

CHINA'S GREAT STRATEGY. THE WESTERN BALANCING AND THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

MIHAI NAE¹

ABSTRACT

The following material proposes an analysis of the dynamics of the People's Republic of China worldwide in recent years. Chinese civilization is marked by its inventions that contributed to the development of mankind: compass, gunpowder, paper, printing, silk, seismograph, compass, wheelbarrow. Lao Tzu introduced the idea of living in harmony, and Confucius emphasized ethical values for a harmonious society. China is a very large country with a fairly large population. These elements could portray China as a great power, but on the other hand they may also pose challenges that the Chinese authorities must manage. Among the solutions to solve domestic challenges would be attracting certain resources from abroad, as well as Beijing's credibility worldwide. How is it possible to materialize such solutions? Through the Belt and Road Initiative megaprojects. At first glance things seem to center on the economic and cultural side. In reality, the issues are much deeper. China, through its East Asian civilization, has to go through negotiations with nations with different cultures and, implicitly, strategic narratives that prevent the conclusion of contracts in building joint projects. Most likely, Beijing will eventually succeed in achieving its global goals and reaping the benefits, especially due to the soft power strategies it wields. Was ancient isolation a factor why China did not engage in tactics at the opposite pole as other international actors have historically displayed themselves?

Keywords: New Silk Road, Eurasia, cháogòng (朝贡), soft power, resources.

INTRODUCTION

The world that surrounds us is complex by the very human beings who live. Over time, they formed into communities from the simplest systems to those in a more developed form. The establishment of several family "institutions" in the conjugal sense form communities (Rodseth et al. 1991, 227) Human reason and the language it uses are the basis of what is called "culture." Culture cannot be easily understood if its evolution is not passed through the filter of an analysis (Rodseth et al. 1991, 243).

¹ Faculty of Sociology, University of Bucharest, Email: mihai.nae@history.bucharest.university



People recognize themselves at the community level through language, history, religious beliefs, culture and even institutions. At the identity level they are grouped into tribes, ethnic and religious groups, nations and ultimately civilization. In addition to the need to promote certain interests, politics is also a tool in defining the identity of a human group (Huntington 1996, 21). Civilization is a complex notion compared to the element of culture. It has no well-defined borders. They represent values, norms and forms of thinking transmitted from generation to generation. Civilization contains several cultures that can resemble each other in certain shades. A civilization refers to culture, not to a political entity (Huntington 1996, 41–44). However, it is certainly possible at some point to be politically instrumentalized according to interests. The above introductions have been formulated in order to make it easier to understand the behavior of the People's Republic of China today. There are certain factors that still contribute to the dynamics of international policies initiated by Beijing today. Chinese civilization was formed in what is now known as central and eastern China. The areas bordered by the Chinese involved hostile environments inhabited by nomadic human groups that lacked civilizational affirmation. These led to the creation of their own image of superior civilization of Chinese nature. Geographical isolation led the Chinese people to call their state the Middle Kingdom (Kerr 2013, 1–5). In order to preserve the international balance of that time, from the earliest dynasties, tributary forms were established between Chinese authority and non-Chinese entities (Stuart-Fox 2003, 9–22). Broadly speaking, it was the recognition of Chinese suzerainty through the giving of symbolic gifts at court by representatives of barbarian chieftains. The Chinese state also had a duty to militarily support the surrounding nomadic societies in case of conflict (Budura 2021, 36–38).

In other words, we can talk about an isolation of the Middle Kingdom. The Chinese state did not want to deal too much with foreign/Western elements. With the nineteenth century, over time the Western powers will subjugate the Chinese space. This would affect China's suzerainty over nomadic areas near the Amur River, Mongolia to the north, Tibetan space, Indochinese in the south. The Western Powers were to become barbarians in the truest sense of the word (Palmer et al. 2006, 666). This subjugation lasted until the twentieth century simultaneously with the communization of the Sinic space. It represented for the Chinese people a century full of humiliation in which China's isolation manifested itself even vis-à-vis neighboring states (Westad 2012, 172).

THE SOCIAL UNDERPINNINGS OF CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY

Following the liberalization of the Chinese economy thanks to Deng Xiaoping's reforms, China is beginning to step on an international path. He understood that isolation was no longer an optimal solution, or at least cooperation

with the socialist world alone was not enough. Coupling to the international system benefits the Chinese state if it also has sufficient capacities to manage them. In the 90s the People's Republic of China had a great imprint on the growth of the world economy, leaving behind the United States, the European Union and India (Li 2008, 77). Population growth has contributed to this growth through labor itself². Over time, China became a consumer society (Chow 1993, 815). However, the transformation of the Chinese state into a consumer society indicates the need for resources. China needs imports of raw materials to be able to assert itself internationally in a soft power system (Dumitrescu 2020, 33). It is worth noting that in the last decade China's tendency is to increase imports of products³. Beijing has realized that a society is productive if it has the resources it needs to thrive. Among the products imported in 2022 are: electric machinery (23.7% of total imports), mineral fuels, including oil (19.7%), ores (8.3%), machinery, including computers (7.4%), stones and precious metals (3.8%), optical and medical equipment (3%), cars (3%), plastics and plastics (2.8%), copper (2.5%), oilseeds (2.5%) (Workman 2023).

