

Underlying historical assumptions in the current geopolitical narration of the Chinese  
One Belt One Road: A critical assessment

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China's new and ambitious vision, called One Belt One Road (abbreviated as OBOR – sometimes dubbed as the “New Silk Road”) – given modern Chinese economic vigorousness and social massiveness – unavoidably opens up, in every part of the planet, new ideas and perspectives on Eurasian International Politics, Economy, History and Culture, some of which are diverging while others converging. China is not the only one dreaming – by making use of Economy, History or Culture (amongst other things) – of an integrated Eurasia, in which it will assume the leading role – other societies and states have the same ambitions, too, or simply fear the geopolitical possibility of a politically integrated Eurasian continent under a single leadership. In this perspective, not only Trade and Economy, but also History and Culture are utilized in the international political arena for supremacy in Eurasia, with the term “Silk Routes” (either as a historical phenomenon or a Geopolitical) being at the forefront of discussions.

So far research on current policies as regards East-West interaction in Eurasia have mainly focused on the economic implications that China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) (Sharma and Kundu 2017; Yiwei 2016, *passim*) initiative may have, while a few have laid emphasis on the international geopolitical competition for access to markets, natural resources and trade lines this implies, both at land and at sea. (厉以宁, 林毅夫, and 郑永年 2015, *passim*) Yet, there hasn't been any serious attempt so far to see OBOR under the prism of theories of classical Geopolitics.

This paper aims at initiating this conversation, first by simply answering the question “Is China's OBOR project a geopolitical narration?” and if it is indeed, what is the role of history in its structure? For as Robert Kaplan has suggested every classical

geopolitical narration is essentially a historical narration set against Geography as its background, which connects it to concurrent times and developments.(Kaplan 2017, 98)

### **Is China' OBOR a geopolitical narration?**

Geopolitics cannot exist cut off from history, even in spaces where (human) history is hardly extant as the case of *the Space* demonstrates (Dolman 2002), because geography alone tells us nothing of how humans interact within its context. Essentially, the two main tendencies that have appeared in Geopolitics (Classical Geopolitics and Critical Geopolitics (O'Tuathail 1996; Atkinson and Dodds 2009)) mirror the different approaches (methodological, textual et.c.) taken by their promulgators. Compared with the Classical Geopolitics theories, Mackinder's and Fairgrieve's *Heartland* (Kaplan 2012; Mackinder 2004) , Hodgson's geographical concept of the *Wider Middle East*, named as the *Oikoumene* (Hodgson 1977), the *Middle Tier* (Kearns 2009; Mackinder 1919), the concept of *Rimland* (Spykman 2015, 2015, 1969), *Central Europe* or *Mitteleuropa* (Kaplan 2012) (Brzezinski 1998, 57–86) and Russia's *Eurasianism* (Laruelle 2008) (to mention but a few), the Chinese New Silk Road or OBOR lacks nothing in respect(Cheng, Song, and Huang 2017, 79). Besides the promises for economic development and prosperity, it offers a global vision for future international politics in which Eurasia takes the leading role, security solutions through SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), alliances and cooperation based on a narration of commonality of objectives, of accommodation and inclusiveness(Yiwei 2016, 29) and especially it offers a concrete historical narration through which China's modern Silk Route vision evolves as the natural course of events.

### **Main historical assumptions underlying China's OBOR vision**

Since 2013, the year when Chinese President Xi Jinping set forth his New Silk Road vision (Xi Jinping 2014), publications on the history of the Silk Road have skyrocketed. What is more, approaches to China's foreign relations especially as regards OBOR unavoidably offer brief resumés of the history of the Silk Route trade networks of the Middle Ages and ancient times.

Here are some of the basic assumptions:

- First of all, let's begin with the name of the project: OBOR is directly connected with the Silk Route (it is otherwise called the "New Silk Road"). Given that in the modern world, silk, as a product, is directly related with China, this obviously overstates China's role in the historical trade network (leading to the false conclusion that China is merely resuming a role it had in past centuries).

