

PARADOKS EKONOMİ, SOSYOLOJİ ve POLİTİKA DERGİSİ

PARADOKS Economics, Sociology and Policy Journal

Cilt/Vol: 19, Sayı/Issue 2, Sayfa/Page: 113-133

Yıl: 2023

ISSN: 1305-7979



PARADOKS
Ekonomi, Sosyoloji ve Politika Dergisi



PARADOKS
Ekonomi, Sosyoloji ve Politika Dergisi

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Yıl: 2023, Cilt/Vol: 19, Sayı/Issue: 2

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ÇİN BAKIMINDAN KUŞAK ve YOL GİRİŞİMİNİN JEOPOLİTİK ANALİZİ

Yiğit KARASU

*Lisans Öğrencisi, Marmara Üniversitesi, Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi,
Siyasal Bilimler ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü*

ORCID: 0009-0008-4701-1504

YiitKarasu@hotmail.com

ÖZET

Çin yükselen bir güç olarak dünya sahnesinde daha büyük bir yer arzulamaktadır. Bu arzunun sonucunda Çin, jeopolitik ve ekonomik güç kazanmak amacıyla, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimini devreye sokmuştur. Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, “İpek Yol Ekonomi Kuşağı” (SREB) ile “Deniz İpek Yol Projesi” (MSRP) adıyla iki ana bölümden oluşmaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi’nin bu iki ana bölümünü jeopolitik açıdan karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz etmektir. Bu sayede hem projenin jeopolitik kazanımlarını anlama şansımız olacak hem de projenin hangi ayağının Çin jeopolitiği açısından daha sürdürülebilir, güvenli olduğu ortaya konacaktır.

Makalenin ilk bölümünde Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi genel hatlarıyla tanıtılmış, projenin jeopolitiği anlatılmıştır. İkinci bölümde, projenin kara bölümünü oluşturan “İpek Yol Ekonomi Kuşağı” taşımacılık, enerji güvenliği, Orta Asya’daki güç boşluğu, Orta Asya’da istikrar ve Çin Komünist Partisi’nin geleceği başlıkları altında incelenmiştir. Üçüncü bölümde ise, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi’nin deniz ayağını oluşturan “Deniz İpek Yol Projesi” jeopolitik rakipler, silahlanma ve güvenlik ikilemi başlıkları altında ele alınmıştır. Çalışmada Çin bakımından Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi’nin kara ayağının deniz ayağından daha fazla jeopolitik kazanımlar getirdiği sonucuna varılmıştır. Çin’in Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi’nin daha iyi tanıtılması ve gelecekte Çin açısından bu projenin ne gibi jeopolitik kazanımlar ve engeller oluşturduğunun doğru bir biçimde anlaşılması makalenin diğer amaçları arasındadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Enerji Güvenliği, Çin, Jeopolitik, Orta Asya, Yeni İpek Yeni Yol Projesi.

A GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS OF BELT and ROAD INITIATIVE FROM PERSPECTIVE OF CHINA

Yiğit KARASU

*Undergraduate Student, Marmara University, Faculty of Political Science,
Political Science and International Relations Department*

ORCID: 0009-0008-4701-1504

YiitKarasu@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

As a rising power, China desire to a greater place on the world stage. As a result of this desire, China has launched the Belt and Road Initiative to gain geopolitical and economic power. Belt and Road Initiative consists of two main parts called “Silk Road Economic Belt” (SREB) and “Century Maritime Silk Road Project” (MSRP). The aim of this article is to comparatively analyze these two main parts of Belt and Road Initiative from a geopolitical perspective. In this way, we will have the chance to analyze the geopolitical gains of the project and it will be revealed which leg of the initiative is more sustainable and safer in terms of Chinese geopolitics.

In the first part of the article, the Belt and Road Initiative is introduced in general terms and the geopolitics of the initiative is explained. In the second part, the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, which constitutes the land part of the initiative, is examined under the headings of transportation, energy security, power vacuum in Central Asia, stability in Central Asia and the future of the Chinese Communist Party. In the third chapter, the “Maritime Silk Road Project”, which constitutes the sea leg of the Belt and Road Initiative, is discussed under the headings of geopolitical rivals, armament, and security dilemma. The study concluded that for China, the land leg of the Belt and Road Initiative brings more geopolitical gains than the sea leg. Other aims of the article are to better promote China's Belt and Road Initiative and to accurately understand what geopolitical gains and obstacles this initiative creates for China in the future.

