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Research Article*

## **CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICS OF EURASIA AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative. This modern initiative aims to revive the ancient Silk Road and connect China with many neighboring and distant countries and economic blocs. China invests mainly in infrastructure by developing a network of land and maritime roads, facilitating communication, trade and transportation. The various projects under this initiative will make China a leader in international trade and an attractive region for giant partners. This paper analyzes the Chinese presence in Eurasia after the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative and the contemporary geopolitics of Eurasia in light of the great Chinese expansion. This study contributes to clarifying the China-Central Asia relationship and represents this relationship within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. This study is based on data issued by governmental institutions and international research centers, which makes it an important reference in Central Asian studies. This paper concluded that the Belt and Road Initiative will have a significant impact on the economy of Central Asia and its geopolitical position through the great Chinese openness and dependence on Central Asia in China's regional and international trade. The paper also discusses the Sino-Russian contrast that may arise with the Chinese penetration into Central Asia.

**Keywords:** Eurasian Geopolitics, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese Foreign Policy, Central Asia, Caucasus, Post-Soviet Eurasia.

## INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative, launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, has become the most important topic in academic circles and it is a concern for policy makers. This state-of-the-art initiative is a tool for China's rapid advancement in the world via a wide range of land and maritime routes. This initiative has implications for China's geopolitical interests in both neighboring and distant regions. The increasing trade between China and Central Asia may increase China's influence in that region, especially with the activation of the Belt and Road Initiative.

In this paper, the author deals with China-Central Asia and the Caucasus relations from an economic standpoint, based on the Belt and Road Initiative, and refers to the changes and development that it may bring about in joint cooperation. The paper presents a geopolitical analysis of Central Asia covering Sino-Russian relations and Chinese cooperation with the Central Asian regions. The author points out the great role of the western region in promoting Sino-Central Asia communication and deepening peaceful exchanges based on the policy of common interests. The author links his regional analysis to the modern Chinese strategy that relies heavily on the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Belt and Road Initiative is concerned with facilitating trade exchanges between China and member countries and overcoming border barriers, thus developing bilateral relations and strengthening the proposed transnational and intercontinental mega projects. If the proposed projects are implemented, they will have economic benefit to more than half of the human population. If the proposed projects are implemented, they will have an economic benefit to about two-thirds of the world's 4.4 billion people, a gross domestic product of about 30% of global output (World Bank, 2018), and 75% of energy reserves (Grieger, 2016).

The term "Silk Road" was coined by German explorer Ferdinand von Richthofen, to refer to the ancient routes that linked China to the West and led to many economic and cultural exchanges. In 2016, the first train loaded with containers set off from Yiwu City in east China's Zhejiang Province to Iran, passing through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, covering a distance of more than 10,000 km. On May 4, 2018, the Chinese train set off from Tangshan to Antwerp, a 16-day journey that covered a distance of 16,000 km. On January 16, 2016, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which is the financing institution for the Belt and Road Initiative, was established. This newly established monetary institution has become parallel to the largest and most prestigious monetary institutions in the world and has become a threat to Western liberal monetary institutions in terms of financing development and investment projects.

This paper analyzes the Belt and Road Initiative within the framework of China's foreign policy and refers to China's geopolitical interests outside its borders and the geopolitical interests of member states in partnership with China. For example, China has increased the volume of its trade in Eurasia, as it has become the most important partner in that strategic region that attracts international powers. The paper analyzes the potential effects of Chinese investments in areas bordering China such as Central Asia. The Belt and Road Initiative is likely to affect the geopolitical balance in Eurasia, as well as in other areas of China's

active presence. The huge initiative proposed by the Chinese administration is a tempting deal for many countries, but in return, it will entail many economic, security, and political consequences that may be in favor of China in the end.

The study aims to understand the geopolitical significance of the Belt and Road Initiative and to indicate its effects on member countries. This paper analyzes, relying on Western and Chinese sources, the Chinese presence in Eurasia, which has developed greatly since the last decade; the paper aims to define the objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative, to refer to China's foreign policy in Eurasia and the threat that this initiative may pose to Russia in its backyard. Thus, the paper presents an in-depth study of the modern Chinese strategy in Central Asia and the new geopolitical foundations that China is laying.

The study assumes that the Belt and Road Initiative is a tool for China's domestic growth and foreign policy service. In other words, through this initiative, China seeks to become a global power with cross-border influence. The influence may not be in the traditional sense. China is connected to neighboring or distant regions via coastal ports and inland centers of the Chinese mainland. The Belt and Road Initiative is therefore an innovative way to create a new economic world order that is different from the prevailing one (Zhang, 2017). Chinese interests may clash with Russia in Eurasia, which has historically been considered a political and economic subordinate to Russia.

