

Preparing the New Silk Road for Regional Development and Exploring a Research Agenda



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An Introduction to the Belt and Road Initiative

The Chinese project “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)” is the largest development programme of its kind worldwide. China is investing heavily in the network of trade routes over land, over sea and in the air. The project highlights China’s ambition to intensify collaboration with Europe, Asia, Australia, South America and Africa.

The project itself is known by several names: the “Belt and Road Initiative” and its acronym “BRI”; “One Belt One Road” and its acronym “OBOR”, and the translated Chinese name of the initiative “yi dai yi lu”. Moreover, the “New Silk Road” is often divided into the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, referring to the land route, and the “Maritime Silk Road”, which describes the sea route section connecting different countries, from China, through Southeast Asia, the Indian sub-continent, Africa, the Arabian peninsula and Europe. The various routes and countries involved are displayed in Fig. 1.1.

In 2013, the launch of the international project was announced by the Chinese government. The President Xi Jinping introduced both the overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road during a visit to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, where he presented his vision of creating a project that stretches from East Asia to Europe by means of outstanding infrastructural development and investment initiatives. The original Silk Road connected Europe to Asia centuries ago, when the Han Dynasty developed trade routes to connect the West with Central Asian countries such as today’s Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as India and Pakistan.

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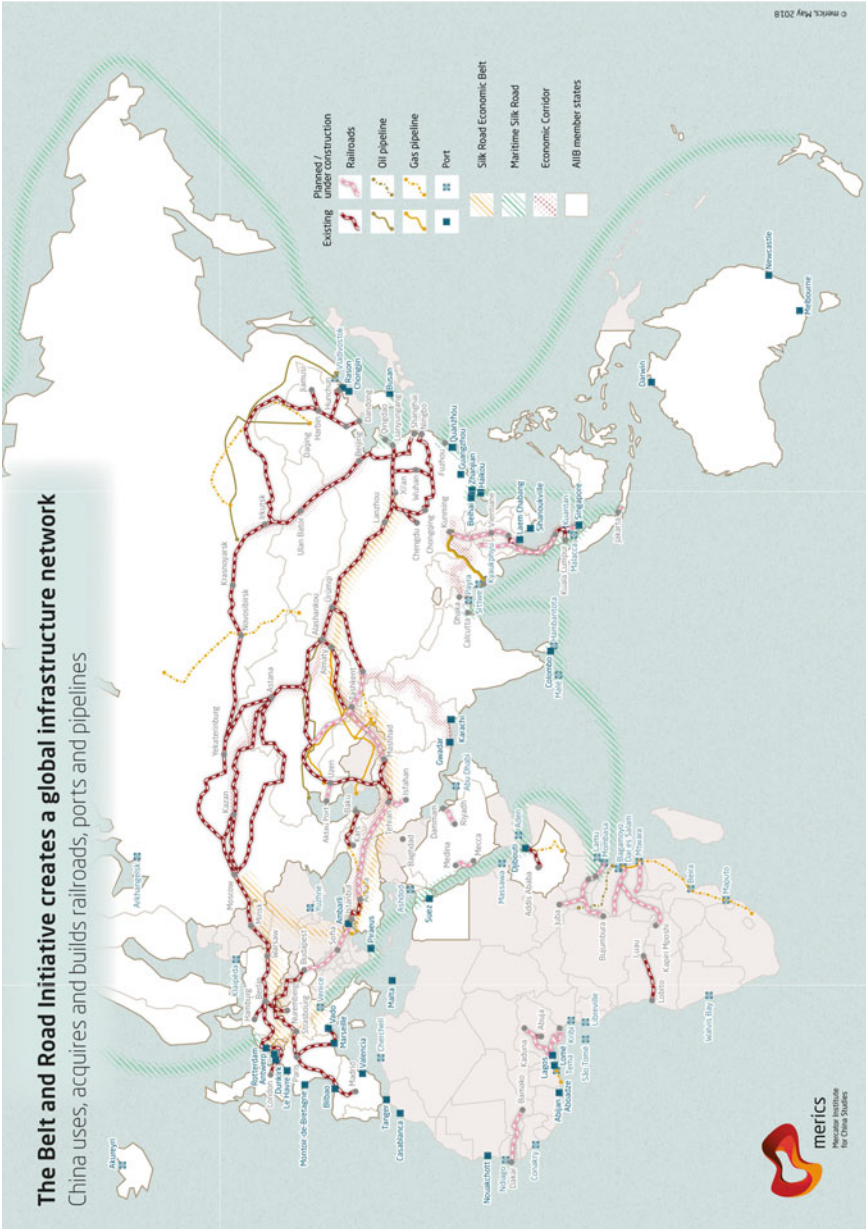