Key Words: Belt and Road Initiative, Energy Security, China, Geopolitics, Central Asia, New Silk Road Project.

INTRODUCTION

Comparison of land power and sea power has been an important topic in geopolitics throughout history. We see the comparison of these two power types not only in the military field but also in the economic sense. However, since most of the world trade is carried out through maritime trade, this debate seems to have ended. However, if the place, time, interests and economic needs of the states change, this superiority can be opened to discussion. Especially when we look at China's Belt and Road Initiative, this ambitious project brings this discussion to light once again. The reason for this is that the initiative has different parts, namely sea and land parts.

This article aims to make a geopolitical gain comparison between the two parts of Belt and Road Initiative. Therefore, the article is divided into 3 parts. In the first part of the article, Belt and Road Initiative and its geopolitics will be discussed in order to enlighten the reader. Then, the reasons explaining why the land part of Belt and Road Initiative is more advantageous in terms of geopolitics will be listed. The article explains the importance of energy security, the power vacuum in Central Asia and the stability of the region and finally the economic benefits of the project for China and the legitimacy of the CCP. In the third part of the article, examples will be given to show that the sea part of the project should not be abandoned, but that it is less beneficial in geopolitical terms than the land part of the project. While these examples touch on China's naval power and culture, especially in the East China Sea, they will explain geopolitical competition and address the security dilemma arising from these reasons.

1) WHAT IS BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND GEOPOLITICS OF THE INITIATIVE?

The Silk Road has a great historical significance. In addition to being the largest commercial road in the world, it has pioneered the transportation of many cultures and inventions throughout history. In addition, it has become one of the most important gates of China to the world, connecting cultures. But today, the New Silk Road has a new mission. For China, it is not only a door opening to the world, but also plays an important role in increasing China's great power capacity and increasing China's influence in the world through this door opening to the world.

So, what is this Belt and Road Initiative with a new mission? Belt and Road Initiative, officially announced by the President of China, consists of two parts. The first, Silk Road

Economic Belt (SERB), covers 85 countries and aims to improve trade and exchange of goods, culture and people between China and Europe, Asia and the Middle East. The SERB is backed by a massive \$1 trillion fund poured into infrastructure development, hardware and digital connectivity in countries along the initiative's trade routes. These funds receive support from many funds such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the New Development Bank and the New Silk Road Fund. For example, AIIB has received \$40 billion in investments from China's state-controlled banks since its founding. In addition, 2000 economic infrastructure projects have been determined for SERB within the scope of the "Go West" policy (Karlis and Polemis, 2019: 3). In addition to following the route of the ancient Silk Road, it includes investments such as railways, roads and bridges in many countries on the Eurasian continent. The second part is a new Maritime Silk Road Project (MSRP) for the 21st Century. MSRP is supported by trillion-dollar funds such as SERB, while many banks such as AIIB, NDB, SRF mentioned above provide support, and ASEAN countries also make financial investments in the same way. Beijing has also backed the initiative with a significant financial commitment, allocating \$25 billion to the AIIB, \$50 billion to the AIIB, and \$40 billion to the SRF. MSRP continues by renting ports from many countries or helping to build new ports. For example, the Port of Piraeus, which is of great importance for European trade, was leased to China until 2052 for 280 million euros. Likewise, China set a target to build 30 new ports through Chinese companies in Indonesia, where the project was announced (Koboević, Kurtela, & Vujičić, 2018: 117). When such investments and ongoing port leases and investments throughout the Indian Ocean, Red Sea and Mediterranean are taken into consideration, the size and geopolitical intent of MSRP is more clearly understood (Karlis and Polemis, 2019: 13).

