the west, going through Belarus and Poland to Germany (Duisburg) and the Netherlands (Rotterdam). It then runs via Antwerp (Belgium) and France through Switzerland to Venice.

The maritime Silk Road will begin in Quanzhou in Fujian province. Continuing on via the Chinese ports of Guangzhou, Beihai and Haikou (Hainan peninsula), it goes to Hanoi (Vietnam). It then passes through the South China Sea and, after crossing the Malacca Strait, comes to the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur. From there it heads for Colombo (Sri Lanka) and then makes a northward loop to Kolkata and Bangladesh. It then crosses the Indian Ocean to Nairobi (Kenya), from where it goes north around the Horn of Africa and via the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean Sea. It stops in Athens before ending in Venice, where it meets the land-based Silk Road.

On its own, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road would link the three 'old continents'. Together with the land-based Silk Road, its geo-economic and geopolitical impact would be extraordinary. When completed, the two routes would traverse an area that is home to 63 % of the world's population (4.4 billion people) and accounts for 29 % of world GDP (\$2.1 trillion) (Leverett et al. 2015).

What does ‘One Belt, One Road’ mean?

The geographic location of the Silk Road’s starting points in north-western and southern China indicates that the concept was originally motivated by the need to develop China’s border regions. The decline in the country’s economic growth rate and its already existing industrial overcapacity obviously fuelled the need to rebalance the Chinese economy by opening neighbouring markets.

However, its very scale shows that the New Silk Road initiative is also a geopolitical initiative to establish a new, China-led framework for economic and political cooperation. It would be based on a large-scale infrastructural network and develop into a belt of free trade areas.

The two Silk Roads form a network of railways, highways, airways, seaways, oil and gas pipelines, power grids, Internet networks, transmission lines and communication networks. It is expected that along this connectivity infrastructure, industrial clusters and services networks will be developed. They will form an integrated economic belt, stretching from the Pacific to the Indian and Atlantic Oceans and establishing a more or less direct link between the two major global economic units, China and the EU. The construction of the intercontinental infrastructure would be the basis for the creation of further regional integration and a free trade belt to foster the free flow of goods, capital and labour, which in the long run would give rise to a huge Eurasian market. The vision of an intercontinental free trade association will certainly have enormous consequences for the global economic landscape, forming the foundation for a new political and economic order (under Chinese leadership).

The New Silk Road has to be taken as the central political concept put forward by Xi Jinping, who is regarded as probably the strongest political figure since Deng Xiaoping. It is the expression of a new, highly self-assured foreign and security policy that is oriented towards obtaining global hegemony.

The biggest obstacles will be the huge differences between the economic, political, cultural, social and legal systems found in the Eurasian and African regions and the countries between them. The need to create harmonised and secure conditions will be a great challenge.

China’s foreign policy: development and goals

The final two decades of the twentieth century were characterised by strategies to prevent conflicts and produce stability on China’s borders in order to be able to concentrate on China’s national development: ‘Do not attract attention’ (*tao guang jang hui*) and friendly neighbourhood relations (*mulin jou hou*). These strategies were continued in the first decade of the twenty-first century with the principle of ‘peaceful development’ (*haiping fazhan*). The new Chinese president, Xi Jinping, has introduced the new

guiding principle of the ‘Chinese Dream’ (*zhōngguó mèng*). It refers to the rebirth of China’s global power status (*fuxing zhi lu*) and ‘a new pattern of relations’ between world powers.

The two-fold Silk Road initiative is the political narrative for two mega projects. The Silk Road Economic Belt is aimed at the economic domination of the Eurasian land mass, while the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is designed to gain maritime supremacy in the Indian Ocean. As such it is the political narrative for the mega-goal of becoming the world’s leading power.

On both routes, China will sooner or later land up in a clash of interests with both Russia (due to the latter’s historically strong links with Central Asia and the Caucasian region) and India (over future domination of the region of the Indian Ocean).

The initiative is an additional challenge for the US, the current global leader. The competition between the number one and number two world powers goes beyond the ‘Old World’. It includes Latin America, where China has launched huge infrastructure projects, such as the Nicaragua Canal, and road and rail projects across the South American continent.