This study is based on the qualitative approach. The researcher attempts to clarify the issues related to the Belt and Road Initiative with available evidence, documents and data. This study analyzes the effects of the Belt and Road Initiative on the areas of Chinese expansion, specifically in Eurasia, which constitutes a geo-strategic center for Chinese expansion towards many regions and economic blocs. Campos and Da Silva (2015) indicates that it is very difficult to determine the future course of international relations, but this study is based on scientific facts and official documents.

The researcher relies on causality in his analysis. The Belt and Road Initiative is linked to the reasons that prompted its launch, and to indicate its characteristics and the associated regional and international reality. As part of the analysis of the Chinese presence in Eurasia, the researcher studied the Russian strategy in that region. Eurasia is an essential part in the development of the Belt and Road Initiative, since ancient times, both Russia and China had political, security, and economic ties to Central Asia. The Russian administration will be at a crossroads, either clashing with China or cooperating with it in Central Asia. The spatial framework of the study is the land and maritime routes of the Belt and Road Initiative, while the time frame starts from 2013 with the launch of the initiative by the Chinese president (Della Porta and Keating, 2008).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese investment projects in Eurasia, the paper answers the following question: What is China's strategy towards Eurasia in terms of investment and bilateral cooperation?

The paper gives an explanation of China's interest in investing in Eurasia and indicates the strategic importance of that region for China. The paper studies Russia's position in the Chinese progress towards Eurasia and points to the joint

Sino-Russian strategic cooperation in that region as well as to the incongruity of some interests between Russia and China. The paper is mainly based on Chinese official documents and opinions of Chinese officials, as well as opinions of experts from Russia, Kazakhstan, and others. In order to obtain accurate analysis results, reference is made to the data of Chinese investment projects in Eurasia and Chinese trade exchanges. The intensity of trade exchange will be linked to China's geopolitical influence on Eurasia. The paper depends on the analysis of documents as well as the analysis of statistical data.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the last decade, China has achieved unprecedented qualitative development. Morgenthau (1986) pointed out that China's progress is due to its large population, wide geography, and richness in natural resources. China's accumulated surplus of economic power and international prestige through its open-door policy formed the entrance to the Belt and Road Initiative. The geopolitical parameters of this initiative are still unclear, so the Chinese data for this initiative will be analyzed in addition to some Western references that contribute to a clearer understanding. An approach from an Atlantic perspective may contribute to a clearer understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly through the interactions identified by Keohane and Nye; therefore, it is possible to rely on some Western literature to understand the strategic balance between the great powers in Asia or other regions (Keohane and Nye, 1988).

Currently, China has the second-largest economy in the world after the United States and first place in terms of the human population. It has borders with 15 countries in a strategic geographical location overlooking major marine outlets in the international economy and borders with powerful countries such as Russia and India. The Chinese influence will increase significantly with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, which may bring about a change in the mentality of governance that has prevailed in contemporary history. The great Chinese progress and the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative confirm the ideas put forward by Keohane and Nye (1988). The economy is the most important means of gaining influence. International politics is entirely linked to economic transformations. China's position in international politics has changed dramatically in the last quarter, mainly due to the massive economic gains it has made.

The Chinese initiative, like many initiatives throughout history, is based on political-economic cooperation and people-to-people interactions, with a special focus on the regional geographic environment. In the Belt and Road model, China places great emphasis on Eurasia. Malena (2010) indicates that China seeks to build a regional system similar to the Chinese system with special political, economic, cultural, and social characteristics. It is the Sinocentric scheme that China, through the Belt and Road Initiative, intends to implement. The rise of China in the last decade may be at the expense of some international powers such as the US, the European Union, and Japan, forcing some international powers such as the US to reconsider their foreign policy. Biden's current policy, for example, differs radically from Bush's foreign policy. The US is becoming less hostile and more focused on domestic economic growth. Pardo de Santayana (2017) indicates that the world is currently in a period of transition from a unipolar regime to a multipolar one. Some third-world countries, such as China and

India, may turn into effective international powers with huge wealth.

The increase in trade exchanges between China and international partners has been reflected in the huge size of its economy. Allison (2017) considers that the Chinese economy in 2004 represented 47% of the US economy, while in 2014 it became 5% higher and is likely to take an upward trend. In March 2018, the US administration imposed taxes on many Chinese goods. This US policy was followed by a policy of reciprocity by China. In turn, China imposed taxes on US goods. This policy was known as the trade war between the US and China. Allison previously noted “in the forest as well as in the relations among nations, most sparks do not ignite blaze” (Allison, 2017). Allison links China’s economic progress with its military superiority and points out that China’s growing military capabilities undermine the United States’ position as a superpower in the world and force it to retreat at times (Allison, 2017).

