



Geopolitical Dimension of the Old and the Modern Silk Road

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Abstract

The old Silk Road, that connected the West and East, was a center of cultural and trade interaction in the Asian continent from China to the Mediterranean Sea, but in 2013 it was referred by the Chinese president Xi Jinping as “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR), which announced that China would fund a New Silk Road Economic Belt across Eurasia to connect China with Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. Different from the old Silk Road, current Silk Road includes the flow of financial services, information, technology as well as the Chinese initiative to strengthen connectivity in Central Asia and beyond. Comparing the modern Silk Road with the old Silk Road, in this paper we focus on China’s regional and international expansion, and the relevance of new Silk Road as one of the current largest programmes of economic diplomacy. Thereby, by using the qualitative descriptive methodology and interdisciplinary approach, this paper demonstrates that the new Silk Road comprises a new global order; therefore, it must be seen as the link between the past, present, and future. That is why its concept must be analyzed with reference to the old Silk Road, but also in wider geopolitical context.

Keywords: Silk Road, BRI, geopolitics, Southeast Asia, globalization

Eski ve Modern İpek Yolunun Jeopolitik Boyutu

Öz


Batıyla doğuyu birbirine bağlayan eski İpek Yolu, Çin’den Akdeniz’e Asya kıtasındaki kültürel ve ticari etkileşiminin merkezi olmasının yanı sıra Çin Devlet Başkanı Xi Jinping tarafından “Tek Kuşak, Tek Yol (OBOR)” sloganıyla anılmıştır. Çin bu sloganla birlikte Avrupa, Orta Doğu ve Güney Asya’yla ilişkiler kurmak amacıyla Avrasya boyunca uzanan Yeni İpek Yolu Ekonomik Kuşağı’nı finanse edeceğini duyurmuştur. Eski İpek Yolundan farklı olarak mevcut İpek Yolu; Çin’in Orta Asya ve ötesindeki bağlantıları güçlendirmeye yönelik girişimlerinin yanı sıra finansal hizmetler, bilişim ve teknoloji akışını kapsamaktadır. Modern İpek Yolu’yla eski İpek Yolu’nu karşılaştıran bu çalışmada Çin’in bölgesel ve uluslararası boyutlarda genişlemesiyle birlikte güncel en büyük ekonomik diplomasi programlarından biri olarak yeni İpek Yolu’nun önemini ele almaktayız. Nitel betimsel metodoloji ve interdisipliner yaklaşımın kullanıldığı bu çalışma; yeni İpek Yolu’nun yeni bir küresel düzen oluşturduğunu ve bu nedenle geçmiş, bugün ve gelecek arasında bir bağlantı olarak görülmesi gerektiğini gözler önüne sermektedir. Dolayısıyla bu konu, “Çin Küreselleşmesi (Chiglobalization)” kapsamında ve daha geniş bir jeopolitik bağlamda eski İpek Yolu’na atıfta bulunarak analiz edilmelidir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: İpek Yolu, Kuşak-Yol Projesi, jeopolitik, Güneydoğu Asya, küreselleşme

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Introduction

Different from the ancient Silk Road, dating back to the Han and Tang dynasties, two of the greatest Chinese empires focused mainly on trade, China's current "Silk Road", or "The Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), also includes the flow of financial services, energy resources, information, technology and people. Although the main trade routes of the ancient Silk Road were established in ancient times, the Silk Road's name refers to the delicate fabric produced only in China, and it was formulated in the 19th century by a German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen. Collectively, the Silk Roads were also referred to as The Maritime Silk Route that enabled inter-civilization exchanges based on premodern maritime intra-Asian interconnections within the Afro-Eurasian networks, which involved the intermediary states starting from the first millennium of the CE onwards. Accordingly, the expansion of maritime trade altered the Silk Road's landscape, from early Asian contacts with the Roman Orient, India, China, Arabia, and the navigation towards the Pacific. At its peak, paper, gunpowder, porcelain and spices were transported to the west, while horses, woolen rugs and blankets, gold, silver and glass made the return journey. Considering the modern concept of globalization as a process of interaction and integration among the people of different nations, we can point out a clear example of transboundary society and political cultures as well as a pure demonstration of early globalization (Stošić, 2018).

With the aim of reviving the Old Silk Road, by launching the (BRI), China's president Xi Jinping launched publicly in October 2013 the concept of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) oriented to promote trade cooperation between Asia, Europe, and Africa. Although the center of this new global network based on the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR), or new Silk Road initiative, is in Beijing, the concept alone represents a universal framework for global development, and not a Chinese strategy for global dominion. In accordance with the past legacy of the ancient Silk Road and geographical terms, two main routes should be mentioned: one, between China and the Korean Peninsula, and the other, crossing the South Chinese Sea along the shores of South and Southeast Asia all the way to the Persian Gulf. Because of the security reasons, since the Han dynasty (209 BC–8 AD) and the intensified role of the Arabs in the 7th century, the sea trade roused attention as being more lucrative, thus the Asian sea routes and passages, such as the Trans-Pacific corridor, have gained significant momentum, especially from the 15th century.

The term "political economy" dates back to the 18th century when economic transactions were subject to increased government intervention. The concept of political economy is multilayered and denotes the economy from the ideological, cultural, and social aspect (Caporaso & Levine, 1992, Sriramesha et al, 2009). In May 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China issued a document named "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," as a strategic project which promotes trade cooperation between Asia, Europe, and Africa.

In regard to trade of resources and the potential impact of the new Silk Road on the U.S. economy, it is obvious that in today's global challenges, China's multilateral participation requires involvement of its neighbors in a series of institutional setups – such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the CICA security architecture, and corridors through Pakistan and Myanmar to the Indian Ocean; all that may contribute to the creation of an increasingly sinocentric Asia. In that sense, this paper seeks answer to the question of how the old and the modern Silk Road, as an international commercial system, serve as a mean to increase our understanding of premodern and modern international systems operating outside the European context and within the geopolitical consequences of the China-U.S. rivalry.

Undoubtedly, China's attachment to the past and the remembrance of ancient times resonate throughout the One Belt, One Road scheme. According to Professor Yang Baoyun from the University of Beijing, "just like the historical route hundreds of years ago, the new (MSR) will bring tangible benefits to neighbors along the route, and will be a new driving force for the prosperity of the entire East Asian region" (Jiao & Zhang Yunbi, 2013). Nonetheless, although China's leaders have not explicitly shown any effort of pursuing an expansionist foreign strategy

which would transform the PRC into a regional hegemonic center, in many countries along the New Silk Road, China's new and active positioning is perceived as a potential threat to the existing regional and international system. In order to shed some light on the concept of the MSR as a revitalized phenomenon under the ancient concept that promotes globalization under the principles of peace, mutual economic benefits, and sustainable development in the maritime sphere, in this paper we will also aim to offer a comparative view between the ancient and the modern Silk Roads.

Historical Silk Roads Trade as an International System

Although China has long been considered a continental power, it also has a rich maritime history, some of which is part of the old Silk Roads. In a general sense, The Silk Roads, as a series of routes that connected Asia, Europe and Africa, both through land and the sea, were connecting East and West for centuries – two most developed world regions of the medieval and early modern periods (China and the Muslim East), that undoubtedly reflected the emerging of pre-modern international system.