In recent decades, China has adopted different policies to reduce poverty. However, achieving such goals is difficult in a country with a large population. The liberalization of the economy in Chinese terms has allowed certain human groups to thrive. The effect, however, generated social polarization. But Beijing's leadership continues its campaigns to combat poverty (deLisle and Goldstein 2015, 25–41). And one of the main tools would be the import of raw materials. Among the stakes would be access to finished products by wider social groups. On the other hand, it could substantially help China in its ambitions in the global sense. The latter fact is confirmed by its very ambition to become the world's leading exporter and eventually managed to surpass even the United States of America⁴. Such an outcome is also possible thanks to imports.

Turning back to the idea that China considered itself a superior civilization since Antiquity, it is still found today under certain nuances. China is transforming day by day from well-known isolationism to expanding its influences, at least in Asia. It certainly doesn't stop there. There are much bigger ambitions even towards the West (Pazienza 2014, 27). How could a civilizationally diverse China expand its influence in relation to other major players? In 2013, when the presidential mandate was transitioning from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping, a megaproject, the Belt

² *Total population of China from 1980 to 2022 with forecasts until 2028*, Statista, Society-Demographics, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263765/total-population-of-china/>, accessed on 24.06.2023.

³ *Value of import of goods in China from 2012 to 2022 (in billion U.S. dollars)*, Statista, Retail & Trade-International Trade, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263646/import-of-goods-to-china/>, accesat la 24.06.2023.

⁴ *Leading export countries worldwide in 2022 (in billion U.S. dollars)*, Statista, Economy 6 Politics-Economy, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264623/leading-export-countries-worldwide/>, accesat la 24.06.2023.

and Road Initiative or in other words, the New Silk Road, was discussed at the proposal level. This project involves two components of great importance, namely one economic trajectory on land (Silk Road Economic Belt) and the other on the sea (21st Century Maritime Silk Road). Belt and Road Initiative aims to unite important areas of Asia, Europe and Africa in improving economic cooperation between actors in these areas. Support is also present from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Mayer 2018, 3–4).

THE ELEMENTS OF CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY. INFRASTRUCTURE AND GEOECONOMICS

In 2015, institutions such as the National Commission for Development and Reforms, the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs cooperated in drafting a document that leads to a new stage in materializing the global project. The government in Beijing wants to primarily connect China to other states in Eurasia. The focus is primarily on building transport and communication infrastructures. The strategy pursues five points. Three of these are economic like financial integration, functional trade, infrastructure building. The remaining two boil down to strategic points, namely political coordination and connection between people (Mayer 2018, 6–7). It is a Marshall Plan with a Chinese impetus which incorporates different regimes of government. In other words, the People's Republic of China could economically dominate other international actors. It does not matter how divided the world is by the diversity of civilizations (Huntington 1996, 219). Economics seems to have the capacity to bring humanity to a common denominator. We need to return to the traditional Chinese mentality that Chinese space is destined to export civilization at a global level. Through this megaproject, the Belt and Road Initiative, it can be confirmed that the messianic role Beijing assumes is not too far from the truth.

In doing so, Beijing is projecting national prowess in international politics. Earlier it was mentioned about the challenge China has to manage in terms of poverty. Beijing's policies in charge of developing the Belt and Road Initiative could be useful in improving the moral of Chinese citizens. The Chinese central authorities can use their victories abroad in order to win sympathy from the inhabitants of the local provinces, especially the most impoverished ones. This is necessary because the state has not yet been able to cope successfully with social polarization. There are provinces⁵ in such a deplorable state that it gives the impression that the state is unable to design infrastructure.

⁵ UNICEF for every child. China, *Rural poverty rate, by province, 2017. Chapter 2 Economic and Social Development*, National Bureau of Statistics, Poverty Monitoring Report of Rural China, 2018, <https://www.unicef.cn/en/figure-211-rural-poverty-rate-province-2017>, accessed on 25.06.2023.

The map in terms of social and economic development shows a poor China in the central and western regions. Only about the coastal area can it be said that things are somewhat more balanced⁶. In the rest of the areas, the existence of human groups that are not part of the main branch of ethnic Chinese can be confirmed (Zheng 2017). Indeed, the provinces hosting the main ethnic minorities are sparsely populated, but strategically they are very valuable to Beijing⁷. For an internal balancing⁸ of the Chinese state, it would be much more efficient to distribute resources in such a way that the poor would have the opportunity to prosper. So, in the short term, policies aimed at the Belt and Road Initiative could improve the image of Beijing politics, especially in the eyes of minorities. On the other hand, China's gains from the well-known plan could also be distributed to people in need. People are of the same nationality if there is a sharing of the same culture, that is, a common type of behavior, ideas, associations and ways of communication. People are of the same nationality if there is a mutual recognition of belonging to the same nation. Once this sentiment is achieved, the legitimacy of the government in Beijing will increase substantially in the view of national minorities. Finally, the level of security of the Chinese state increases. In other words, national sentiment cannot be found among China's national minorities by the very existence of different cultures. As we said before, the nation is felt.