This initiative is a huge project with sea and land parts, and it is quite costly. Belt and Road Initiative's land transportation dimension includes various investment and infrastructure projects, as well as a wide network extending from east to west of China and then into Central Asia, even to Russia and Europe. In this context, a land transportation project in this extent has not been carried out before. Besides, the maritime trade dimension of Belt and Road Initiative is also as large as land transportation. Likewise, it starts from the Quanzhou in Fujian province and goes to the Suez Canal through the Strait of Malacca, where world trade is the most intense, and connects to Europe via Greece (Hong, 2015: 2). When we look at an initiative of this size, it is unthinkable that it does not have a geopolitical purpose because it almost connects the world's largest continent, the Eurasian continent. This clearly creates an opportunity for a soft power, and in some cases even a Chinese, to strengthen its hard power. According to Zhang Zhixin, as a requirement of its new geopolitical strategy, China aimed to expand its sphere of

influence with its soft power, develop new norms of international economic cooperation and promote a new world order. This soft power strategy is China's Grand strategy for peaceful development (Zhexin, 2018: 328). But considering this cost of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, what size will it bring a greater geopolitical gain for China?

Although this comparison has many dimensions, in this article, a geopolitical comparison will be made especially over the Belt and Road Initiative. This is because, Belt and Road Initiative is a geopolitical comparison that can affect both land and sea size. Given its land dimension, access to Central Asia states is geopolitically more essential for China than maritime transport. This is due to reasons such as energy geopolitics, geopolitic importance of Central Asia, the power vacuum in Central Asia, the perspective of Central Asia states towards China and the contribution of the Chinese land leg of the initiative to the Chinese economy. The maritime aspect of Belt and Road Initiative, on the other hand, may yield less returns for China than expected. The reasons for this are that China is surrounded by its Western rivals and Asian allies in the China Sea, possesses the interests of major geopolitical powers, encourages armament, and has more risks in terms of energy security even if it is cheaper. As shown in discussions and geopolitical comparisons are made, it is likely that the land dimension of the Belt and Road Initiative and the convergence to Central Asia will be more profitable for China in the future geopolitically and will be healthier for China's peaceful growth strategy.

2) WHY IS CHINA'S PRESENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA WITH THE SERB MORE GEOPOLITICALLY BENEFICIAL?

In this question, we will address the land dimension of SERB and the geopolitical importance of the consequences of SERB in Central Asia for China. However, writing these geopolitical gains in subheadings will not only make it easier to follow up, but also provide a better understanding of the implications of SERB in Central Asia. SERB is a very important initiative as it closes many geopolitical vulnerabilities of China. In order to understand the Central Asian dimension of this initiative, we will examine China's energy security, the power gap in geography, its contribution to Chinese economic development and the attitudes of Central Asian states towards China.

2.1) Energy and Transportation Security

With China's rapid economic growth and foreign trade accounting for almost 50% of the Chinese economy, today China is highly interdependent with a globalized market. This situation creates a security problem in China. This is because most of the world trade is transported out by sea transport. Chinese commercial activities are mainly concentrated in the eastern and southern coastal regions of the country, and %80 of its imports and exports are located here. In addition, with the developing economy of China, its energy needs are increasing. Especially oil, Although China is the fourth largest oil producer in the world, it can only meet half of its own demand. When China's oil needs are considered, the demand is increasing day by day. For example, China's dependence on foreign oil in oil was 60 percent in 2015 and this rate reached 68 in 2020 (Ruixue, Xiuling, & Cai, 2016: 50). 70 percent of the oil comes from Africa and the Middle East, where the political situation is quite unstable, and the associated energy supply is a problem. In addition to these problems, the fact that China's energy supply is from the eastern part of China creates a geopolitical problem and triggers energy security. This is because China is geopolitically besieged from the sea by its Western and Asian allies, India. This siege is a big problem considering that 4/5 of the oil coming to China must pass from the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca.

In short, major economic sanctions or a major maritime conflict could have disastrous consequences that will abruptly halt China's economic development. If China wants to maintain its energy security and stable economic growth, it must establish an overland access to energy resources. Here, SERB's road trade and SERB's presence in Central Asia is a very important alternative for China. Oil and gas resources are common, with high quality and fewer impurities. Currently, Central Asian countries are promoting the process of diversification of energy exports. Therefore, Central Asian countries and China have great cooperation potential, China can eliminate its dependence on maritime transport for its energy needs such as oil, natural gas, and precious metals, thereby securing its own energy geopolitics (Ruixue, Xiuling, & Cai, 2016: 49).