Based on historical and archaeological records, for several thousand years, Arab, Persian, Indian Ceylonese, Chinese and Southeast Asian traders and seafarers were traversing the East China Sea, South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. This vast expanse of oceans and seas was actually the Indo-Pacific region in which Southeast Asia exported its spices, scented woods, feathers of exotic birds, tortoise shell, ivory and rhino horns, while China exported its three treasures of silk, porcelain and tea, while the Indian and Arabian exports included textiles, precious metals and jewelry, frankincense, glass and horses. However, the trade didn't consist only in goods but also in exchange of ideas, cultures and religions.

One of the most important aspects of the ancient maritime Silk Road was surely autonomy of navigation (Koh, 2015), which enabled cross-cultural interaction among different civilizations while exploring the seas. In that sense, historical notes on the ancient maritime Silk Road define peaceful traits beyond commerce; hence art, culture and religion were the key factors for co-existence and tolerance amongst various civilizations. But there were noticeable drawbacks to the ancient maritime Silk Road, including unpredictable weather and harsh storms that vanished wreckage of ships. Furthermore, there were dangerous straits which were crucial in relation to navigational expertise and control for power, while later the rise in piracy emerged as a result of Mongol dominance of the Silk Road. Bearing in mind the before mentioned, the ancient Silk Road still remains in the field of history, sociology, archeology, politics and international relations. The book *The Silk Road: Travel, Trade, War and Faith* written by Whitefield and Williams (2004) reveals some discrepancy with regard to names and places associated to the Silk Road, showing how each text relating to the Silk Road should be analyzed firstly in the realm of human narratives, where myths play such an important role, and how exchange between civilizations in terms of religious beliefs, art objects or trade, always contributes to this variety of viewpoints.

As the ancient maritime Silk Road emerged as a new economic structure that was beyond trade, social interaction, political dependence, and a shift in power relations, one of the most integral elements of the Silk Road was the maritime domain (Iftikhar & Abassi, 2016). Geographically, the old maritime Silk Road had two routes, one from China to the East China Sea linking to the Korean peninsula, and the second one from China to South China Sea, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Although maritime routes were used several thousand years before the continental routes, which coincides with the archeological evidence that suggests that maritime transportation dates back to thousands of years before inception of the Silk Road, the maritime trade routes became popular with the Chinese Han Dynasty (209 BC – AD 8). Until the 7th century, an era when Chinese, Romans and Parthians predominated, land routes were more used and very lucrative. However, with the rise of the Arabian influence in trade, the maritime routes gained the advantage over land ones due to the capacity for greater volume of shipments and higher security compared to the assaults on land routes (Ibid.) Nonetheless, due to the voyages of famous Admiral Zheng He, during the 15th century China established itself as the great maritime power whose sailors reached the coast of

Africa, promoting the extension of political-economic relationships. Recognizing the strategic importance of geopolitical aspects of these enterprises, they surely may be considered as the precursors of today's international concepts enhancing China's power up to the Middle East (Sabbatini & Santangelo, 2011; Scott, 2016).

In this chapter we will try to give a brief overview of the rich history of the Maritime Silk Road that outlines a general history of East and West Asian trade and its geopolitical dimensions, with onward references to maritime connections with Africa and Europe. Likewise, we will try to describe the importance of the spatial routes and trade history of the Maritime Silk Road.

Namely, according to a well-known legend, the Empress Hsi Ling Shi, wife of the mythical Yellow Emperor, Huang Ti, discovered silk after a cocoon fell from a mulberry tree into her tea cup and unraveled (Paludan, 1998). Although reserved under penalty of death as a well-kept secret for the Chinese imperial court, China managed to keep a monopoly on the world's silk production until about 200 BCE. However, with the Chinese settlers silk spread through Asian culture and, as a key state in the early Chinese international system, Korea soon saw its own silk industry emerging.² Hence, by the time of the Han dynasties, an extensive network of interlinking trade routes led to an expansion of cultural and commercial transactions across Central Asia, which enabled the sericulture's spread into India, Japan and Persia (Iran). The Roman Empire also traded in silk, which was generally reserved for the ruling class.³ In the 7th century, sericulture and silk weaving spread through Africa, Sicily and Spain, where Andalusia was Europe's main silk-producing center in the 10th century, with the Republic of Venice and France becoming important producers in the late Medieval and Renaissance periods. By the 19th century, silk production was industrialized in Japan, but the late 20th century saw China regain its position as the world's largest silk producer. Nowadays, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Uzbekistan and Brazil also have developed a silk related industries.

Archaeological evidence shows that maritime transportation dates back to prehistoric times. Actually, the earliest historical reference to Funan (Cambodia and the Mekong Delta in today's Vietnam) is a Chinese description of a mission that visited the country in the 3rd century AD, although evidence shows that East-West trade already existed early in the first millennium (Darvill, 2008). During the first millennium, the Korean Peninsula was highly developed with a large trading network maintained both with China and Japan. The remaining ancient tombs in Gyeongju, the capital of the Silla Kingdom in Korea (57 BCE to 935 AD), indicate that there was frequent exchange between Silla and other parts of the world linked through the Silk Road. In the West, the Failaka island of Kuwait was one of the places where Greece, Rome and China exchanged goods. The Sassanids from Persia (226–651 AD) explored trade routes to India, South-East Asia and China, where their cargo was known as *possu* (meaning Persian). They traded at Gujarat, Konkan, South Carana, Malabar and Coromandel in India, and in Sri Lanka (Malekandrathi, 2010). The Arabs built on this trade network and in 762 AD moved their Umayyad⁴ capital from Damascus to Baghdad on the Euphrates. Quilon (Kulluam) in Kerala, India, was home to Arab, Christian and Jewish merchants and a thriving Chinese community by the 9th century AD.⁵

The expansion of Tang dynasty (618–907 AD) brought stability and expansion of both trade and new ideas. Stability in China was followed by stability in Persia under the Sassanids, and both the overland and maritime Silk Road routes flourished. The great transformation of the historic Maritime Silk Road occurred from the 7th century onwards, as the area opened up to

² Korea functioned as an intellectual bridge between China and Japan, with trade and settlements also fomenting the growth of Buddhism and porcelain making.

³ According to a legend, monks working for the Emperor Justinian smuggled silkworm eggs to Constantinople in hollow bamboo walking canes (Baumer, 2013).

⁴ The Umayyad dynasty was the second of the four major Islamic caliphates.

⁵ The traces of the lucrative Maritime Silk Road trade led by the Muslim merchants since the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD) are still visible in the Ashab Mosque (Mosque of Purity) in Quanzhou which was built in 1009 AD.

maritime trade (Abulafia, 2018).⁶ After the collapse of the Tang government and the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–960 AD), the Song dynasty came to power and brought a centralization of government and an upsurge in economic activity. During the reign of the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD), maritime trade flourished, as well as the expansion of Islam and coastal trading communities that were developing all around the Indian Ocean and in South-East Asia.