The imbalance in Asia and the Atlantic began to appear in 2011 in favor of China, that is, before the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative. At that time, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the US was considering reducing the US presence in the Middle East and intensifying its presence in East Asia. Zhang Yunling (2017) points out that China makes more contributions than the US in the neighboring region, which makes China a key country in achieving Asia-Pacific growth. In this context, Yong Wang (2016) points out that the Chinese administration considers the neighboring region crucial for it to create a balance of power in Asia and the world and to protect Chinese interests. China’s strong relations with neighboring countries give it more strength when dealing with the West and Japan. Allison (2017) points out that China will strengthen its diplomatic relations, increase economic exchanges with neighboring countries and deepen its dependence on China, thus increasing China’s influence in its surroundings and diminishing that of the US.

In 2012, Bremmer foresaw the future relationship between the US and China. He referred to joint cooperation or a clash of interests. Indeed, a trade war broke out between the two greatest economies, and the bilateral relationship is still tense. China’s foreign policy principles have remained consistent, but its bilateral relations with some countries have been modified in line with its interests (Malena, 2010: 5). According to Malena, the theory of international relations is not just a tool for theorizing, but rather a way to understand the foreign policy of states. Malena quotes the following from the former Chinese Foreign Minister “the strategic calculation of the People’s Republic of China should not ignore a series of elements: 1) cooperate with those regional and global forces that tend to economic integration and facilitate financial assistance; 2) avoid all kinds of foreign control; 3) advocate for our own ideas regarding the new international order; 4) maintain the stability of the surrounding region; and 5) speak on behalf of the Third World countries” (Malena, 2010: 185).

In its dealings with international partners, China relies on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and on the thought established by Deng Xiaoping. These principles were announced during Zhou Enlai’s visit to India in 1954. These principles state the following 1) Mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; 2) Mutual practice of non-aggression; 3) Non-interference in the internal affairs of other states; 4) Equality and mutual benefit and 5) Peaceful coexistence. Chinese President Xi Jinping considered these five principles to be

the backbone of contemporary Chinese political thought (Xi, 2017). President Xi Jinping also noted at the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China in October 2017 that China will continue to support international efforts to maintain world peace and promote common development.

The great economic progress made by China has increased Beijing's international standing at the expense of traditional powers. The "miracle of the Chinese Renaissance" raised questions in academic circles, and China has become the most important topic in contemporary political debate (Montobbio, 2017). Some point out that it is not possible to present an explanation of Chinese politics based on Western theories and viewpoints. China is a unique model that does not align with Western political and progressive trends that have prevailed for decades. Qin (2013) points to three approaches to the study of international relations that have emerged in the past decade and that give space to Chinese philosophy, thought, and customs for a clearer understanding of Chinese society. The three approaches are Zhao Tingyang's approach and theory of Tianxia, an ordinal principle with roots going back to the Zhou Dynasty. This principle is based on peaceful conflict resolution, mutual benefit, and living in harmony. According to Confucian ideals, this system made a peace that lasted for 800 years, by strengthening family ties and non-discrimination, in contrast to the Westphalian that arose in the West in the seventeenth century (Qin, 2013).

The second approach is to study the behavior of China using conceptual schemes through Western theories. Some Chinese scholars, such as Yan Xuetong, interpreted some events before the Qin Dynasty, that is, before 221 BC. Yan Xuetong attempts to connect the ideas of ancient China in the days of the Warring States with modern Chinese strategy. The third approach is interactive. Qin presents a study that combines Western theories of international relations with the historical and cultural foundations of Chinese thought. Qin (2013) emphasizes independent ontology in building international standards. Yan Xuetong points out that China should seek to build partnerships and alliances to build a modern international order, specifically with neighboring countries; Xuetong believes that the Chinese government should focus more on national security than economic security (Creutzfeldt, 2012).

Most studies of the Belt and Road Initiative deal with the economic dimension, while some studies deal with Chinese national security and Chinese foreign policy. Undoubtedly, the Belt and Road Initiative carries political and security dimensions, not just economic ones. For example, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PWC, 2016) indicates that China is competing with the largest economies through this initiative and creating a loophole in the current international system. Djankov (2016: 13) also points out that China seeks to dominate Asia in the long run, and the Belt and Road Initiative may be an effective tool, but China must cooperate politically and militarily in order to ensure regional security. As Van der Putten et al. (2016) point out that the Belt and Road Initiative increases the Chinese presence in Central Asia and in areas not far from Europe, such as the Balkans, Turkey, the Southern Caucasus and North Africa, and in areas of strategic importance to Europe, such as the Middle East and East Africa.