First of all, one needs to mention here that the term "Silk Route" (or Silk Routes) is a modern convention (an expression coined by the German traveller, geographer, and scientist, Ferdinand von Richthofen (Hildebrandt 2017, sec. 114). The fact that modern historians gave the appellation "Silk Road" to the trade networks that existed in Eurasia from early times does not mean that Chinese silk was the only product that circulated in these networks, as assumed by the Chinese strategy planners (Cheng, Song, and Huang 2017, 119). On the contrary, historical research (and Greece, demonstrates some of Europe's most advanced researches in Silk Route history), has pointed to various products with origins as diverse as the Steppe and forest peoples to the Roman Empire, circulating in these networks. (Παπαπαύλου and Πρεσβέλου 2002) Of course silk was the most important (as it was also used as currency in the exchanges in local markets – bolts of silk were exchanged for other commodities)

Secondly, China was not the only region in Eurasia that developed silk industries. It is true that China had silk fabrics (hence industry) from very early in its history, but the same is true for other regions of Eurasia, namely Central Asia, especially those areas that are called in medieval Greek sources as «Σήρινδα» (Serindia). These were also silk producing regions which were part of a network of production and distribution that did not belong to China proper, until much late in the Middle Ages (essentially it was the Mongols and their Yuan dynasty that firmly connected China with these western regions and for a short period of time. Before them, China had occasionally parts of these regions under its control – especially during Han and Tang dynasties).

What is more, other societies managed to develop – or were in the process of doing it – their own silk industries. Byzantium here comes to mind, especially Justinian's efforts to import the technology for the production of silk from these regions of Central Asia.

- Cartographical depictions of the historical Silk Route and the narrations that accompany them in Chinese treatises of the OBOR project, present the Silk Route network as having a continuity throughout the ages, with standard tracks and stops along its course and always having an East-West orientation.(Yiwei 2016, 29; Xi Jinping 2014, 4178). It resembles in other words what seems to the ancient or medieval version of modern railway tracks or highways that the Chinese leadership dreams of building.

These cartographical depictions are essentially the same depictions found in historical treatises of the history of the Silk Routes, only taken completely out of their respective contexts.(for such treatises see Zhang Xu-shan, 1997) In this way, the “Silk Route” trade network is presented as a unity and appears to have a continuity and a political existence on its own throughout history with a fate that is completely irrelevant to the political situation of the states along its track.

The first underlying false assumption here is the unity of the historical Silk Route. The historical Silk Route, in its totality, is an illusion created by the fact that an artifact (for example a tissue) or an element (for example a Roman coin or an art motif) is found in the exact opposite side of where it was initially produced. The fact that an element produced in the western part of Eurasia is found today in its eastern part tells us nothing of the realities and actual circumstances that existed along what is presented today as the historical track of the Silk Route. In reality, what we nowadays call the Silk Route network in the past comprised a multitude of local trade and communications networks spread across Eurasia. I seriously wonder how many of the merchants exchanging goods in a local market on a daily basis in Tashkent or Ispahan or Constantinople – or any other, smaller or bigger trade post – were actually aware of China, let alone of a “Silk Route” interconnecting Eurasia.

Moreover, each of these local trade networks belonged to a different political sphere and was susceptible to regulations, control and taxation imposed by the ruler of the particular region where it was located. The moment a product entered the territory of a medieval state was known to central authorities, since trade was conducted in predetermined places (in the case of Byzantium the cities along Euphrates river or Crimea,

in China's case, in border cities like Dunhuang and later the famous *maimai* - city or town trade posts). Implying that commerce was conducted without any hindrance, especially political, and that a product could make its way from China to Europe already from the Middle Ages, is a logical fallacy to which one may derive if one completely obliterates historical experience and the competition to which great empires were thrown in their effort to regulate and control trade..