From the west, first Persian and then Arab sailors played a central role in the rise of the Maritime Silk Road: Building on Sassanid routes, the Arabs brought their sailing *dhow*s⁷ eastwards to trade, and with them they brought Islam to the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia and coastal China. Pilgrimage to Mecca was at first an aspiration, but, as circumstances improved, travel for *Hajj* became possible for many. With the monsoon winds, half-yearly trade visits became major trading festivals. By sea it was possible to carry greater volumes in relative safety compared to the looting and thefts on overland routes. However, there were also drawbacks to the ancient Maritime Silk Road in terms of piracy and unpredictable weather (Iftikhar & Abbasi, 2016). Thanks to the flourishing trade with medicinal plant camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*), Chinese merchants were motivated to participate actively in a trading network that had developed in the East Indies under the protection of the rulers of Srivijaya Empire in Sumatra, which linked the world of the Chinese traders to that of the Malay and Indian. A trade route that emerged as a result, was rightly called the “Silk route of the sea”, because increasing quantities of spices were passing through India, the Red Sea, and Alexandria in Egypt to reach merchants in Genoa, Venice and other western ports. From there they were shipped to Europe, mostly by land, to end up in Lübeck (Germany), Riga (Latvia) or Tallinn (Estonia) (Abulafia, 2018). During the reign of the Song Emperor, Renzong, great wealth and energy in China were directed towards increase of knowledge, which led to growth in the economy. By relying on the knowledge of Arab and Indian sailors, the Chinese, who had invented the compass (in 1119 AD), in short time surpassed others in cartography and seamanship, while their *junks*⁸ became the most advanced ships in the world. Simultaneously, Asian coastal trade gradually expanded from Arab to Chinese merchants, and with the inclusion of the Kingdom of Korea, Japan, the Malabar Coast of India, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea region, existing networks were developed. China imported tropical luxuries and raw materials (rare woods, precious metals, gems, spices and ivory), but exported tea, silk, cotton cloth, porcelain, lacquer ware, copper, dyes and books and paper (Paludan, 1998).⁹

In Indonesia, Malaysia and southern Thailand, the Srivijaya kingdom that controlled the passages between India and China, namely the Sunda Strait from Palembang and the Malacca Strait from Kedah, served as an important *entrepôt* which traded with valuable commodities from the region and beyond. Srivijaya functioned as the pinch point between India and China and during the 11th century AD, rice, cotton, indigo and silver came from Java, while aloes, resin, camphor, ivory and rhino tusks, tin and gold were shipped from Sumatra (Xing & Nilsson, 2015). Timber, rattan iron, gems and precious stones were collected from Borneo and exotic birds and animals, sandalwood and rare spices from the Eastern Indonesian archipelago. Meanwhile, various spices of South-East Asia and India, as well as Chinese ceramics, lacquerware and artworks, brocade, fabrics and silks were some of the most precious trading commodities of Srivijaya’s networked ports (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018).

With its capital in Palembang, the Hindu-Buddhist Kingdom of Srivijaya was actually the first major Indonesian kingdom and the first major Indonesian commercial sea power. Ruled by Tamils, the Srivijaya Kingdom seemingly emerged at the end of the 6th century AD, following the

⁶ The first Arab ambassador arrived in 651 AD.

⁷ *Dhow* represents the generic name of a number of traditional sailing vessels with one or more masts with lateen sails used in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region. Some historians think that the dhow was invented by Arabs, while some claim that it was the invention of Indians.

⁸ Chinese vessels used from the 2nd century till today.

⁹ Chinese copper coins from the Song period can be found in Sri Lanka, while porcelain was found in East Africa, Egypt, Turkey, some Gulf States and Iran, as well as in India and South-East Asia (Ibid.).

conquest of the sea power of Funan, and it flourished from the 8th to 13th century. Afterwards, the Java-based Majapahit Kingdom dominated much of today's Indonesia. Java-based Majapahit Kingdom maintained relationships with Champa (southern Viet Nam), Cambodia, Siam (Thailand) and southern Myanmar, and even sent missions to China, while its rulers extended power over other islands by destroying neighboring kingdoms and keeping under control a larger share of the commercial trade of the archipelago. At the time of the foundation of Majapahit, Muslim traders began entering the maritime trade area, while excavations conducted along the banks of the Singapore River and in the Kallang estuary showed that the island of Singapore at the southern end of the Malay Peninsula had been a node in the ancient Maritime Silk Road.¹⁰

Amid the 13th century, the rising Mongol Empire was forcing trade by sea, hence contributing to the vitality of the Maritime Silk Road. Via the Maritime route, Marco Polo returned from his 17 years' travel through China. From China to Sumatra, Indonesia and the Indian Ocean, Marco Polo finally docked at Hormuz, Persia, and after his historic voyage wrote the brief description of it. Under the Yang Dynasty (1271–1368 AD), trade with Southern India and the Persian Gulf flourished in China. Due to the monsoon winds, trade with East Africa also boomed bringing ivory, gold and slaves to China. In Sri Lanka guilds developed in order to control Chinese trade on the Malabar Coast and, thus leading to formalization of commercial relations; yet intense rivalry remained, so Cochin started competing with Calicut in Kerala (India). Under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 AD), in the early 15th century, China's maritime explorations culminated due to various naval expeditions led by the great Admiral Zheng He. These state-sponsored voyages enhanced trade relations with states in South-East Asia, around the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea (Frankopan, 2015).

The Ottoman Empire gained complete control of the overland Silk Road with the capture of Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1453. At that time, the price of spices in Europe jumped precipitously, but the Ottomans managed to weaken the power of the Venetians and with Salim I (1512–1520) they gained more control over the Maritime Silk Road. Thus, Cairo and Suez fell under Ottoman rule in 1517, and Basra on the Persian Gulf in 1534. Likewise, Portuguese expansion along the west coast of India was followed by Ottoman expansion into the western rim of the Arabian Sea, so while the Portuguese controlled the Straits of Hormuz, the Ottomans traded via the Red Sea. Moreover, in the consequential trade war which started between the Old World System (via the Middle East) and the Portuguese-initiated New World System (via South Africa), the Maldives emerged as an important port for Ottoman and Muslim trade via the Red Sea, allowing them to avoid Portuguese, Dutch and later British-controlled shipping routes. The Marakkar traders from Cannamore (Kannur, India) were crucial participants in this trade, while the port of Surat in Gujarat, India, functioned as a nucleus of Indo-Ottoman trade (Malekandrathil, 2010). At the Red Sea end of the route, Mocha in Yemen functioned as a key port, notorious for its export of coffee from the 15th century onwards. The Armenians were influential promoters of the Ottoman navy by becoming commercially engaged right across the Indian Ocean as leading merchants and bankers throughout Muslim states in Asia (Kamen, 2003).

Ming dynasty sent abroad many others naval expeditions after Zheng He's Armada and at least twelve other admirals led voyages to South-East Asia and the Indian Ocean.¹¹ The last voyage was led by Xuande in 1430–1433 and, in 1497, the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama travelled eastwards to some of the same places as Chinese admirals. After this prosperous period of Chinese exploration, more conservative mandarins convinced the Emperor to end the costly voyages. In addition, during the Tokugawa period (1603–1868 AD), Japan also limited its contacts with the outside world, but trade with China never fully ended. With China and Japan

¹⁰ Excavations uncovered glass shards, beads, globules, ceramics and coins. The ceramics found at Fort Canning are of Chinese origin and date back to the 14th century, while the Chinese coins from the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127 AD) were also found (Koh, 2015).