Rolland (2016) notes that many political thinkers have pointed to the idea of China's great progress after the end of the Cold War. General Liu Yazhou - General of the Air Force of the People's Liberation Army and Chief Political

Commissar of the National Defence University proposed the idea of Chinese integration with Central Asia, due to the strategic importance of this region on the economic and security levels for China. For General Liu Yazhou, the main objective is to support the integration of western China and Central Asia and to thwart any US attempt to establish a presence in that region. In this context, Wang (2014: 131) considers that China should develop an updated plan for cooperation with international partners in order to ensure the security of trade routes that reach western China.

## GEOPOLITICS OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

The Chinese economy has grown tremendously in the last decade, which has brought about changes to the geopolitics of Asia and the world as a whole. Grygiel (2011: 2) referred to the geopolitical changes that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which opened the door to the United States to be the most prominent international power and an active player in Central Asia. Other scholars such as Qoraboyev (2018: 104) have pointed to the geopolitical dimension of the BRI and China's great interest in Central Asia as a vital area for Chinese influence and the success of the BRI, thus it appears that Eurasia is a strategic region in international politics. From the perspective of Pardo de Santayana (2017), China's greater growth as an international power will lead to updated geopolitics of international relations. The rules of the game that prevailed in the period of the Soviet Union and after it during the absolutism of the United States will change with the rise of China, which pursues a completely different strategy based on mutual gain and international cooperation.

The Russian and British interest in the Eurasian region emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century through the "Great Game". Russian interests may clash sharply with the Chinese in Eurasia. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, nationalist sentiments emerged in the countries of Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and others. Despite the Sino-Russian friendship, the foreign policy and strategic interests of the two countries differ. The Belt and Road Initiative confirms Mackinder's ideas of Eurasian connectivity. China is establishing a network of transportation and communication that contributes to Sino-Eurasian communication and creates a developed cooperative economic model. From the perspective of classical realism, Spykman argues that whoever controls the Rimland may control Eurasia (Holmila, 2020).

Historical experiences indicate that powerful states often seek access to the sea and control of trade outlets, and according to Spykman, whoever rules Eurasia will control the world (Spykman and Rollins, 1939). Sino-Russian history is full of tension and conflicting interests. Russia's continental power may constitute a stumbling block for China if it is not dealt with diplomacy and skill (Spykman, 1944). China is penetrating Eurasia through the Belt and Road Initiative, turning China into an unbreakable international power through integrated land and sea routes. Bernal Meza (2016) consider that China has become the hub of Asian regional growth and that the great economic growth achieved by China will enable it to create a common space for Asian integration. According to Malena (2010: 67) China still follows the instructions of Sun Zi, to protect the heart by controlling the limbs; this is one of the foundations of Chinese thought. Malena

refers to “The National Defense of China”, published by the Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China in 1988, in which the document notes the increasing importance of economic security (2010: 91).

China deals with international partners in a pragmatic manner, without forgetting that it belongs to the Third World. China’s constant growth since the eighties has increased its import of natural resources. Therefore, the focus of Chinese foreign policy is based on economic security (Zakaria, 2008: 108). The Belt and Road Initiative is not limited to achieving economic interests, but also to cultural exchanges, people-to-people communication, and political cooperation. China has been able to be the world’s number one exporter of goods and has quadrupled its domestic product in fifteen years (Malena, 2010). The financial crisis of 2008 that hit Europe and the United States made China pursue a strategy of the market and domestic consumption. In the early twenty-first century, Joseph Nye suggested that in the future, China might consider re-annexing Taiwan and adopting a different strategy in the South China Sea (Nye, 2002).

The Chinese administration has launched the Belt and Road Initiative as a tool to achieve the set strategic goals. Currently, there are huge Chinese economic projects in Asia and Europe, in addition to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank Nye (2002). The Chinese initiative, which could involve more than 120 countries from all parts of the world, would have a major impact on Central Asia. China has taken advantage of the asymmetry between the West and Russia to woo Putin in its favor (Higuera, 2015). The Belt and Road Initiative and China’s intensification of its projects in Eurasia would fill the void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Moscow’s withdrawal from that region. The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan will facilitate the way for Beijing in its expansion (Clover and Hornby, 2015).