What is most obvious from the above, is the fact that Chinese policy makers (judging from their writings) tend to project modern cosmopolitan and globalization trends into the remote past.(Cheng, Song, and Huang 2017, 13) Modern highly monetized economy (especially after the collapse of Bretton-Woods system) permits both production in and distribution from a single region (essentially China), since profits can be transferred easily and without friction and provided that the parts involved in this process are happy with the way profits are distributed. In other words it presupposes a political accord, it does not create one. In the Middle Ages or Ancient Times, that was not the case. Every local trade network was a result of an economic activity at a local level which was promoted and protected by the local or regional political authority. In other words, the local, regional and trans-regional economies were the genitors of spontaneous trade activity at every level. People then were both producers and consumers at the same time. China's economy was producing alongside with the economies of India, Persia, Roman Empire and the Steppe Belt, unlike what is happening today. In other words, products produced in the Roman Empire, or Persia or the Steppe Belt were circulating along the Silk Routes and were competing with those produced in China. China's OBOR resides on the assumption that all parties involved in the modern global economy will continue to function in the way they have been functioning so far (accepting China as the a "World factory") and that they will refuse to change roles. Yet, as recent developments show, societies that had the role of consumer want to revert back to that of producer or at least combine them both.

Another aspect that Chinese policy makers seem to forget (judging again from their writings, where emphasis is put on promoting regional and cross-continental connectivity between China and countries in Eurasia (Mayer 2018, 6 ff)), based as they are on the assumption that all parties will continue to function in the way they have been functioning

so far, is the effect political competition had on the Silk Route trade networks in history. In other words politics was not (as it still is not) oriented towards free trade but towards power; free trade was permitted or promoted on the grounds that it served that basic orientation. Consequently, with the exception of the Achaemenid Empire and the empire of Alexander the Great and up until Genghiz Khan's Mongol empire, there has never been a period in history when all local and regional trade networks were put under one political roof. Instead, the great empires of the past (particularly of the Middle Ages, were happy to control segments of local or regional trade networks and be involved in a game that today one could call it "denial of access through proxies". Denying access to their opponents at crucial geographical locations or "Choke points" along the Trade Network which we now call the Silk Route, regulating the volume of trade (or other exchanges) and, artificially raising or lowering the prices of exchange, became the most common practice. Choke points existed both along the land Silk Route and the Sea Route. The most important of these in the land routes were the Caucasus Mountains and the plains to their north, Khorazmia, Transoxiana/Tokharestan (N. Afghanistan), Uddiyanna, Gandhara, Baltistan and Ladakh (East Afganistan and NW Pakistan), and Gansu corridor. In the Sea Route, Arabia Felix and the southwestern tip of the Arabian peninsula (Yemen) and - further east - the straits of Oman acted as choke points as regards sea routes to western India. There are many examples coming from the history of the competition between Byzantium and Persia/Caliphate or between China, Tibet and the steppe empires of the north where these choke points were actually part of a "Great Game of the Middle Ages". The point to be made here is that, perhaps with the exception of Pakistan, where China seems to have a firm foot through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the rest of the choke points (most of which are hotspots of violence even today) are still beyond China's military reach (and possibly any of the Super Power's military reach), exactly as they were during Ancient and Medieval times.

#### Conclusions:

Chinese narrations on the OBOR make selective use of aspects of the "Silk Route" history, as it has been described in modern historical works. As a rule, Chinese policy makers

detach certain conclusions of the research and discussions on the East-West trade contacts from their initial context, and, by isolating them, attempt to convince that the “New Silk Road” (or OBOR) is the natural continuation of an old trade network where China had the leading role. The point behind this tactic is to present China’s modern and ambitious grand-strategy plans with an aura of historicity, cosmopolitanism and inevitability and cloak it with the impression that, as it happened in the past (at least according to modern historical research), it is a network whose purpose is to benefit every state, nation and society across Eurasia.

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