



**NATO Foundation**  
*Defense College*



***Around the Belt and Road Initiative: the emerging of a grand strategy***

**Dr. Alessandro Politi**  
**NDCF Director**

# Around the Belt and Road Initiative: the emerging of a grand strategy

## Executive Summary

---

*The article is a five point reflection on the New Silk Road (i.e. BRI or OBOR).*

*First point: It is first of all an indispensable missing land link in global trade missing since 300 years. Thus it is a very positive development. Why should anybody be against?*

*Second point: The old continentalist theories of Mackinder and Spykman are of very limited relevance, measured against historical experience and are today pretty useless as a possible argument against the strategic implications of the BRI. The Heartland is not important per se, its value comes from the connection to the sea, via a capable naval instrument. No links with the sea, no trade, no pivot. The Heartland, as long as it is landlocked and without naval vectors, is just locked down.*

*Third point: links and trade create a continental gravitation, but not an occupation or an exclusion zone. Yes, railways, like pipelines, are long term marriages, but frankly shared benefits outweigh by far any inconvenience. As long as benefits will be distributed and investment loans are wisely administrated by established standards, and generally there is no reason to think the contrary at global level, the BRI is a peaceful development.*

*Fourth point: BRI complements Pacific and Atlantic trade. Paradoxically it is the de facto complement of the TPP and the TTIP, if these agreements will go forward. Which means that it complements also US trade logistics: we have a sea conveyor belt since the Cold War and now we will have an interesting linkage between the dense European rail network and the US-BRI trunk lines. TTP and TTIP had a flawed commercial logic from the beginning, because they thought to exclude relevant economies like the Chinese and the Russian ones, today one should avoid to complement biased political choices with already flawed economic ones.*

*Fifth point: if China continues to be a very interesting and maturing market, China and the USA have an unprecedented opportunity to transform together global balances. In 1972 it was the ping-pong diplomacy, today it could be the sharing the compatible military paradigms and logistics, increasing reciprocal transparency, instead of embarking into a creeping strategic race whose outcome could be a devastating world war. It is time to win-win without a battle or worse, a war.*

---

Talking about the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) needs to look beyond the easy mental associations with Marco Polo, Matteo Ricci or Walt Disney's Mulan: seventeen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall (9 November 1989), the transformation of the Mediterranean was silently achieved by Chinese economic expansion. By year 2006, this author was able to write in the yearly strategic report of Nomisma's OSSS "Nomos & Khaos" that the Mediterranean had to change its name into Chindoterranean (i.e. the Med as concrete terminal of goods, people, capitals etc. from China, India, Gulf, Africa mainly in direction of the port of Gioia Tauro at that time, and now also the Greek, but Chinese operated, Piraeus port and to the huge Moroccan Tangermed terminal).

This fact dashed the traditional Mediterranean image of the Romans (mare nostrum), the Arabs and the Crusaders, the battle of Lepanto (1571), the Royal Navy dominion after the battle of Cabo Trafalgar (1805) or the US Sixth Fleet dominance during the Cold War, despite the Soviet Fifth Eskadra.



It was incredible to see that this image persisted among Mediterranean and MENA specialists despite the evident network of commercial agreements, undertakings and investments and the impressive evacuation of 38.000 Chinese civilians in 2011 from the countries affected by the Arab Revolutions, coordinated also from the PRC Embassy in Rome. Finally in 2014, when the CEMRES (Centre Euro-Magrébin des Etudes et des Recherches Stratégiques, the virtual rotating research centre of the intergovernmental 5+5 Defence Initiative) published under my direction the report «Quelles mesures de confiance permettraient d'édifier un espace 5+5 Défense ?» the term became officially known.

By the way also US naval operations had quietly taken stock of reality: after the end of the Cold War the Sixth Fleet was gradually shifting its main vessels to the USCENTCOM's Fifth Fleet, while the word "Mediterranean" in the mission of the Sixth Fleet was replaced with the more vague "Europe" and "Africa" words. If one looks at the usual US approach towards the Mediterranean, one understands that a Euro-Mediterranean region is not considered, but just a passageway between Europe to other places, to Africa or the Middle East. For this reason the Euro-Mediterranean region is divided between AFRICOM, EUCOM, CENTCOM, and not always these commands have a fluid communication among each other.

On a more strategic conceptual level the Chindoterranean ends a long era where the Mediterranean could be considered, together with the Black, North, Baltic, Norwegian, Greenland and Barents Seas, a continuation of the Atlantic Ocean. Today and for the medium-longer term, the Mediterranean, notwithstanding its physical communication with the Atlantic, can be seen as the terminal of the Indo-Pac maritime strategic system not only from a US Navy operational viewpoint, but precisely in terms of global trade.