2.2) Geopolitical Power Vacuum in Central Asia

According to Mackinder, whoever controls the historical pivot area will control the world island (Saalman, 2017: 27). Although this is a reductionist and old-fashioned geopolitical theory, today it appears to be an unfair theory considering the geostrategic importance of Central Asia. Especially considering that the region where the "great game" has played among

the great states throughout history is Central Asia. The disintegration of the USSR was followed by start of the "second great game". However, the ineffectiveness of neither Russia nor the USA in the Central Asian power struggle has provided a "third great game" opportunity for China. However, this struggle will be a more economic struggle. Therefore, SERB's investments in highways and infrastructure will be of critical importance.

With the disintegration of the USSR in 1991, the newly formed independent states in Central Asia quickly sought a different foreign policy from Russia and displayed a more nationalist attitude. On the other hand, while Russia continued to maintain its superiority in the region with various institutions (Eurasian Economic Community, Collective Security Treaty Organization, Commonwealth of Independent States) as the first strategic partner, Russia continued to make Central Asian states economically dependent on itself. Until the collapse of the USSR, Russia still maintained a monopoly on all infrastructure services and much transportation technology. It continued to do so after independence. Because Russia is aware of how much of a key role it plays in controlling the region and controlling the energy flow, along with the richness of the region's natural resources (Brzezinski, 2005: 195).

However, this situation started to change with the economic rise of China and the announcement of Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan in 2013. Since the region is generally under Russian domination, Central Asian states pay attention to maintaining multi-vector relations with many states. However, the region is sandwiched between China and Russia. The fact that China did not make a big breakthrough for Central Asia for a long time left more room for Russia. Thus, in the changing situation with Belt and Road Initiative, China and the investments that China can bring thanks to the SERB is welcomed by the Central Asian states. For example, in recent years, China has increased its sphere of influence in the region, which makes it difficult for Central Asian countries (Kodaman and Gonca, 2016: 1252).

This situation has created a geopolitical power struggle of "Central Asia and the Balkans". Russia and China have entered into a struggle with each other for the sphere of economic influence. For example, Russia established the Eurasian Economic Union in 2014 to combat the SERB. However, when we look at the size of infrastructure and investments made by China within the scope of SERB, it is very difficult for the Russian economy and investors to hinder Chinese economic power in the region in the long run. For example, according to Yazdani's data, China's direct investments in Central Asia increased exponentially from 2004 to 2013. In addition, it is expected that the investment made within the scope of SERB will reach \$2.5 Trillion by 2025 (Yazhani, 2020: 185). This is an indispensable opportunity for the Central Asian states, which must pay 33 billion dollars for infrastructure services development

between 2016-2030 (Omonkulov, 2020: 50). In addition, China has included Russia in the initiative in order not to trigger any more regional competition. Central Asian countries have not only been a field of competition between Russia and China, but also acted as a diplomatic bridge (Özdaşlı, 2015: 591). In addition, considering the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the occupation of Ukraine by Russia in 2022, it will not be surprising that Central Asian countries take a stand against Russia, considering the Russian minorities they have. Because Russia violated the principle of non-intervention with the use of force.

In other words, it will be difficult for Russia to establish an influence in Central Asia due to economic cooperation and economic incompetence. On the other hand, there is India, which is ready for a geopolitical rivalry with the USA and China, which became more involved in the region after 9/11. However, it is very difficult for these two states to create a geopolitical barrier as big as Russia. This is because, in addition to the USA withdrawing its forces from Afghanistan starting from 2014, China has improved its relations with Pakistan and managed to partially exclude the USA from the region, and by supporting India's geopolitical rival Pakistan and including it in the SERB, India's Muslim increased his exclusion from the world. Thus, an important area of influence in Central Asia remained with China.

However, this geopolitical struggle is not only on an economic dimension. It continues in many areas. For example, the SERB also includes a cultural aspect, with 30,000 scholarships to study at Chinese universities and 10,000 places to study in China for Confucius Institutes teachers and students over a 10-year timeframe. This may lead to economic and social benefits for the countries in question and to an increase in the education level of Central Asian countries (Karlis and Polemis, 2019: 13).