¹¹ In 1403, Ma Pin led expeditions to Java, Aceh (Indonesia), Calicut, Quilon (India) and other places. Wu Bin, Zhang Koqing and Hou Xian also led recorded voyages (Miksic, 2013).

both looking inwards, trade continued through prosperous entrepôts like Malacca in Malaysia, and Hôi An (once known as Fai Pho) in Vietnam.¹² Although after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, an outward-looking Japan reappeared in trading relationships, the threat from outside influences marked deeply and almost equally the Chinese and the Japanese attitudes to sea trade, especially during 17th and 18th centuries. As a result of this attitude, ports functioned as a multi-cultural melting pots, offering new ideas, and religion views. They were often accepted with suspicion by more orthodox and mono-cultural inland traders, because these traders were also trying to control the ports' wealth, as the colonial powers later did. Finally, there is no doubt that it was the wealth of trade that attracted Europeans.

To sum up, the Indian subcontinent represented the center of the Maritime Silk Road. During the medieval period, due to the movement of people and commodities, maritime India emerged as more liberal than inland India marked by conservative Hinduism that discouraged sea travel. While Arab *dhow*s were sailing eastwards at its ports, Chinese junks were travelling westwards. Mostly, the ruts of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal were controlled by monsoon winds, so India and Sri Lanka were natural stopping places. Since ancient times, India has been connected to the Mediterranean world via the Persian Gulf, so commodities were traded from China, South-East Asia, the Deccan and Sind in Traprobane and Sri Lanka. During the 7th century AD, Christian merchants from West Asia made connections with the Konkan region of India, and in particular with Gopakapattanam (Goa). Because the monsoon period called for long stays, the development of settlements came naturally. The accession of the Rashtrakutas affected positively Arab commercial activity and Arab governors were appointed to Sanjan, Gujarat in the 10th century.¹³

In regards to the importance of the Indian Ocean to Chinese merchants coming from the east, the Chinese Buddhist monk Fa-Hsein who travelled to today's Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the 5th century wrote about a voyage by sea, describing the route from Tamralipti (Tamluk in West Bengal) to China through Sri Lanka. Likewise, in the 7th century, the Chinese monk I-Tsing recorded his travel to India via Srivijaya (Sumatra, Indonesia) and Kedah (Malaysia) (Malekandathil, 2010). As noted above, during the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 AD) and the Tang reign (618–907 AD), the maintenance and preservation of peace were one of the crucial factors for improving trade relations along the Maritime Silk Road and primarily benefit the Indian peninsula, located at its center. Therefore, Quilon in Malabar, for example, became an important node for long distance trade, while the chain of ports, of varying degrees of economic importance, developed on both the east and west coasts of India. Also, there were various interconnected routs through which commodities were traded, and journeys were diverging. Hence, one could sail from Persia to Quilon (Kollam) in 30 days, and then on to Kedah in Malaysia, a further 30 days distance away, and finally reach Canton (Guangzhou) within a month. The ships that traded via these maritime routs during the 10th century focused on India, bringing wealth to the Kadambas on the Konkan (west coast of India), to the Cholas (southern India), to the Khymers in Angkor (Cambodia), to the Burmese at Pagan (Bagan, Myanmar), to the Ly (Viet Nam), and to the Sung (the Chinese mainland). Arab and Jewish traders from Abassid Persia and Fatimid Egypt became the main intermediaries and financiers of the European trade. So, while the Old World Trade System saw goods travel from the east via Aden, Cairo and Alexandria, in the reverse direction horses were mainly exported to India, and on the eve of the Portuguese conquest of Goa, each ship from Hormuz was bringing 80–125 horses (Ibid.).

In other words, the Portuguese initiated the New World Trade System, through which goods travelled around the Cape of Good Hope (South Africa) to Europe. Regardless, merchants making the *Hajj*, kept using the old trading system by exchanging information and settling prices for

¹² Entrepôt in Vietnam enabled a powerful trade conduit between Europe, China, India and Japan, and was especially known for its ceramic industry. Shipwreck discoveries have shown that Asian ceramics were transported from Hôi An to as far as Sinai in Egypt (Li, 1998).

¹³ The great Arab historian Al Masudi, writing in Cairo (Egypt) at the time, refers to Cambay, Sanjan, Thana, Sopara, Chaul and Malabar as important maritime centers on the west coast of India that actively traded with Arabs.

goods travelling the maritime routes. Kerala, on India's Malabar Coast, was one of the richest centers of maritime exchange. After the collapse of the Abbasids in Baghdad, Cairo developed trade with Kerala via the Red Sea, and Calicut (Kozhikode) emerged as a prominent port. Later, the Calicut port was overtaken by Cochin (Kochi), and by integrating it with the Portuguese, in Malabar arose the Portuguese state. By the 1540s, the merchants of Kerala were trading simultaneously using the Old World system (Cannamore/Calicut to the Maldives and the Red Sea to Venice), and the New World System (Goa/Cochin to Lisbon). The development of Portuguese attracted many Hindu entrepreneurs. Pepper and cinnamon had long history of trade, thus making of Sri Lanka a key destination for silk route traders. Before the Portuguese reached Sri Lanka, the Europeans did not know where cinnamon came from. Likewise, a similar species were later discovered in the Philippines (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). After the Portuguese established a trading post in Sri Lanka, striving to maintain control over the island through the Kingdom of Kandy, the Kandy king invited the Dutch, allowing them to take control over the much of the island. During the Napoleonic wars, in 1802, the British took over the Dutch part of the island and, in 1815, the Kingdom of Kandy dissolved. Instead of cinnamon, tea became a major export, especially to Britain and, under the name of Ceylon, Sri Lanka stayed a British Protectorate until 1948.

The last Chinese imperial dynasty expands over 1644–1912 AD. By the 19th century, foreign seaborne trade to China was regulated by two systems, the ancient tribute trade and the so called Canton system. Trade based on tributes arrived at ports in Guangdong, while the Canton system involved rising European powers that traded at the port in Canton (today's Guangzhou), the only harbor open to foreign exchange and Western traders. Therefore, the merchants from the British East India Company could come during the October to March trading season, and were issued a Chinese permit in Portuguese-held Macao to be able to anchor offshore. It was obligatory for Emperor's agents to authorize Chinese merchants' trade with the foreigners, and they considered the Chinese merchants responsible for collecting duties and fees before the ships were permitted to leave. By the late 18th century, this type of trade bloomed, driven mainly by the British demand for tea from Fujian. Also, products from India such as cotton and opium were traded by the East India Company for Chinese tea, porcelain and silk. Although the taxes obtained through the Canton system were very important to the Qing, restrictions placed on trade became a point of clash with the European traders, especially because restrictions included the sale of Indian opium, a commodity that the Chinese Emperor banned in 1796. In the end, trade restrictions and China's attempts to stop opium imports led to the Opium Wars.