China’s Eurasian partners and competitors

One Belt, One Road is an initiative to dominate the Eurasian continent (except China’s potential political competitors Russia and India) economically and, in consequence, politically as well. The concept regards financial integration as an ‘important underpinning for implementing the Belt and Road Initiative’ (Xu 2015, 8). China obviously envisages its currency, the Renminbi, becoming more widely used and ultimately Eurasia’s primary currency.

Its goal is to build a vast corridor of economic regions that link north-western China with Europe via a route that goes south of Russia. However, there are many factors that clearly favour a direct link between the eastern and the western ends of the Eurasian continent via Kazakhstan and Russia. These factors include the distances involved, geographic features, costs, security, time needed for construction, and the number and highly diverse nature of the partners needed. The land route also bypasses India, although India is China’s biggest immediate neighbour and will soon surpass China as the most populated country of the world. The connecting infrastructure is being constructed as the basis for the development of strong economic ties and better political cooperation within a future free trade zone. If the intention had been primarily to develop good neighbourly relations and not so much continental and world dominance, the highest priority would have been given to relations between China and India—instead of planning the route through western Asia and especially Eastern Europe.

This indicates that China will continue its strategy of recent decades, central to which is a policy of encircling and potentially containing India by establishing strong special

Fig. 2 Counterbalancing India's power and influence

Source: Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (2015).

links with countries in India's neighbourhood (Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal). China's close relationship with Pakistan was confirmed during Xi Jinping's first state visit to Pakistan in 2015, when he announced Chinese investment of \$45 billion in Pakistan's energy networks and infrastructure (Shahzad 2015). A multitude of infrastructure projects bear witness to the importance China places in these links: for example, the Karakorum highway, the China–Pakistan economic corridor and Gwadar port as China's most important hub in the Indian Ocean (Fig. 2).

China's dominance in the Indian Ocean

In the framework of the strategy for its periphery—the strategy with respect to India and the future dominance of the Indian Ocean—China has made large investments in the construction of ports not only in Gwadar, but also in Hambantota and Colombo in Sri Lanka and Chittagong in Bangladesh.

The strategy to attain maritime dominance in the Indian Ocean is clearly shaped by the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road concept. The initiative includes Kuala Lumpur, and there are plans to construct the Kra canal in Thailand (at an estimated cost of \$28 billion) to avoid having to go through the Strait of Malacca (*WantChinaTimes* 2015). This would shorten the route between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea by 1,200

nautical miles and make China less dependent on the Strait of Malacca with its security challenges. China claims more than 80 % of the sea area of the South China Sea and is already constructing a new harbour and airport infrastructure which would effectively give it control over South-East Asia and the maritime link between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. A new hub in Kenya would more or less complete the infrastructure and would provide another strong link with the African continent, which is already economically dominated by China.