As can be seen, China's geopolitical influence in this region is not limited to being a hegemon state or accessing cheap resources. This is also "an Asian Dream". China creates a win-win situation with its investments and spreads its cultural power within the Central Asian states with a peaceful soft power initiative together with the soft power area it has created. It seems that China's acting in accordance with Asian sensitivities and maintaining SERB through bilateral relations with countries will increase this development and cooperation. With this, China will eventually become a greater geopolitical power. For this reason, China's presence in Central Asia with the SERB is directly related to China's future geopolitical gains.

2.3) Importance of SERB for Stabilizing Central Asia

China's SERB is not just economically, geopolitically or culturally profitable for China. At the same time, it has an important effect on ensuring regional stability. This is because SERB is also of great importance in terms of China's development of international institutions in Central Asia. In addition, China can play a diplomatic mediator role thanks to the bilateral relations it has established with the countries in the region thanks to the SERB and China's own regional problem, such as the autonomous region of Xinjiang, can ensure the neutrality of the Central Asian states. These three situations are important for Central Asia to ensure the continuation of investments and economic development, and for China to protect its investments in the future. As we have seen in the USA, soldiers may be temporary, but rail links and pipelines are permanent (Kaplan, 2022: 242).

Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank can be cited as the first example of China strengthening international institutions with SERB. Because this project has an important role in financing both MSRP and SERB. Because, naturally, the economies of the Central Asian states are not strong enough for the financing of the project and they cannot fully trust the existing financial institutions created by the Bretton Woods conference (for example, the World Bank, IMF) considering that they can no longer support all the necessary financial assistance. At the same time, Central Asian countries do not have enough voice within these institutions. For this reason, AIIB was established to support huge investments regionally. Signed an agreement to set US\$100 billion as core capital of AIIB, with China holding 30.4% stake, India 8.5%, Russia 6.7% and 54.4%. are the shares of the remaining members. By financing initiatives such as the SERB, China can establish regional stability and play a unifying role in the Central Asian market (Çelik, 2021: 86). This bank clearly expects a regional market understanding to support SERB by providing loans to the places China wants to reach with SERB and reaching places that Western financial institutions cannot. At the same time, China not only contributes to regional economic stability with the AIIB, but also increases its own possible alliances by supporting the economic development of the countries around it and can try to take on the role of the watchdog of financial stability in the region thanks to the AIIB.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can be cited as a second example. Although it is an organization that was established long before the start of Belt and Road Initiative, its aims have changed in various periods. At first, the SCO aimed to resolve border disputes between Central Asian states after the disintegration of the USSR and to prevent Russia or its predecessor, the USSR, from dominating Central Asia. However, it later started to draw a pattern based on the fight against terrorism and separatist movements, the joint execution of

emergency exercises, and the military cooperation of countries. The aim of the SCO has started to show an economy-oriented change in recent years. In 2015, members of the organization published a 10 year development strategy in which the economy stood out and included a provision to improve the joint approaches of SCO member states to the SERB (Yazhani, 2020: 184). Thus, the goals of regional economic integration and regional security were united. The SCO has now evolved into a multinational structure, such as the prevention of economic and regional conflicts. Thus, investments and infrastructure services are protected by reducing terrorist activities in the region, and many infrastructure and investment initiatives within the scope of SERB could be politically organized by a multinational organization. The SCO is an important key to both regional stability and economic development for China (Reeves, 2014: 8). The third situation is the separatist groups in the region who dream of separation. For example, Xinjiang region has close bounds with Central Asia and shares common cultural elements with the peoples of the region. The Xinjiang folks, especially the Uyghurs, differ from the Han people in their language, religion and customs. As we said, the region has strategic importance, as it is a window to Central Asia, has many neighbors, shares cultural ties with its neighbors, and due to the historical conflicts, that emerged after the disintegration of the Soviets, and some of the residents of the region constantly demand separation. This situation escalates relations between the central government and other countries. The situation has become even more complicated when several terrorist attacks have been undertaken by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement since 2014 (Zreik, 2022: 16).