Patterned largely in 1835, the unequal treaties were initiated by the conflict between Britain and China, known as the first Opium War (1839–1842), which was resolved by the Treaty of Nanjing (Nanking; August 29, 1842).¹⁴ During 1850s and 1860, along with the further wars with the hostile European powers, the uprising of rebellions was initiated against the weakening Qing rule. Besides a series of treaties and agreements in which China was forced to concede many of its territories, during the 19th and early 20th century, China was also forced to concede its sovereignty rights to distinct foreign imperialist powers, especially Great Britain, France, Germany, the United States, Russia and Japan. As a result, the British Supplementary Treaty of the Bogue (Humen; October 8, 1843) granted British citizens in China extraterritorial rights by which they were to be under the control of their own consuls and were not subject to Chinese law. This treaty also included a special-nation clause, guaranteeing Great Britain all privileges that China might grant to any other foreign power. Moreover, over the next few years China concluded various similar treaties with other powers, of which the most important were the Treaty of Wanghia (Wangxia) signed with the U.S., and the Treaty of Whampoa signed with France (both 1844). Each treaty expanded upon the rights of extraterritoriality, allowing the foreigners to enjoy an independent legal, judicial, police and taxation system within the treaty

¹⁴ Under the terms of that agreement, China not only paid the British an indemnity, but also ceded the territory of Hong Kong and established a "fair and reasonable" tariff. Moreover, British merchants, who were previously allowed to trade only at the South China port of Canton (Guangzhou), were allowed to trade at five "treaty ports", including Canton and Shanghai.

ports. After the defeat of China by Britain and France in the second Opium War (1856–60), the new treaties of Tianjin (Tientsin; 1858) supplemented the old ones by providing: foreign diplomats in Beijing the possibility (Peking) to travel in the interior of China; the opening of the country's major waterway, the Yangtze River (Chang Jiang), to foreign navigation; permission to Christian missionaries to propagate their faith; legalization of opium importation and the coolie trade; and the opening of 10 new ports to foreign trade and residence (Ibid.).

Meanwhile, Russia signed the Treaty of Aigun (May 16, 1858) which enabled Russian jurisdiction over the lands north of the Amur River from its junction with the Argun River to the Tatar Strait, and Chinese control over the lands south of the Amur from the Argun to the Ussuri (Wusuli) River, as well as the mutual use of territory east of the Ussuri to the Sea of Japan (East Sea). According to the this treaty, only Russian and Chinese vessels would be permitted to navigate the Amur, Ussuri, and Sungari (Songhua) rivers.¹⁵ Nevertheless, in 1860, the Yuangming Yuan, a heritage site containing hundreds of pavilions, temples, pagodas and libraries, was burnt by British and French troops, which was the pure act of aggression that can be considered as one of the greatest acts of cultural vandalism of the 19th century. The palace was attacked once more and completely destroyed in 1900, when the forces of the Eight-Nation Alliance invaded Beijing. To summarize, by the beginning of the First World War there were 48 “treaty ports” which enabled foreigners to trade according to their own legal systems (Westad, 2012). Finally, the 20th century in China brought definitely a major social change. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the foreign interference to a large extent ended. With the aim of modernizing the country, in 1978 Chinese government announced the policy of opening-up to the outside world. Therefore, in the 21st century China has reemerged as a great world power, and President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative confirms the country's outward looking leadership.

The 21st Century “Belt and Road Initiative” and its Geopolitical Implications

During the 1980s, China entered a positive demographic and economic reality based on a growing middle class. Under the rule of the president Xi Jinping, the Communist regime remained, based on the social premise of “stability and wealth for submission and loyalty”. The premise goes back to the era of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms (1978-1992) and it's related with the belief that the government's legitimacy relies on its ability to ensure the wealth and security of its people. Thus, in order to endure, the Chinese regime focused its resources to generate constant energy supply, and thus support energy intensive industries that encompass production of cement, iron and steel, petrochemical, chemical, glass, etc. and consequently, social development and growth. After the economic crises in 2008, the American president, Barac Obama, made shift in the foreign policy of the United States by launching the East Asia Strategy (2009–2017) and investing in East Asian countries instead in the Middle Easetern/European area. Guided by the desire to benefit from this situation, Xi developed the New Silk Rad Initiative based on the three-fold approach: to promote relations between Beijing and its neighbors and ensure security, while diminishing American influence in Asia; to find new markets for Chinese oversupply of products generated due to the economic crisis and inability of domestic market to absorb it; and to secure all China's strategic routes.

In other words, the situation mentioned above has deeply marked China's foreign policy, particularly toward states in Middle East and Southeast Asian regions that have considerable amount of energy resources, such as crude oil and gas. As the old Silk Road, the Modern Silk Road, or the BRI, comprises not only the countries of the ancient Road, but also other regions, continents and even the entire world. In this sense, the Eurasia region has a great importance

¹⁵ The Soviets terminated most of the gained privileges after the Russian Revolution in 1917, while between 1928 and 1931 the Western powers returned tariff autonomy to China. Nonetheless, extraterritorial privileges were not surrendered to China by Britain, France, and the United States until 1946, and the British restored sovereignty for Hong Kong to China in 1997, while the Portuguese did the same in Macau in 1999.

nowadays and could imply a change in the actual geopolitical dynamic in the existing world order. Due to the evident China's growing global role, many experts have raised speculations towards China's hegemony. However, what is important to understand in today's context is that up until now the world has been dominated by Western powers. In that sense, the BRI, which involves some of the most relevant international actors of our time (China, the United States, Japan, South Korea and Russia), surely contributes to the new multi-polar world currently emerging.

Namely, in recent years China has strived to obtain the implementation of its new project based on the route on the sea, and route overland. In 2014, the Maritime Silk Road, and in 2015, its joint creation, were the central theme of the China-ASEAN Expo. On the whole, most of the involved countries reacted positively to the Chinese initiative. One of the crucial goals of the New Silk Roads has been to revive China's western provinces, mainly undeveloped and burdened by numerous difficulties. One example of this intention is related to the area of Xinjiang, formed of vast desert basins and surrounded by mountains, but included into global flows through the MSR, destined to be a major energy corridor and a gateway for hydrocarbons from Central Asia.

In accordance with the original plan, the main branch of the MSR would leave from Kanton and then go along the Asian shores, while its main stops would be Kuantan, Jakarta, Colombo and Calcutta, and via Mombasa, on the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, it would reach Europe with the destination in Athens (Duquennoy and Zielonka, 2015). The other branch of the MSR should pass Southeast Asia and then continue toward Pacific islands. However, it is difficult to delineate concrete paths, because apart from current investments, the political situation of the involved countries has its own dynamic, and these routes and paths may have side-branches along the way. Therefore, the modern MSR began from China, moving on to the South China Sea and then Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and Europe. The southern spreading out of the route has offered access to the South Pacific. Although officially the main goal of the new MSR and the entire OBOR initiative is economic prosperity based on so called "win-win cooperation", and oriented to common development, as well as to the promotion of economic and cultural integration between China and the states involved, the project is inherently geopolitical, and thus backed up by serious diplomatic, economic and strategic considerations (Yale, 2015).¹⁶

With the aim to financially support OBOR project, China established not only the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), but also the Silk Road Fund (SRF), thus, as a geopolitical and geoeconomic idea, OBOR, as well as the ancient Silk Road, functions as a combination of land and sea lines, involving so far more than 200 BRI cooperation agreements with 151 countries and 32 international organizations (Helsinki Times, 2023) in projects related to energy, transportation, digital networks, and trade. As a grandiose and holistic concept, based on approaches like cooperation, trade, infrastructure, etc., the BRI comprehends massive investments, infrastructural development, and industrial integration in the field of energy sector. The BRI initiative embraces an area of about 70% of the world's population, provides more than 55% of global GDP and has about 75% of known energy reserves.¹⁷

Within this scope, even though the continental and maritime component of OBOR are closely related, the routes and ports outlined by the MSR are the priority, as well as their protection by the military navy, while the construction of new railways, system of pipelines and roads (Iron Silk Road), comes secondary. In this sense, China's naval expansion and its investments in ports and over the shores from Asia to Europe have been interpreted as a political and military maneuver, directed to rise China as an imperialist power, so the MSR has contributed to the competition with the United States and India for supposed China's pretensions of creating strategic space for itself in Western Pacific and Indian Ocean. Actually, an

¹⁶ Under the president Xi, China not only has emerged as one of the major regional powers in Asia, but also as a global superpower.