Joseph Nye points out that economic strength is no less important than military capabilities, and this is what constituted a lever for China in its rapid progress. Nye also considers that China has become a force to be reckoned with, as the United States is no longer the only power capable of controlling international politics and the global economy (Nye, 2002). The transition from unipolarity to multipolarity brings the idea of geopolitics forward. The United States, Europe, and Japan are no longer the only dominant ones. Many emerging powers such as China, Russia, India, and Brazil have an active presence in the international economy. The need for the emerging powers to access energy sources reshapes new geopolitics (Pardo de Santayana, 2015). Nye (2002) argues that China could become a great power and replace the United States in many regions, including Eurasia. According to Yong Wang, the Belt and Road Initiative may bring China into many challenges due to the political, cultural, and religious differences between its neighboring countries (Wang, 2016).

## **THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AS A GRAND STRATEGY**

Chinese President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative in September 2013 during an official visit to Kazakhstan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs People’s Republic of China, 2013). Kazakhstan had an active role on the ancient Silk Road and is expected to be a strategically important member state on the

Belt and Road Initiative due to its geographic location in Central Asia. A report issued by the Office of the Leading Group for the Promotion of the Construction of the Belt and Road (2017) indicates that this Chinese initiative aims to deepen regional cooperation and enhance communication between countries on the basis of development and peace. The Belt and Road Initiative creates more partners for China and draws international attention to it (Brown, 2016: 28). China's vital issues such as Tibet, the South China Sea, and Xinjiang will not be compromised (Aoyama, 2016). The Belt and Road Initiative will increase China's regional and international influence, which will reflect on the development of China's economy and local societal progress (Johnson, 2016).

This initiative restores strategic importance to the east after a period of international isolation since the collapse of the Soviet Union. China's relations with the United States and Japan are unlikely to turn into strategic partnerships, given the dark history, strong international competition, and sharp division of interests (Grieger, 2016). The Belt and Road Initiative propagates the Chinese model of development and deepens the "outward" strategy initiated in 1999. Many of the proposed projects have not yet crystallized, but important projects are on their way to be realized, such as the railway between China and Europe and between China and Iran, the development of the ports of Piraeus and Gwadar, and the development of the city of Khorgos near the border with Kazakhstan.

According to official reports from the Chinese administration, the aim of the Belt and Road Initiative is to promote peaceful cooperation and common development at the regional and international levels (Leading Group Office, 2017). The Belt and Road Initiative comes as part of the "Path to Revitalization" of the Chinese nation in an international context, making the People's Republic of China more robust. President Xi Jinping pointed out that the Chinese dream is to achieve prosperity, increase the strength of the country and the well-being of the people (Xi, 2014). The Belt and Road Initiative was launched in 2013 at a time characterized by low exports and less dynamic economic growth, whether in China or the world. The Belt and Road Initiative came as a tool to compensate for China's excess capacity in many industrial sectors by increasing demand for Chinese capabilities and opening more markets (PWC, 2016). Therefore, the new definition of this project may be, the innovative Chinese tool to absorb the excess industrial capacity and promote it outside the borders, as it is an opportunity for the huge government industrial companies to access new capital and embrace investment opportunities looming on the horizon. Chinese companies will thus enter a new wave of "going global".

Starting in 2013, China has entered a new phase of international cooperation through many cross-border projects that will be on the way to implementation within the framework of bilateral cooperative partnerships and agreements and cooperation with economic blocs (Chinese State Council, 2015). The promotion of international production capacity and equipment manufacturing cooperation will be the basis for mutually beneficial cooperation between China and its international partners. The Belt and Road Initiative will link China to energy sources such as gas and oil through special pipelines or roads. An estimated 80% of China's energy imports come from the Middle East via sea routes (Grieger, 2016). Therefore, the issue of energy security is a sensitive case for Beijing. China is in constant search of safe transportation methods for energy sources

and to reduce distances. The Belt and Road Initiative may solve this issue and make China more easily access energy sources. China places special emphasis on the western region directly connected to Central Asia, which is the basis of the ancient Silk Road and an important area of the Belt and Road Initiative. China's development policy in the western region drives away "three evils" of separatists, terrorism, and religious extremism.

## **SINO-EURASIAN INTEGRATION THROUGH THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE**

### **Western China: A Pivotal Region in Regional Integration**

The Belt and Road Initiative eliminates the dream of some separatist groups of establishing their own region. In Xinjiang, for example, there are many huge investment projects and a wide network of roads linking it with Central Asia, which contributes to tightening the grip of the Chinese administration on that region (Hendrix, 2016: 27). According to the Visions and Actions document, an intensive development policy towards Xinjiang is indicated in accordance with the policy of balanced development of the inner Chinese regions, the document indicates the geostrategic importance of Xinjiang to the Belt and Road Initiative and to China's opening up to Eurasia, thus turning Xinjiang into an important economic center and a city for cultural, human and scientific communication, as it was during the Silk Road (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015).