However, the SERB is blocking the separatist movements of these groups. For example, Xinjiang has huge investment projects and an extensive road network connecting it to Central Asia, which contributes to increase the Chinese administration's dominance over Xinjiang. Since Xinjiang is in the western part of China in terms of its location and provides terrestrial connection with Central Asia, the investments to be realized with SERB will both develop the region. In addition, it increases the presence and control of the Chinese government in the region with the development of communication and transportation means (Zreik, 2022: 16).

With China giving priority to Central Asia in its belt road initiative policy, a separatist movement that may occur within China is stopped by ensuring common welfare. On the other hand, the support of other countries to separatist movements is weakening due to its economic ties with China, and China thus prevents its regional integrity without a possible conflict.

To sum up, China is helping the regional incorporation, the economic unity of the region, and the fight against separatist or terrorist groups, thanks to its Central Asian policies,

which are on the land part of the SERB. This shows how important Belt and Road Initiative's land leg is not only for China but also for the region.

2.4) SERB's Effects of Chinese Economy and CCP Legitimacy

The SERB has a critical importance when examining the Chinese economy. Because the SERB can trigger development in many sectors and growth in new economic areas for China. In addition, this economic development will increase the political legitimacy of the Chinese government (CCP) with the continuation of economic prosperity and will cause it to act more comfortably while implementing its policies in the international arena.

As I mentioned earlier, the SERB can help these countries (regions) build, as many countries (regions) along the Belt and Road still lack infrastructure and domestic industry and are in dire need of capital and technologies. Since China is aware of the existence of such a weakness especially in Central Asian countries, it also carries its own capital and production wherever SERB goes. The construction of these production and infrastructure services by Chinese capital can provide an important area for China's economic transformation, as we have seen in the example of the Xinjiang region. China's iron and steel, cement, equipment manufacturing, etc. explore new international markets and provide them with greater development space; China's industrial transformation and improvement further increases the market competitiveness and market share of China's strategic emerging products in Central, West, South Asia and even Europe. This increase is a crucial pillar for China's current and future economic development system (Ruixue, Xiuling, & Cai, 2016: 53).

At the same time, China is increasing its economic strategic resilience. This is due to trade based on imports and exports, as they are essential for maintaining economic activity and stability. In a crisis, some trade with the outside world must be maintained to maintain economic stability, except the national market is highly independent and self-sufficient. In this case, China will increase its strategic resilience as a result of a possible economic depression or economic sanctions by using the economic ties it will provide with the SERB in Central Asia and the economic dependencies of the Central States. Because Central Asian states will refrain from following an anti-Chinese policy due to their economic and infrastructure dependencies. Thus, China can come to a level where it can overcome all kinds of political and economic crises regionally (Saalman, 2017: 17).

Secondly, this is important in the long-term legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Because economic development is shown as proof of the long-term legitimacy of the party and

the working of Chinese communism. At the economic level, the purpose of the state is to sustain economic activity and the living standards of its population. Failure to do so will significantly increase the likelihood of social unrest and potentially provide the cause. It is crucial that the state and its people have access to energy, food, water, basic services and goods that are vital to economic activities. Another important factor is trade based on imports and exports, as they are essential for maintaining economic activity and stability. Politically, the CCP will increase the country's strategic resilience if it continues to provide these situations with the SERB and strengthens its ties with the SERB in every possible situation. Thus, the party that survived a Tiananmen disaster can maintain its legitimacy. However, the failure of this economic development in terms of Central Asia and the SERB, and possible sanctions and economic crisis, may cause social unrest among the population that the party wants to regain legitimacy (Saalman, 2017: 18).

3) WHY IS IT LESS BENEFICIAL GEOPOLITICALLY FOR CHINA TO TURN TO MSRP RATHER THAN CENTRAL ASIA WITH THE SERB?