¹⁷ As confirmed by the official Belt and Road Portal (2020), China has signed more than 190 official documents with countries from the Eurasian region to Africa, Latin America, the South Pacific and West Europe, including 136 foreign governments and 36 international organizations.

alliance with Japan, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, Singapore, Taiwan and Indonesia, as countries within the sphere of American dominance, the geostrategic importance of the MSR has become undeniable, especially in the case of ASEAN countries.¹⁸ Due to its geostrategic value, the BRI initiative has endowed China to develop partnerships with the neighboring countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan from which China imports raw materials, such as energy, iron, and other metals and minerals, while complementing the Central Asian economies with Chinese consumer goods and products.¹⁹ Likewise, by expanding its influence towards outside its borders, China has managed to ensure the transportation of oil and gas. As an oil importing country, through strategic network of railways, highways, airways, and oil and gas pipelines, China has improved its external security.

To understand the geostrategic importance of SREB and MSR, it is necessary to bear in mind that China's maritime transport system relies heavily on four oceanic routes and numerous other maritime strategic routes. Precisely, the transport of goods to the Middle East, Africa and Western Europe depends on the Straits of Malacca, Hormuz, Mandez and the Suez Canal, while the transport of goods to Australia and South-East Asia depends on the Bashi Strait and the Lombok Strait, while the transport of goods to North America and Latin America depends on the Panama Canal. Almost 90% of China's trans-shipment of goods relies on sea routes, and the transport route of oil goes through the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca, or mainly from the Middle East and Africa, whose geopolitical situation is unreliable. Because of that, by creating new land passages in the Eurasia that reach the Middle East, and thus avoiding the dependence on Strait of Malacca, the BRI initiative ensures economic security, while respecting sovereignty of other countries, and creating a new Eurasian Land Bridge that forms China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-West Asia and China-Indochina Peninsula economic corridors (Venancio, 2018: 19-20).

As an ambitious initiative that connects the entire Asia, the BRI comprehends six land corridors: the Eurasian Land Bridge, China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, China Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, as well as two maritime routes that connect big sea ports through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean route, and the South China Sea and the South Pacific route (NDRC, 2015). That is to say, the new Silk Route connects China to land and maritime states of Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Middle East, Africa and Europe, so the concept of OBOR comprehends economic belts along the ancient Silk Road and the modern Silk Road. However, since China in accordance to its political agenda often changes the routes of the project, they can't be accurately grouped.²⁰ However, it is possible to point out some of the main routes for Beijing. One of them is the Xi'an – Duisburg route which is partially the same as the one of the ancient roads and goes through Urumqi, Horgos, Almaty, Bishkek, Samarkand, Buchanbe, Tehran, and Istanbul. By this route raw materials and energy are transported to China, while manufactured products go to Europe. Namely, there are various branches throughout Central Asia, which is actually the center of the MSR. Those routes serve both to secure the energy supply and to increase the influence of the BRI. One route goes through Russia (the second Beijing-Europe route that goes through Ulanbaatar, Irkutsk, and Moscow); another through Pakistan (strategically important corridor

¹⁸ An international organization ASEAN has 10 member countries in Southeast Asia: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Of all the ASEAN countries, Indonesia expressed the greatest interest towards the Chinese project.

¹⁹ Because of vast hydrocarbon resources, more than 70% of Chinese investments in Central Asia rely on Kazakhstan. The economy of Kazakhstan is mainly oriented towards the exportation of gas and oil, which accounts for 3% of the world's resources, as well as uranium, which amounts 12% of the world's resources. Through Kazakhstan go several oil and gas pipelines – from Beyneu on the Caspian Sea to Horgos on the Chinese border, and from Atyrau in the west to Karagandy in the center, and Alashankou near Xinjiang (Armando, 2021).

²⁰ Some countries, like Australia in 2021, have left the project because the Chinese influence has been stigmatized as “problematic”.

between Gwadar and Xinjiang), and others through South Asian countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, etc. With regard to maritime routes, the most important is Venice-Shanghai corridor that comprehends Athens, Djibouti, Gwadar, and Hambantota. One branch of this route reaches Gwadar port situated across the mouth of the Persian Gulf and its vast energy resources. Other routes go to Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nairobi and Caracas, and to be no longer dependent on the narrow Malacca Strait, China is establishing a new route through Thailand. All mentioned land routes reach Chinese region of Xinjiang and its neighbor borders belong to Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Mongolia, Pakistan, Russia, and Tajikistan, so Xinjiang represents the most important region of Chinese influence in Central Asia (Armando, 2021).

Although China strives to include as many countries as possible into the BRI, few of them are of crucial importance. One of important countries is Pakistan where China invested a large sum of money in order to form an economic corridor between the port of Gwadar and Kashgar, as a place where begins Karakoram road which crosses the mountain range of the same name and reaches China (Xinjiang). Furthermore, for China the port of Gwadar has special geostrategic value for various reasons. Firstly, Gwadar is surrounded by deep waters, hence it's reachable for different types of ships. Secondly, it is secure due to the presence of a Pakistani military base. Thirdly, because of its closeness to the Gulf of Oman, and today's Chinese presence in Djibouti, Gwadar is perfect for import of hydrocarbons from the Middle East. Through a terminal for gas tankers gas can be imported from Qatar, while the liquefaction of gas can come from Iran, and a refinery combined with an oil pipeline can transport the crude to Xinjiang. Additionally, Pakistan's thermal power plants have secure finances due to the MSR, and Pakistan is perpetual opponent of India which is China's regional competitor, so by maintaining good relationships with Islamabad Beijing has the ability to influence New Delhi.

Other important country for China, also close to India, is Myanmar. By opening a corridor between the port of Sittwe and Kunming for transporting oil, China ensured diverse energy routes, while the Coco Island and Andaman Islands ensured Chinese maritime control. Besides Myanmar, because of their oil resources, Iran and Venezuela are also important countries for China. Despite U.S. sanctions, after temporary halt in 2019, China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) in 2020 continued to import Venezuelan crude rebranded as Malaysian, in order to settle Caracas' billions of dollars of debt to Beijing (Reuters, 2022). Besides existing railroads and highways in Central Asian region, China needs to secure an oil pipeline that runs from Kazakhstan to Alashankou. For that purpose, China also constructed the Central Asia-China gas pipeline that begins at Gedaim on the Turkmenistan / Uzbekistan border and ends at Horgos, in the Chinese Xinjiang region. This energy corridor is not only spreading across the four corners of Central Asia (Atyrau, Mangystau, Kyzylorda, Darkhan), but also in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, running from the Caspian Sea to the Chinese coast. The pipeline reaches the eastern and southern China, supplying its 14 regions.