In the meantime Chinese trade towards MENA and Iran grew by 37% between 2003-2007 and by 21% in the 2007-2011 period, amounting to \$263 billion. The Suez Canal received by 2015 some 30% of the global trade with 15,3 million TEU (Twenty-foot Equivalent Units), against the 17,9 million TEU passing the Cape of Good Hope (35%). Some 29,6% of the Suez bound flow is managed by the West Mediterranean ports, while the Hamburg-Le Havre port complex handles 45,6%.

This diverse economic flow, generated by a booming Chinese economy, was of course perceived by economic legal and illegal operators, sometimes by police and intelligence organisations, but not by several strategic analysts due to mental stovepiping. Seven years later the New Silk Road (BRI, One Belt One Road, etc.) was announced as a project. The intent here is not to dwell on the rather discomforting recurring old news about actual tensions or interesting investment possibilities, but on the value of this initiative in terms of global grand strategy. Grand strategy has been defined as the design of the future in the very long term (10-20 years) at least for a country, if not of a continent or a global arrangement. Too often mainstream politics in different countries appear compressed on a mono-dimensional present or what has been called short-termism, whereas the fact that global renewable and non-renewable resources are clearly limited on this planet, makes grand strategy an indispensable tool not just for national interests, but for an overarching global common good (something aptly and timely spelled out by the Vatican as global spiritual and knowledge-based power in the "Praised be" encyclical letter).

The first point on which attention should be drawn is that the BRI an indispensable missing land link in the global trade system. One could object, using probably short term memories, that global trade has flourished considerably without this link, but this argument ignores that trade was international, but neither global nor transnational during the Cold War (more appropriately to be called III World War). Commercially the world was at least tri-sectored between more or less capitalist economies (the then Free World), a raft of Socialist economies more or less integrated around Soviet Union (their core was the COMECON, the common market of the USSR and its direct satellites), including Communist China and finally the economies of the non-aligned countries, outside strong links with both blocks or tied by neo- or para-colonial economic bonds.

Moreover the stretch that should be now covered by the BRI had vertical links from the periphery to Moscow, Peking or New Delhi, but scarce horizontal ones, including a Trans-Siberian railway that was and is still insufficient to dynamize the development of the regions beyond the Urals. This has been painfully clear right after the dissolution of the Soviet Union: one thing is the political use of the existing Soviet industrial infrastructure in order to manage a post-Soviet Russian influenced space, but another is to foster economic development in a decidedly more open market also at regional level.

This brings us naturally to the use of long-term history (*histoire de la longue durée*, as called in French) that allows to understand that this long land link existed for centuries until 1720 when the twin collapse of the Moghul (Gurkhani, Indian branch of the Mongol Timurids) and the Safavid (Persia) empires closed that route. Without that link, the old connection between China and Europe was severed, only to be replaced by rather unfortunate colonial relationships. It has taken a hiatus of some 300 years to re-start a significant way of structuring continental relations.

To be very concrete there are two important effects of the BRI: globally the integration of a land link with the existing sea routes and regionally the dis-enclaving of Central Asia. If we want to dis-enclave Central Asia and large swaths of the former Middle East and of the Caucasus, railways are simply indispensable, since air freight is just a fraction of the needs and road transportation is much more expensive and environmentally unfriendly. In this wider continental context the Trans-Siberian railway will still have a relevant function, but it is clearly insufficient. Being this the case, one should be very clear in understanding that the BRI complements but does not substitute or compete with global trade arrangements, including the now US-frozen TTP and TTIP regional agreements. We shall see afterwards how these agreements had essential flaws.

To put succinctly this first point, the grand strategic value of BRI's land component is absolutely similar to the American railways that connected at the end of the Nineteenth century the Pacific with the Atlantic.

The second grand strategic aspect is that the BRI is a good occasion to stress the very limited relevance of the old continentalist theories of Mckinder and Spykman: namely the idea that the control of the Heartland or the area called "geographical pivot of history" allows to control the whole of Eurasia and hence the world, especially if the power owning the heartland has access to portions of the rimland. It is quite evident that both theories were moulded on the British fears regarding the expansion of Russia in Central/South Asia and Iran and it is also clear that, after the II World War, this theory was quickly used to prop up the containment policy against the USSR.

These theories have played an important role in the development of geopolitics, but against the historical record they appear unfortunately uncorroborated. Few powers have controlled large parts of the heartland: the empire of Alexander the Great, some Mongol dynasts, the Chinese Ming dynasty at the zenith of its expansion, czarist Russia and Soviet Union. The first power was short-lived, the second was huge, but could not control even Japan and the same happened also to some Chinese emperors. Russia and Soviet Union proved definitely that this control does not translate into world supremacy. The constant factor connecting all these actors is that they could have access to the sea and even to important naval bases, but they lacked significant naval power and control of the seas, as we are explaining in some detail.