The point of this question is certainly not to suggest that the maritime leg of the Belt and Road Initiative project is unnecessary or geopolitically unprofitable for China. On the contrary, considering that 90 percent of world trade is carried out over the seas (bbc.com., 03.05.2023), this project is essential for China. However, for China, it is a very risky project in terms of the economic burden and conflict risk that it may create in the future to make policies for the MSRP. This is because China is geographically encircled, as we mentioned earlier. China has major competitors. Countries such as Japan, USA, South Korea and Taiwan that are likely to act with and with these countries. Besides, the situation in the Indian Sea is no different. To fend off a possible Chinese presence, India will seek to ally with the West and strengthen its navy. In other words, the presence of geopolitical rivals and the conflicts with these rivals will cause China to increase its naval presence, and then more conflicts will arise in the environment of insecurity. This situation will reveal the need for armament for the MSRP to reveal a geopolitical interest. Because there are many geopolitical rivals and most of them do not want China to gain power with this project.

When we examine this situation, the economic power and military power that China will provide in the region with the MSRP go in parallel. Because China wants to protect its investments and ensure energy security. However, as we will examine under the sub-headings,

as long as China Maritime makes the Belt and Road Initiative independent of the land leg, it is very difficult to gain geopolitical gains.

3.1) Geopolitical Rivals

As we mentioned before, there is no status quo power in Central Asia that can prevent China's Belt and Road Initiative and prevent it from becoming hegemon in the region by creating a peaceful win-win situation there. Russia may be a status quo power, but it is gradually losing its power and it must act together with China. India, on the other hand, has been completely excluded from Central Asia because of the Pakistani barrier. However, when it comes to the Pacific, China cannot sustain this peaceful economic expansion. Because it has too many territorial claims and too many geopolitical rivals.

The biggest of these geopolitical enemies is the USA, which fears China's rising economic power and an alternative to itself. Although the USA started to have problems with China after the end of the Cold War, the increase in these problems was seen especially during the Obama era. The Asia Pivot, announced by Obama in 2010, envisioned the transfer of 60 percent of American naval assets to Asia. This was a soft power attempt to break China's economic stability and power. In addition, the US exported \$320 billion worth of goods to Pacific Coast ports supporting 850,000 US jobs (this number is still growing) and excluded China from this partnership by establishing the Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2016 (Mitchell, 2016: 20). This soft power usage of the USA is increasing with the strengthening of China's MSRP.

In addition, the USA is not alone in the region and has historical partners. Together with these partners, he is uncomfortable with China's growth and economic power. Japan, for example, adds distrust to rival Japan, which imports nearly all its oil through the Strait of Malacca. In addition, Japan is constantly experiencing problems due to its territorial claims with China. For example, the fishing rights and sovereignty issue on Senkaku Island brings Japan closer to the United States and pushes it to become a bigger competitor for China (Wang, 2013, 12).

On the other hand, even countries whose power in East Asia could not compete with China, such as the Philippines and Vietnam, began to engage in certain anti-Chinese movements. The Philippines, for example, renewed US access rights to Clark Field and Subic Bay in 2016, and in April 2016 allowed Japanese Self-Defense forces to make it a port of call for navy ships. Vietnam, on the other hand, is mostly exposed to increased Chinese attacks

(especially in the South China Sea). To partially counteract China's growing power, Vietnam signed an agreement in 2015 allowing Japanese warships to visit Cam Ranh Bay (Mitchell, 2016: 21).

From the perspective of India, although India is not able to respond to Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia, the same is not true for the MSRP. Because, together with China's existing geopolitical rivals, it has the potential to make the Indian Ocean its own economic area and safe area. Even within the confines of the Indian Ocean, India will have to be wary of the growing capability of the Chinese navy and Beijing's "string of pearl" strategy in the Indian Ocean. India envisions energy security as its top strategic concern over the next decades and believes India should base itself on a conflict preparedness strategy to address it (Berlin, 2010: 56). It is a clear threat to India that the sea leg of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which we have examined this situation, passes through the Indian Ocean and perhaps joins the SERB and Gwadar to shorten the existing waterway. India will not hesitate to establish strategic partnerships to prevent this. As can be seen, unlike Central Asia, it is relatively easier for East Asian and South Asian states to find diplomatic and economic partners or to create an alternative to China. However, as we mentioned in the previous sections, the Central Asian states are geographically and economically stuck against the influence of Russia and China. This is due to the dependence of their economies and geographical locations on Russia and China, unlike the East and South Asian states. The absence of an economically rising power in Central Asia virtually presents the region to China on an economic silver platter within the scope of SERB.