Apart from fossil fuels, China has been oriented towards nuclear energy as well as towards renewable energy sources. From 2014 China General Nuclear (CGN) started to extract and enrich uranium in Kazakhstan, and in 2015 China and Kazakhstan signed bilateral projects which included the construction of the nuclear fuel production plant. Actually, "Nuclear Silk Road" was initiated during the 1980s in order to provide China with nuclear reactors. For that purpose, AECL (Canada), Atomstroyexport (Russia), Framatome (France), and Westinghouse (United States) were engaged, supplying China with 49 reactors by January 2020, and with another 16 under construction. Furthermore, in 2021 China developed its own nuclear power unit by using, Hualong-1, a third-generation water reactor, paving the way for its mass construction and export via MSR to countries like Pakistan, Romania, Iran, Turkey, and Kenya (Armando, 2021).

Therefore, bearing all of the above in mind, despite China's pacifist foreign policy oriented towards a path of solidarity, global partnerships and multilateralism, the prospects for the successful implementation of the BRI must be viewed in today's context of a multitude of

geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges. One of the challenges has to do with international perception of Chinese foreign diplomacy as “wolf warrior diplomacy.” Namely, under the Xi Jinping regime, due to the evolving Chinese nationalism, China is perceived negatively by a large part of public opinion.

Apart from a negative image of China prevailing in western countries, problems related to China’s “debt-trap diplomacy” towards developing countries also have negative impact on the BRI. For instance, due to the inability of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, which was financed almost entirely by the Chinese Bank, China in 2017 took out a lease on a 60 square kilometers of the port’s land for a 99-year. Nonetheless, some European countries have ambiguous attitude towards this issue. For example, despite being in debt to China, Greece, with Piraeus, and Italy, with the ports of Genoa and Trieste, have joined the BRI, while Northern Europe, and Germany, whose economies depend highly on exports to China are cautious with criticism of Beijing’s fiscal policy. As a result, many countries have adopted the so called “sublime isolation of China” (Armando, 2021).

In that sense, although Russia shares ideological affinity with China regarding the more pluralist and truly democratic international order, both countries are keen to maintain their sphere of influence over Central Asia. Namely, as explained above, Central Asia is crucial for China’s energy security, and along with Russia, China has established its co-dominance in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). However, despite declared loyalty to the BRI, in 2015 Russia launched the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) composed of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, offering China to secure the stability of Central Asia region. In this context, the ongoing Ukrainian crisis could have global implications by providing a new incentive for the Eurasian integration and the Russian project of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Long before the Ukraine crisis, energy was a crucial part of the Russia–China relationship. The gas deal between Beijing and Moscow was signed in 2014, when Putin visited Shanghai and corporations like Gazprom and CNPC signed a contract on selling gas via a new pipeline called Sila Sibiri, or “The power of Siberia”, constructed to deliver gas till 2030 from two Eastern Siberian gas fields, Kovykta and Chayanda, to China. On the other hand, the Ukrainian crisis could have positive implications for the President Xi’s determination to resolve the Taiwan issue through the complete reunification of the motherland and Taiwan Strait. Moreover, while distancing itself from the West, in geopolitical terms it is logical for Russia to turn to China as the only major Asian partner.

Similarly, as a traditional ally of the U.S., in 2015 Japan also announced its Indo-pacific strategy named “Partnership for Quality Infrastructure” (PQI). Oriented towards the cooperation with India, another Chinese rival, Japan has based its economic policy on liberal values and against “Chinese imperialism”. Hence, with the support of the U.S., Japan has ensured its cooperation with India through the “Asia-Africa Growth Corridor” (AAGC). As opponents of the BRI, both countries strive to stabilize their influence over the Indo-pacific coastline by developing routes to the ports of Djibouti and Jamnagar, and from Mombasa and Zanzibar to Madura (Armando, 2021).

Nevertheless, it’s not possible yet to categorize the AAGC as an alternative to the Chinese BRI. Nowadays, the BRI continues to generate new platforms for international trade and global infrastructure connectivity. Moreover, “the cumulative value of trade in goods between China and countries along the BRI routes reached nearly \$11 trillion from 2013 to 2021, while the two-way investment surpasses \$230 billion”. Additionally, “at the beginning of 2023, China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the joint construction of the BRI with Turkmenistan and an updated MoU with the Philippines” (Helsinki Times 2023). Hence, in spite of many obstacles mentioned above, we can conclude that China’s BRI has demonstrated its resilience, while China has become capable of undertaking a defining role in global politics and the power shift from West to East.

Accordingly, in a geopolitical context, confrontation between Russia and the West may be conducive to pushing the United States out of the Indo-Pacific and reducing its geopolitical

power to a purely Atlantic, not hegemonic one. Overall, in order to reach the European market, China also has the possibility to bypass Russia, Ukraine, and Poland, and use Turkey's Middle Corridor or the Caspian region and Central Asian states in the West. In such a case, China, or more broadly, East Asia, could represent the solution to current Europe's energy crisis caused by the Ukrainian crisis.

Method

This paper examines the geopolitical dimension and far reaching consequences of the trade exchange across the ancient Silk Roads and the Modern Silk Road. Thus, in this study we have tried to compare the old and the new Silk Road in regards to trade of resources and examine the nature of present day networks in Central and Inner Asia with the patterns of similar connections which existed when the ancient trans-Eurasian routes constituted a cross-regional economy that created an emerging "world system". In this sense, the paper relies on descriptive methodology and interdisciplinary approach through which the qualitative interpretation of summarized data from various sources has served to present the New Silk Road as a revival of the old Silk Road, but under the framework of wider geopolitical context.

Findings

For centuries, the Maritime Silk Road enabled the peaceful cultural interaction between different civilizations, leading to the development of long-distance trade and ensuring the creation of a new international economic and political system in which China's leading role was indisputable (Iftikhar & Abassi, 2016). In that sense, the concept of the Modern Silk Roads, or BRI, as a vast network that spreads over Eurasia with branches in Africa, America, and even the Arctic, and based on the revival of past legacy, should be viewed as an attempt to highlight the positive sides of globalization, ensure mutual growth, peaceful cooperation and reorganization of the existing world order. In this sense, this paper demonstrates that the new Silk Road comprises "the silk world order", or a new global order that must be viewed alongside the links between the past and the present, and therefore its concept must be analyzed with reference to the past and future happenings.

In this study we argue that the current Silk Road should be viewed as a modern version of the 19th century Great Game, where Britain and Russia battled for control in Central Asia. In that sense, the main goal of modern Beijing is to secure a constant energy supply for Chinese industries as the main drivers of social development and growth. Thus, the concept of OBOR actually incorporates the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) that enables China's connection with the countries of the old Silk Road and, at the same time, includes the concept of the modern Silk Roads which by itself involves countries along South China Sea, South Pacific Ocean, as well as Indian Ocean and Europe. Precisely, the North Belt of SREB passes through Central Asia, and Russia to Europe, while its Central belt goes through Central Asia and West Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, and the South Belt connects China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. Therefore, part from the North Belt, pretty analogous to the historical Silk Road, and other areas along the extension of this belt are South Asia and Southeast Asia. Moreover, The Belt connects countries such as Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Russia, Germany, Italy, etc. (Venancio, 2018:15).