Xinjiang is very close to Central Asia and shares common cultural elements with the peoples of that region. The people of Xinjiang in particular the Uyghurs differ from the Han people in terms of language, religion, and traditions. Xinjiang has strategic importance for China because of the large number of border countries and the historical conflicts that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and some of the residents of that region always demand separation, which complicates the relationship between the central administration and those peoples. Since 2014, several terrorist attacks have occurred in that region. The first suspect was the separatist East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which relies a lot on the religious element to win the sympathy of Muslims and to point out that the Communist Chinese administration is attacking Muslims (Hendrix, 2016).

The development policy adopted by the Chinese administration towards that region within the Belt and Road comes to create a state of security and political stability and economic development, thus achieving prosperity for the peoples of that region. Central Asia is a priority for China. The Chinese administration is working on a policy of rapprochement with the Central Asian republics, thus eliminating the state of secession promoted by separatists. China's policy with those republics is based on resolving border disputes, intensifying investments, and establishing organizations for regional cooperation (Ramos, 2015). The Chinese administration devotes a large part of its foreign policy to the energy sector, cooperation in the field of energy is no less important than the Belt and Road Initiative (The State Council, People's Republic of China, 2015). The spread of Salafist ideology, religious fanaticism and the separatist approach, especially after the participation of some Uyghurs in the Middle East wars, has led the Chinese state to double down with sticks and carrots (Zreik, 2019).

## Regional Integration through the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative will increase China's influence on the local region, and thus China will become an influential country in terms of economics and politics in Asia (Esteban and Otero-Iglesias, 2015). The Belt and Road Initiative is the most ambitious in history in terms of human resources, financing and geographical scope. China does not intend to set up more international organizations to support the Belt and Road Initiative. Existing organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which includes Russia, may be taken advantage of. During a meeting of the heads of state of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Tashkent in June 2016, senior leaders endorsed the Belt and Road Initiative, as a "tool for strengthening regional economic cooperation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2016). During a meeting of prime ministers in Bishkek in 2016, the Belt and Road Initiative was referred to as a tool for international cooperation and creating new opportunities for partnership and investment (SCO, 2016).

Recently, China has pursued the strategy of smooth negotiations and intensified the conclusion of agreements with international partners. During the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, in November, 2013, it was pointed out that China should open up to more markets and free trade zones, and to more partnerships with neighboring countries (China Policy Observatory, 2015). The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, RCEP, is vital to the Chinese administration's openness and economic integration. This agreement covers half the world's population and includes 10 ASEAN countries, in addition to the six countries with which this association has a free trade agreement: India, South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and China, 30% of world GDP and 30% of its trade (ASEAN, 2018). With regard to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), China has proposed the establishment of a free trade area in the Asia Pacific under the name (Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific) FTAAP. The initiatives put forward and implemented by China contradict the protectionist policy that some countries put forward, which indicates the important role of China in determining the trends of the international economy (Girado, 2017).

The Belt and Road Initiative creates a state of economic dependence on China, especially in the Eurasian region, in which some countries' governments must adjust their policies in line with the harmony of their interests with China. Land and sea routes give China an increasingly strategic position by linking it to many countries and industrial regions (Brown, 2017: 28). This initiative increases Beijing's political presence in Central Asia, which may affect the geopolitical balance in Eurasia between China and other countries such as Russia, Kazakhstan, and others. Other countries, such as India and Turkey, have significant interests in Eurasia that may be affected in the event of China's increasing control over Eurasia and a change in the rules of the game. Recently, Eurasia has become a strategic area for China to achieve its interests and a bridge towards distant countries and continents.

## Russia's Position on the Belt and Road Initiative

Despite the Russian-Chinese alliance and the lack of contradiction in strategic positions on international issues, the Belt and Road Initiative may be a source of concern for the Russians because it may threaten their economic interests and endanger their traditional geopolitical influence in Central Asia (Kirisci and Le Corre, 2015). Russian foreign policy indicates Moscow's unwillingness to give up its influence in favor of China in the republics that were historically part of the Soviet Union. Central Asia is the most important in Greater Eurasia and vital security, economic and political region for Russia. Central Asia and the Caucasus are permanent regions to project the strategic plans of Moscow, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or the Russian Federation (Lo, 2015).

The Eurasian Economic Union may be Moscow's best tool to restore cohesion with its neighbors (Bond, 2017). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow's strategy changed specifically with its neighbors in the Eurasian space. Moscow's modern strategy is based on maintaining economic and political ties with the republics that were part of the Soviet Union (Mankoff, 2016: 15). Asia has an advanced position in Russian foreign policy. Russia seeks to deepen its relations with Asian countries, especially economic partnerships. The Russian strategy may converge with the Chinese in terms of focusing on the geography of the economy in the region. Russia is in a state of economic progress and is once again returning to the international arena as a force to be reckoned with, which necessitates deepening its involvement within its Asian environment (Timofeev and Alekseenkova, 2015).