Alexander the Great (as Hannibal afterwards) was forced to make initially a brilliant land campaign, precisely because Persia controlled the Mediterranean Sea; the subsequent campaign beyond Persia (now Iran) saw the deployment of a fleet just as an exploring element in the Gulf. Only the Mongol empire of Genghis Khan and his immediate successors (until approximately 1279 AD) could justify somehow the idea that possessing the heartland would allow a world domination. But in the end this empire dominated only a very significant portion of Eurasia and, despite conquering important sectors of the rimland (East Mediterranean, Gulf, China coasts and Korean Peninsula), it was unable to dominate the world or even to seize an insular power like Japan.

Approximately the same pattern was followed by the Ming dynasty: control of the Chinese and Vietnamese coasts, in addition to the creation of a powerful fleet whose influence was felt from East Africa to the Indian Ocean and to several Asian coastal countries. As soon as the Mongol threat was acutely felt in the North, the Ming dynasty refurbished the Great Wall and severely curtailed any long-range naval operation. Again, regional hegemony yes, world domination no.

So the assumption that containing a continental hegemonic power away from the rimland is an imperious necessity to avoid a possible world domination is a geopolitical statement that must be seriously qualified. In this respect the geopolitical developments of czarist Russia and Soviet Union offer clear indications. Russia was an important continental power, expanding in Central Asia and towards Iran, but incapable to free from the naval blockade its own Far East strategic naval base of Port Arthur (1905, defeat of Tsushima by the Japanese fleet).

Soviet Union was (together with the USA) one of the two real winners of the Second World War but until approximately 1980 it was strategically incapable to change the basic geopolitical limitations of the predecessor Russian government, with the exceptions of the strategic use of the merchant navy for armaments supplies to allied countries (Cuba, Syria, Egypt and Ethiopia), a powerful submarine fleet and the naval dimension of nuclear deterrence.

First of all, the four main naval complexes supplying the respective main fleets (Northern, Baltic, Black Sea, Pacific) expressed equivalent projection capabilities also in Soviet times, i.e. protection of vital sea areas for Moscow, more or less significant interdiction of Western allied fleets, limited interdiction of significant choke points and very limited control of the sea. Secondly, the relatively limited basing rights in Cuba, Yugoslavia, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Northern Yemen and Angola did extend the reach of Soviet fleets, but not increase their overall offensive capabilities. Thirdly, not even the use of the former US bases in Vietnam after 1975 changed the strategic equation in the Pacific Ocean; so much for the domino theory. Only with the implementation of Adm. Gorshkov's plans to significantly strengthen the Voennaya Morskoy Flot, Moscow started to change the naval strategic balance towards achieving in the long term a rough parity with the US and allied fleets. The end of the Cold War (1989) and the crumbling of the USSR (1991) have stopped this project until now.

In conclusion: the crucial difference in the relationship between heartland and rimland, resulting in a possible (and still unattained in this way) world predominance is neither land extension, nor the possession of well-developed bases, but the existence of a powerful, well supported and operationally capable set of at least three oceanic fleets, possibly around an aircraft carrier battle group (as shown since 1945). The final demonstration about the limited usefulness of the Mackinder-Spykman theories is that the actors that were able to globalise the world, exercising a worldwide political, economic and military influence, were either peninsular or insular powers, namely three: Spain, Great Britain and USA, all capable to build up a sizeable navy. It was the rimland dominating the world with different intensity, for longer or shorter time, surely not the heartland.

The political and strategic consequence of this is that the BRI is not a strategic threat to current balances and that resurrecting a containment strategy on "heartland" arguments is both useless, wasteful of precious resources and, eventually, futile.

This leads us to the third characteristic of the BRI: links and trade create a continental gravitation, but not an occupation or an exclusion zone. During the old Silk Road, with a much less opened global economy, China could not dominate its economic partners because the benefits were distributed by the nature of the link itself. It is also very clear that railways, like pipelines, are long term marriages, but frankly benefits outweigh by far any inconvenience. As long as benefits will be distributed and investment loans are wisely administrated by established standards, there will be no major issues. Actually, in the current economic environment, the risk of debt and speculative bubbles is much more serious than some monopolistic stranglehold.

This does not mean that the BRI, once fulfilled, will not coalesce interests from Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe to Caucasus, Levant, Gulf, Central and South Asia around Beijing, but the sum of interests is distributed and not inherently or necessarily hegemonic. Someone might point out to the rather unequal relationship between China and several African or Latin American countries, but the argument tends to forget that these are strictly bilateral relations whereas along the New Silk Road the whole logistic chain is largely interdependent and will hopefully take stock from these painful precedents.