In other words, the concept of OBOR can be determined as an inclusive and highly pragmatic project based on economic connectivity and cooperation among countries in long terms, which is not only rebuilding the old Silk Road, but also represents its rejuvenation according to the demands of New World Order (Nobis, 2017:203). Although one of the BRI's goals is to ensure outlets for China's overproduction, its geostrategic value is highly related to the issue of energy security. Within this frame of reference, the region of Central Asia represents a significant raw materials and market place for China. Therefore, through its economic corridors, the BRI is transforming the existing world order primarily in terms of geoeconomics.

The Ukraine crisis has not only changed the relationship between Russia and the West but also has led to more intense cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. After the European

Union and the U.S. sanctions were imposed on Russia in response to situation in Ukraine, in order to alleviate the sanctions' burden, Russia has reoriented its entire economy towards Asia, and President Vladimir Putin has signed numerous highly valued gas export deals with China. On the other side, due to the Ukrainian crisis, China has gained a possibility of increased access to Russian natural and gas resources, as well as of assignment of infrastructural contracts and, hence, new markets for its technology. In that way, Russia has become Chinese "junior partner".

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

As well as the ancient, the modern Silk Road promotes economic development through peaceful and cooperative approach that ensures global cultural interaction between countries from various regions. By both its land and sea routes, the BRI creates opportunities for establishing a true democratic and multipolar world order based on mutual respect and growth. In comparison with the old Silk Road, the significant difference for MSR today relies in its intrinsic necessity to ensure Eurasian terrestrial and maritime security, and overall, global stability.

Nowadays, all states are strongly interdependent in an extremely complex international system due to the common global issues with regard to international trade and security dynamics. Thus, it is necessary not only to comprehend the BRI's historic framework but also its geographical view, which offers a much clearer perspective on its current geopolitical course and the global implications. For all these reasons, by taking the Silk Road as a symbol of peace, connectivity, progress and opportunity, and converting the centenary history of the Silk Road into a symbol of a global prosperity in modern times, China has reemerged as a pivotal player in world political economy, and her new place in the world order has been shaped with regard to today's complex geopolitical dynamics.

As China develops economically at high rate, its population growth and level of energy consumption rise as well. Recently, China has become the second highest energy consumer in the world, right after the U.S. Hence, the long-term security of energy resources has become one of the most important issues in China's BRI. Within the scope of its tasks, China has succeeded in establishing good relations with each of the newly independent Central Asia states, and by embracing the historical trend of economic globalization also has ensured cooperation on energy security, as well as investments across western part of Central Asia which was under Soviet rule, particularly Kazakhstan.

Although it's a fact that up to now China has signed about "200 BRI cooperation agreements with 151 countries and 32 international organizations" (Helsinki Times, 2023), growing confrontation with the U.S. and its allies confronts China with increasing economic competition. So, in order to provide stability and secure the strategic routes of the BRI, China must find suitable solution with regard to the relatively narrow and shallow Strait of Malacca where exists high possibility that the flow of goods can be constricted in case of Taiwanese conflict. At the same time, because of the strategic importance of the Strait, which stretches between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, and links the Indian Ocean with the Pacific, a potential conflict with the U.S. could lead to a blockade of China. Given the fact that the Malacca Strait is the shortest sea route between Persian Gulf and Asian markets, China is logically seeking to develop new trade corridors. In this sense, the ongoing Ukrainian crisis could have global implications by providing a new incentive for the Eurasian integration and a closer Russia-China linkage.

Ethical Statement

During the writing process of the study titled "*Geopolitical Dimension of the Old and the Modern Silk Road*", scientific rules, ethics and citation rules were followed; no falsification was made on the collected data and this study was not sent to any other academic publication environment for evaluation.

Note

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Silk Road, as an ancient network of trade routes used for nearly 2000 years, was a center of cultural and economic interaction in the Asian continent connecting West and East from China to the Mediterranean. Precisely, goods like silk, gold, jade, tea, porcelain, spices, etc., were traded from India in the South, and Turkey and Italy in the West. In this way, this pre-modern transcontinental route sequence represented an early model of the global economy. Silk Road routes flourished from about AD 200-900, with the unification of the Han dynasty in 114 BC, due to the delegation of Zhang Qian. The Chinese court made contact with the kingdoms in Central Asia.

With the implementation of the One Belt and One Road project, based on the legacy of the ancient Silk Road and launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, China is once again seeking to rebuild its Middle Kingdom status. Therefore, one of the main objectives of the BRI is to strengthen economic integration throughout the Eurasian region. Specifically, the BRI consists of six land corridors: the Eurasian Land Bridge, the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, the Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Two sea routes connect the Corridor and major seaports via the South China Sea and Indian Ocean route and the South China Sea and South Pacific route (NDRC, 2015). To this end, the BRI includes various infrastructure investment projects aimed at increasing competition in development support and trade flows between participating countries. A key component of the Belt and Road Initiative, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is constantly expanding its borders, nowadays including "cooperation agreements with 151 countries and 32 international organisations," with the aim of diversifying and securing land and sea routes (Helsinki Times, 2023). Therefore, in addition to reshaping its own future and influencing the whole world in a global market, the concept of MSR has far-reaching geopolitical implications

Because of its glorious results, the BRI has been compared with the "new Marshall Plan." Indeed, China is trying to officially promote its international image of a peaceful investor, but at the same time strongly affirms its own sovereignty. Moreover, China has the capacity to promote new sea routes as well as products based on the old maritime silk trade in the Asia-Pacific region, the Indian Ocean and Europe. The geostrategic importance of the MSR as an imperial power has provided a dynamism in world trade, greater connectivity and people's interactions, but in a faster and more advanced manner. Also, compared to the USA as the elite hegemonic power, one of the main concepts of China's BRI is pluralism, mutual respect for heterogeneity and multilateral approach based on the concept of "community of common destiny." In this way, BRI's values are traditional and modern, and therefore bidirectional (Nobis, 2017: 209-210). Due to its sophistication and openness, the new MSR has preserved the spirit of the old Silk Road by ensuring that all roads, including those from the European-made global Atlantic order, are

included. This clearly shows that international relations are no longer dominated by only Western countries, but also by an emerging global power like China.

However, the new “silk world order” has provoked “naval rivalry” and “bilateral alliances in Asia - North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand - led by a collective West”, especially between the renewed quadrilateral or AUKUS partnership with China, Japan, South Korea and Singapore. Namely, the 2017 US National Security Strategy defined China as a “revisionist power” aimed at removing the US from the Indo-Pacific region and spreading its opposing interests and values to the region. So in 2018, the Biden administration identified China as its main competitor. Therefore, by connecting Eurasian land and sea routes through the BRI, China is forced to assume a more important role of security guard in the Indian Ocean region, as it has already done in Myanmar, Maldives and Pakistan. In the same context, the Ukraine crisis is helping Beijing to exert its influence both on a regional and global scale. The developing relationship between China and Russia is getting stronger and as a result of this “soft alliance” Russia will give more resources to China to defend its great power status in Asia-Pacific.”