In order to create a state of trust, China coordinates the Belt and Road Initiative with the initiatives and projects of other countries and economic blocs such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Greater Mekong Sub-Regional Cooperation, ASEAN Connectivity Initiative, Turkey's Silk Road Project, the "Promising Road" of Kazakhstan, the "Steppe Highway" of Mongolia, and so on (Wang, 2016). China benefited from the economic losses incurred by Russia during the economic crisis of 2008, which weakened the Russian role in the republics that were affiliated with the Soviet Union. This comes in the interest of China with more economic and political influence, and thus the rapid Chinese expansion in Eurasia (Mankoff, 2010). Russia is currently unable to compete with China economically outside the borders due to the large economic differences in favor of China. The Chinese role in Central Asia is limited to economic exchanges and government political cooperation but does not extend to direct interference in the internal affairs of those republics (Pantucci and Lain, 2016).

Russia still maintains some of its interests in Central Asia and has some political influence, but this does not anger China, as long as it does not affect its major strategic interests (Pantucci and Lain, 2016). Russia still has a large security role in Central Asia and this is in line with China in terms of protecting its interests. Vadim Kozyulin, Vice President of the Eurasian Economic Cooperation Organization, notes that Central Asian countries may fear the presence of a giant Chinese neighbor that may have interests beyond economic partnerships. Reports indicate that Russia is rethinking the Greater Eurasia project in order to restore its lost influence in some countries that were affiliated with the Soviet Union. This project may reach the countries that participate in the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Association of Southeast

Asian Nations, through the establishment of a network of bilateral and multi-lateral agreements on trade, coordination of regulations, investments, customs cooperation, etc. (Kuznetsova, 2017).

Russia allocates a strategic focus to Eurasia through the Collective Security Treaty (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping agreed on Russian-Chinese cooperation for the success of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative (Xinhua Net, 2015). To achieve this goal, Xi and Putin agreed to take the following measures: expand cooperation in trade and investment, build cross-border industrial economic zones; strengthen connectivity in logistics and transportation; long-term work towards the establishment of a free trade area between China and the European Union; encouraging the use of local currencies in bilateral trade and credit cooperation; strengthening cooperation through the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and to make progress in regional and global multilateral cooperation and in the expansion of international trade. Both EAEU and BRI serve Chinese and Russian cooperation and pave the way for a cooperative future in Eurasia (Timofeev et al., 2017). The Belt and Road Initiative achieves some of Russia's ambitions and contributes to Eurasian economic integration, and EAEU will turn into an effective means of Asian-European communication.

### **The Strategic Location of Central Asia and the Caucasus**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the republics that belonged to it in Central Asia and the Caucasus, some countries have ambitions of gaining influence after the weakness of Russia, such as Turkey, which shares social, linguistic, and other ties with many of these republics. In that period, Turkish foreign policy became more open, hoping for some regional influence. Beijing has given Turkey a special position on the Belt and Road Initiative due to its strategic geographical location between Asia and Europe and its impact on the peoples of Central Asia. At the same time, Turkey is a member of NATO and a major ally of the United States. Therefore, Turkey is not politically committed to a particular axis, but rather follows its interests (Atli, 2017). The presence of President Erdogan at the first BRI Forum in Beijing in May 2017, and the two speeches he delivered, indicate Turkey's strong interest in cooperation with China, and China's desire to strengthen its relations with Turkey (Colakoglu, 2018).

Turkey's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative will bring it an economic and investment advantage and reduce its trade deficit with China. Turkey will turn into a regional economic destination with a more developed infrastructure (Atli, 2017). One of the proposed projects is to integrate the Middle Corridor Initiative with the Belt and Road Initiative (Republic of Turkey - Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Some of the infrastructure projects are the Kars-Edirne express line and the port of Kumport. Central Asian countries view the Belt and Road Initiative as a source of opportunities and economic gain; the Chinese method of economic cooperation without imposing any political conditions is suitable for Central Asian countries. Central Asian countries do not interfere in China's internal affairs, such as the Uyghur issue; on the other hand, China does not interfere in their internal affairs (Mariani, 2013).