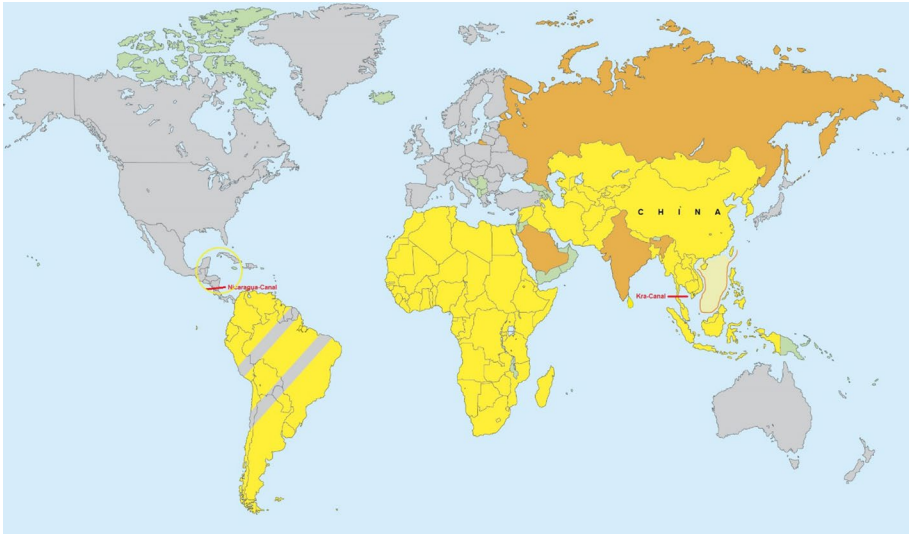
China's presence in Western Asia

In addition to the core region, Central Asia, China's 'marching westwards'—as Professor Wang Jisei, head of the School for International Studies at Beijing University has put it—would encompass Western Asia (especially Iran and Turkey), the South Caucasian region (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and Eastern Europe (especially Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova) (J. Wang 2015; Godehardt 2014, 21). Plans for South-East Asia and India will play a minor role in the whole concept. In Central Asia, China has already established a regional organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, of which all of the Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan are members. China's plans for Central Asia include investing \$48 billion in infrastructure and in the exploration and development of oil and gas fields (Mashrab 2013). In Western Asia, China has run up a bill of \$120 billion for oil purchased from Iran—as a consequence of the Western financial sanctions against Iran. Approximately half of this amount will be settled through the construction of infrastructure projects. As for Turkey, Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Erdoğan have agreed the construction of a rail network that will connect Kars to Istanbul and then, via the planned Bosphorus rail tunnel, to the EU. The estimated cost is \$35 billion (*Today's Zaman* 2012).

China's strategy towards the EU

The EU is the final destination for the terrestrial and the maritime Silk Road concepts. Chinese experts think that Europe should be happy about the project, and they are disappointed that the EU is hesitant.

China is especially interested in maritime cooperation with the EU and sees a wide range of similarities and mutual interests. The Chinese administration is looking for joint efforts to maintain the security of the seaways, collaboration that could ultimately end in a Maritime Cooperation Organisation, as presented by Professor Wang Yiwei from the Institute of International Affairs at China's Renmin University at the Eurasian Economic Summit in Istanbul in 2015 (Y. Wang 2015, 1). China had effectively taken over the management of the harbour in Piraeus, Greece, before the Silk Road initiative was announced. It is ready to invest in a rail project connecting Belgrade and Budapest. In its argumentation, China promises a unique opportunity to build a greater Eurasian market and even to 'revive European civilisation' (Y. Wang 2015, 103).

Fig. 3 China's global strategy

Source: Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy (2015).

Note: Grey Western world, yellow China's hegemonic area, orange others. (colour figure online)

From a Central European perspective, it is not easy to understand why the route of the Silk Road provides a better link between Asia Minor and Russia, rather than between Turkey and the EU (Fig. 3). It looks more like an attempt to reshape the post-Soviet space than an endeavour to improve the connections between the Middle East, the South-Eastern European countries aspiring to EU membership and the EU. Furthermore, it is difficult to see how the Silk Road concept could offer a substantial contribution to the existing and already planned infrastructure between Rotterdam, Antwerp, the Rhine Valley and northern Italy. Direct railway connections already exist between Chongqing and Duisburg (since 2011), Yiwu and Madrid (since 2014), and Cheng Du and Lodz (since 2012). The Lodz–Prague rail link has been in operation since 2014, as have its Zengzhou–Hamburg–Duisburg and Suzhou–Warsaw counterparts.

Chinese experts like to quote British geopolitical analyst Halford Mackinder, who regards Eurasia as 'the world island' (Y. Wang 2015, 103). He believes that its integration will turn the US back into an 'isolated island' and allow Eurasia to return to the centre of human civilisation, thereby reshaping global geopolitics and the global landscape. This clearly sounds like a carrot to weaken the transatlantic partnership and to substitute it in part with enhanced China–EU relations. It is doubtful whether such a development would be favourable for the EU's political visions and aspirations of a world based on Western values and democratic rule.

Conclusion and outlook

The Chinese Silk Road initiative seems to be driven by a combination of internal economic pressure (resulting from the slowdown in economic growth and the existing overcapacity in steel production and the construction industry), the promise the scheme holds as a response to the US's Asian pivot and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership initiative between the US and the EU, and the Chinese dream of world dominance. Its substantial investment plans will produce some local and regional benefits and build a transcontinental, China-oriented infrastructure.

The Silk Road concept certainly has to be taken seriously. It will be China's predominant geo-economic, geopolitical guideline for the next decade. Moreover, it clearly shows that China has learned to sell its world power ambitions by means of a nostalgic public relations concept.

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