Lastly, the historical conflict between Taiwan and China continues to increase, supported by the West and its allies. For example, Nancy Pelosi visit to Taiwan has been a warning message for both Taiwan and China. Thus, with the presence of geopolitical rivals, China will have to protect its economic initiatives more. This will further draw China into the "Thucydides trap" and increase an arms race in the region (Konishi, 2018: 1).

3.2) Armament and Security Dilemma

The existence of geopolitical rivals and the prevention of China's MSRP strategy by these rivals create the armament and security dilemma as well as soft power and diplomatic blocs. This security dilemma is not a burden that China can handle in the long run. However, China and PLA experts continue to arm themselves with the Mahanist naval approach in order

to protect their investments and China's geopolitical advantages (Scobell, 2018: 209). For example, China is considering increasing the number of aircraft carriers from 2 to 4.

Its current navy is also the largest in the world in terms of quantity. Although China increases the number of aircraft carriers and navies, China is currently a continental power, not a naval power. This continental power of China has also been documented solely as defense of the homeland. This is one of the reasons why China does not have a military base anywhere other than Djibouti (Kaplan, 2022: 253/ Wasserstrom and Cunningham, 2018: 131-134). As can be seen, this situation is not sustainable. One reason for this is the reason for this is the decrease in the growth of the Chinese economy over the years (Hong, 2015: 11), as well as the increase in military expenditures. This can cause problems if a large navy continues to be financed for this reason. Whereas, with a project like Belt and Road Initiative, China can make a big breakthrough without the need for any armament, and maybe change the route of energy trade through Gwadar, while it can be both the largest soft power in Central Asia and a successful country in energy security, with the MSRP. It continues to expand this project in order to reach the China Sea and surrounding countries.

This armament will not only be an economically correct expenditure, but it also has the potential to cause uneasiness in Southeast Asian countries that are sympathetic to China. Considering these reasons, it is more in China's geopolitical interest for China to work with the SERB to change its terrestrial trade and trade route, thereby solving its energy security problem. The indispensable resources of Central Asia and its importance for Chinese soft power are much more important than a possible naval conflict.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Belt and Road Initiative for China is a great opportunity and a very accurate project to gain economic strength and to eliminate its own security gaps. At the same time, China will gain a geopolitical power with this project. However, when we look at the examples we have given, it is a big question to what extent this geopolitical power should be sought in Belt and Road Initiative. Will China be a new soft power that unites Eurasia by following the traditional Silk Road, or should it become a maritime power by reaching the water, the highway of trade?

When we look at the location of China and its surrounding geography, we realize that the most reasonable place for China to go with Belt and Road Initiative is Central Asia. The reason for this is that China should hegemony with SERB and Central Asia with an economic

soft power in order to realize the most important security vulnerabilities and its own strategy, to become a great power in 2050, to maintain the legitimacy of the CCP by providing stability in the economy with a declining growth rate. However, this hegemony is not an aggressive hegemony. On the contrary, SERB is a peaceful hegemony initiative, as China fills the geopolitical gap in Central Asia, restores its own energy security and can contribute to regional stability.

On the other hand, the maritime part of Belt and Road Initiative, which is the other pillar of the Belt and Road Initiative, does not seem to be beneficial in the future from a geopolitical point of view. This is because China's achievements with SERB contrast with the MSRP. For example, on the one hand, there is a China that protects a peaceful investment with soft power and increases its influence, on the other hand, we see a China that is likely to come into conflict with the geopolitical power centers around it in order to protect its investment and energy security in the MSRP. When China and other surrounding states experience a sense of geopolitical tightness or loss of power as a result of regional economic rivalries, they will become more armed. This will increase a possible conflict and may cause the collapse of an entire project.

In this context, the conclusion that can be drawn from this is the following: If China wants to increase and protect its geopolitical gains with Belt and Road Initiative, it should do so in Central Asia through the SERB. Because the geopolitical vacuum and the strategy of establishing hegemony based on investments in Central Asia is safe and the risk of conflict is low. In this case, one of the options that can be made for China is to combine the MSRP with the One Belt One Road initiative, but it should do this by centered on the Central Asia and SERB. Thus, it will be more beneficial for China in terms of economic, geopolitical and energy security.

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