The Kazakh Nurly Zhol or Shining Path project launched by President Nazarbayev in 2016 closely matches the Belt and Road Initiative in terms of infrastructure and local and regional integration. Kazakhstan has a strategic location and owns a large geographical area in Eurasia; this country turns into an international hub for companies, including Iranian, Indian, and Russian, in addition to its strategic location on the Belt and Road Initiative. The Kazakh government is very open to cooperation with the Chinese because the partnership is economic without any interference in its internal politics. Security issues and Islamic extremism may be an obstacle to the full success of the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia. The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program, CAREC, an association established in 1997 may be an effective tool in achieving Eurasian integration and the success of the Belt and Road Initiative. Central Asia's interest lies in cooperating with both China and Russia in order to gain more economic profits and strengthen security (Timofeev et al., 2017).

There are three initiatives in the Caucasus: Eastern Partnership Initiative, the integration into the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Belt and Road Initiative. Russia regained its influence in the South Caucasus in the mid-2000s. This strategy aims to attract Azerbaijan to a new Russian integration model, which has become an element of the Eurasian Economic Union. China, through the Belt and Road Initiative, has filled the void left by the European Union in Baku. Azerbaijan was in dire need of a strong regional partner such as China (Valiyev, 2016). China may benefit from Azerbaijan as a bridge between Asia and Europe. There are no direct political interests because of the geographical distance. Central Asia and the Caucasus depend heavily on Russia and China in their trade exchanges. These countries cannot continue economically without their partnership with these two giants.

## CONCLUSION

China has become a force to be reckoned with. It has the second-largest economy, an extensive network of commercial and political contacts, and a highly armed army. The Belt and Road Initiative, launched by the Chinese president in 2013, will increase China's strength and international standing. Unlike most Western powers, China pursues a strategy of peaceful expansion across the Belt and Road and other projects based on economics and soft power. During the XIX. Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Chinese president pointed out that his country has become a major international power in the East and that socialism with Chinese characteristics has succeeded in making China a world power (Xi, 2017).

This paper provided a deeper understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative and its regional framework, especially in the Eurasian region. Reference was made to Mackinder's thought, which dealt with internal communication in the Eurasian bloc, and to Spykman, which dealt with maritime communication. It seems that the Belt and Road Initiative has combined the two ideas and turned them into a single vision and a unified project. It is a project not limited to economics and trade, but also to cultural exchanges, people-to-people contacts, and political cooperation without interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. This initiative will bring more self-security to China through the multiple partnerships and the great interests it will share with many countries. Many of the

corridors included in the Belt and Road Initiative and forked roads will refute the historically promoted hypothesis of the difficulty of Eurasian connectivity. Trade between China and Eurasian countries has increased significantly in the past few years, which indicates the intensity of communication and further closeness.

Despite the innumerable literature on Central Asia and Sino-Central Asia relations, this paper contributes to clarifying many concepts related to China's foreign policy towards Central Asia and refers to the Sino-Russian relationship in light of the large Chinese presence in Central Asia after the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is considered a former Soviet land and part of Russian glory. The study refers to the Chinese peaceful expansion strategy, which is a form of soft power, and the massive Chinese dependence on commercial projects as a tool to expand its geo-economic area and thus more political influence.

The Belt and Road Initiative is vital to Eurasia as well as to China because of the great economic benefit and prospective international cooperation. However, the Chinese economy is still huge compared to the economies of Eurasian countries, so some people wonder about the mechanisms for financing these projects, the nationality of the largest segment of the workforce, whether they are Chinese or from the country of origin, and the terms of partnership contracts. The paper referred to the more active Chinese role in Eurasia, but this does not end the geostrategic role of Russia in Central Asia. The cooperation between Beijing and Moscow comes within the framework of "division of tasks." There is harmony in work, not competition. Joint cooperation will fortify Eurasia more and frustrate the endeavor of any external forces to interfere in Eurasia.

Most of the available studies deal with influence and hegemony in terms of military power and the traditional superior dealings with other countries; this study is mainly based on the soft power that China relies on for peaceful expansion in its surroundings, and on the new and unique strategy in international relations that China is promoting. The paper refers to the development strategy pursued by China in the western region, which will be the focal point for launching the Belt and Road Initiative and for linking China with Central Asia and the world.

The Belt and Road Initiative is the backbone of modern Chinese strategy through an integrated land and sea network, financial institutions such as the AIIB and the Silk Road Fund, and extensive partnership agreements with many member countries from different regions. In a record period of time, China has become a major partner and competitor to the greatest economies of the first world countries. China is a major contributor to the restructuring of regional geopolitics and the formation of unconventional new world order. China will be in a more powerful position in the next ten years in terms of economic power and political influence, especially in Eurasia. In order to understand the bulk of the current international politics and foresee the future, it is necessary to delve deeper into the Belt and Road Initiative.

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