However, the common element between the minority and majority groups is that of representativeness, which is an expression of central government. It is also a question of societal security, that is, of preserving identities (Buzan et al. 1998, 120). It is closely linked to positive security, which concerns not only state institutions, but also non-formal institutions such as the family, professional environments or even civil societies. In this approach there is the possibility of negotiation between the state and the individual in relation to the elements related to security (Dumitrescu 2020, 15). The People's Republic of China stands to gain by building influence over Eurasia. Throughout history this vast expansion has come into the spheres of interest of several powers⁹. It is very true that from the very beginning of the phenomenon of globalization by venturing to the Americas, certain actors would become thalassocrats, maritime powers. They had control over areas of great importance for international trade, spaces that were also of military importance (Mahan 2004, 48–49). The freedom of movement of thalassocratic, that is, maritime, powers on the seas and oceans was one of the elements that created conducive conditions for their military and technological development. This was

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *People of China*, <https://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/geo/tpeople.htm>, accesat la 25.06.2023.

⁸ In an anarchist system, states mobilize to survive. This is not only about foreign policies, but also about domestic ones.

⁹ Rethinking Central Eurasia, *The Heartland Theory and the Present-Day Geopolitical Structure of Central Eurasia*.

not the case with regard to Eurasian areas. The distances to the seas/oceans seemed unapproachable from one end to the other, and the hostile environments seemed to intentionally condemn Eurasian state entities to stagnate.

On the other hand, things have changed since the last century in which technological progress has had such a magnitude that resources of great importance have been discovered in places that at first glance seem impossible to approach. Over time, Central Asian areas came to occupy a place on the political agenda of the Great Powers. Currently, technological progress has the possibility to transform the Eurasian space and project a modern image to it. Once modernized, it could establish more connections with the rest of the world (Gerace 2010, 351).

And yet, what is the philosophy behind this expansion of land? As argued above, state-of-the-art technology has managed to discover and value the natural resources of an environment in which it is apparently quite poor. Eurasia is said to hold about 60% of the world's gross national product and three-quarters of the world's total energy resources (Brzezinski 1997, 31). Having these resources could also create an instrument for promoting regional peace (Brzezinski 1997, 203). Mackinder said: "Whoever rules Eastern Europe dominates the Heartland. Whoever controls the Heartland controls the Island of the World (Scott 2008, 3). In other words, a continental power would have the possibility in time to extend its influence to the exit to the seas and oceans and even further to other territories. Beijing seems to have understood this and is mobilizing its plans on paper as best as it can. Compared to Western actors, China is committed to cooperating with states that are governed by authoritarian regimes (Finkel and Brudny 2012). Such tolerance from China will bring long-term gains.

China's investments through this project are large. For example, the People's Republic of China finances projects generating both renewable and non-renewable energy (McBride et al. 2023). Beijing's influence has gone global. China's influence is also because it needs resources (Johnston 2019, 52). International isolation would mean the risk of an involution. Since the last century, Karl Haushofer has been discussing pan-regions. It is worth mentioning that Africa retains some of its importance. According to him, this continent was reserved for a last century German government and at the same time integrated into the Eurasian region (Agnew et al. 2003, 195). Thus, Africa is now an alternative to China in terms of connection with Europe. This does not mean that Africa itself is negligible. For Eurasian unification alongside Africa, it is possible primarily by sea. But China and other players with merchant fleets face piracy¹⁰ (Gilmartin 2008). Therefore, it mobilized to send military units to the coast of East Africa. In Djibouti, China built a naval logistics center in the summer of 2017 with the help of the Ministry of National Defense. It was originally designed to undertake escort-type missions rather than offensive operations.

¹⁰ China has also faced maritime piracy in the Strait of Malacca.

China is highly motivated to carry out such security missions. In November 2008, two Chinese ships were captured by Somali pirates. Nearly 1, 200 Chinese vessels cross the Gulf of Aden every year. Somalia joined the projects promoted by China through the Belt and Road Initiative in 2018. Beijing imports raw materials while exporting construction materials, electronics, textiles, pharmaceuticals and toys to Somalia. Certainly, none of them could afford to lose their gains in advantage of maritime piracy. The People's Republic of China fights for what belongs to it and has been successful in the fight against modern piracy. Beijing managed to recover over twenty merchant fleets, even other than those under the Chinese flag, from the hands of pirates (Cheng 2019, 4).

CONCLUSIONS

China's policies on a global scale seem to be gaining ground. It is a state that, thanks to the resources that it has at its disposal, can shape its economic influences in other corners of the world. The Belt and Road Initiative is and will remain, at least in the medium term, an instrument that will help China to make itself heard more and more worldwide.

It will continue to have great successes, primarily due to the soft power with which it operates and, at the same time, because the authorities in Beijing are constantly concerned with improving the image of the People's Republic of China internationally. It's not exactly an easy road to travel. Culture plays an important role in the sphere of international relations, and an East Asian culture cannot automatically get along well with the Western culture. The trappings of perceptions are perpetual and can generate fulminating environments.

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