The other important implication of this project is that it will contribute to a shift of balances at continental and probably also at global level. Narrow or scaremongering interpretations of national interests apart, a shift in balances is not a negative event per se, especially in an international system that is at present highly unstable precisely because equilibria are still undetermined and probably lopsided. Opening communication lines can rarely be seen as a one-way-street whereby a triumphant one-party system floods the rest of Eurasia, as some people would fear; on the contrary these lines work both ways and allow the circulation of new ideas, habits and social conventions. So, there will be a balance shift, but, as long as it is distributed in its effects and feedbacks (and there is no reason to think the contrary at global level), it is a peaceful development.

This appears all the more reasonable taking into account that the Chinese strategic thinking is concentrated on security and not hegemony, on peace i.e. *weiren* (keep stability) in order to concentrate on internal social and economic development. A clear touchstone can be seen in Middle Eastern policies where stability is indispensable for Beijing in order to secure a good flow of energy resources. The race towards regime change or hard confrontation in the Middle East will only provide the Chinese Communist Party with more internal legitimacy for a proactive protection of China's own economic and security interests.

If then somebody would point out that the BRI could favour a multiple hub political global order, the questions are two: is a unipolar hegemony a stable and viable system? Is today a multiple hub system, based on advanced multilateral fora and rules a negative future?

The answer to the first question is rather simple: an unrestrained unipolar hegemony has been possible from 1991 (dissolution of the Soviet Union) till 2004 (failure of Iraq's pacification) and afterwards we have seen a regime of a *primus inter pares* exorientes (a first among emerging peers). This unipolar hegemony has proven its limits against the double Afghan and Iraqi wars and it is unsustainable due to a huge internal deficit and external debt.

The second question can be answered in the following way: it is a negative future only for who wants a *mors tua, vita mea* future (your death is my life), a dystopia that can lead inexorably to a devastating fourth world war. Evidently a shared future is better than the horror of a new unprecedented global conflict. The more sobering truth is that we have two and a half unwilling global leaders: USA, China and Russia; this leaves enough space for a multiple hub political global order, i.e. something different from the old multipolar order because a pole can be in competition and the hub is part of a whole, as one can see in the transportation sector.

Coming to a more narrow China-USA focus, it is remarkable to see how BRI can complement Pacific and Atlantic trade networks. This means that it integrates also US trade logistics: we have a sea conveyor belt since the Cold War and now we will have an interesting linkage between the dense European rail network and the US-BRI trunk lines.

This huge and necessary investment to develop Asia's infrastructure is calculated around \$8,3 trillion and it is a bill that the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank cannot fill even together. The AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) is the only institution that could step in for the wider benefit of the global community.

Paradoxically the BRI could be the integration of the TPP and the TTIP literally on the ground, if these agreements would go forward. One could say that with the present US administration both trade agreements have more or less to live without Washington's participation (one of them is already doing this at the point that Washington is possibly reconsidering its first choice), but trade infrastructure is more flexible than treaties and the launching of the BRI was neither a response to the TPP nor strictly linked to it. To be very honest, from a global and globalised economic point of view it makes no sense to exclude relevant economies like the Chinese and the Russian one and it is rather counterproductive to force ASEAN countries to choose between China and USA when it comes to trade. Russia of course has the big handicap of the illegal annexation of Crimea, but the complementarity of Chinese and US economies offers in the medium term sufficient leverage to negotiate with Moscow a settlement respecting Kiev's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The final point is a further development of the indirect opportunities offered by the BRI. The present status of bilateral relations between Beijing and Washington is somehow frosty and it is improbable to see considerable change in the short term. Nevertheless, if China continues to be a very interesting market coming (also demographically) to maturation, both big countries have an unprecedented opportunity to transform together global balances. It was a staunch and competent Republican president, Richard Nixon, to start this dialogue in 1972, when enemies were real and the threat of nuclear destruction too. For the moment China is still a limited market for military technology, but the time has come to ask the question if these two countries, who have global responsibilities, cannot prevent extremely dangerous developments precisely by sharing the same military paradigms and logistics, increasing their reciprocal transparency in a security engagement, instead of embarking in a creeping strategic race. To paraphrase Sun-Tzu it is time to win-win without a battle.

To sum up: the BRI is recomposing a significant fragment of the world. It is risky, it could fail jeopardising even the future development of China and today there are few illusions about improving short-term bilateral political dynamics, but the project is here, it is a huge opportunity and for now the best answer to the last Davos summit suggestion "Create a shared future in a fragmented world". Pope Francis anticipated it under the name global "common good", Xi Jinping calls it a "Community of Common Destiny", both understand that the world is a little spacecraft with limited resources: who cares about the colour of the cat, provided we prevent the rat of self-destruction?

**Alessandro Politi**



**NATO Foundation**  
*Defense College*

---