Fig. 1.1 The Belt and Road Initiative creates a global infrastructure network (Merics 2018)

According to China's national government, China's goal is to double its 2010 per capita GDP to \$10,000 by 2021—the date when the Chinese Communist Party celebrates its 100th anniversary. Moreover, it was announced that the project is planned to be completed by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the Republic of China.

The objective of this chapter is to illustrate the impact of the BRI at the regional level and to identify the different ways it is reported in the media. After a short overview of the current state of affairs we give a broader perspective, creating a theoretical frame that includes various approaches to looking at an international project. We end with a brief summary of the aim, structure and content of this publication.

The Global Initiative and Regional Impacts

After the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in April 2019, the Chinese Xinhua News Agency initiated the founding of a “Belt and Road Economic Information Partnership” with the goal to implement the tasks discussed at the Forum. Founding members are renowned news agencies, information service providers, research institutions, chambers of commerce and associations from more than 20 countries and regions in Asia, Europe, Africa, Latin America and Oceania (“„Belt and Road“-Partnerschaft für Wirtschaftsinformationen gegründet” 2019). This partnership serves as lights another BRI tool that promotes networking and exchange of information between different actors. Moreover, it serves as a sign that China is not only building infrastructure, but is also using the BRI to raise its profile in various regions.

China's ambitions are portrayed in different ways in the media around the world. On one side are the BRI supporters who see the advantages and possibilities of this project. On the other hand, many critics warn of risks and negative consequences.

China itself promotes the project as a provision for “a realistic opportunity for mutually beneficial and win–win international development and cooperation” (Nan, 2019) especially with industrialised countries. Within this context, the example of Italy, which signed a “Memorandum of Understanding” (MOU) within the framework of the BRI, is often highlighted. Prior to this, 13 other EU states had already signed a MOU with the People's Republic of China (PRC), but Italy is the first member of the G7 and the first founding member of the EU to sign such an agreement. Italy's move was highly discussed in the European media and received a lot of criticism. Peter Frankopan described the Italian action as “largely symbolic” (“Italy joins China's New Silk Road project” 2019).

BRI projects are also often implemented in developing countries and according to the Global Times “China is willing to invest in the least-developed countries, which other countries avoid due to the fear of non-recovery” (Awan 2019). In October 2019, Xi Jinping visited Nepal as the first Chinese President in 23 years. Nepal joined the BRI as early as 2017 and recently the two countries have signed several agreements (among others, on health, agriculture, industry, tourism and infrastructure, including

a trans-Himalayan railway line). Due to its geographical location, Nepal is certainly very interesting for China and critics point to a possible geopolitical influence on the neighbouring country. For instance, Nepal is considered a transit country for Tibetans travelling from Tibet to India and vice versa (Sharma and Schultz 2019).

In fact, especially for developing countries, China's infrastructure projects can entail many risks, such as high indebtedness or economic and political dependence on China. According to the British newspaper *The Guardian* "critics say it is a tool to project geopolitical power, suck up overseas resources and vent the excess capacity of a slowing domestic economy, particularly in the steel, construction and power industries" (Watts 2019). For example, since 2014 the Maldives under President Abdulla Yameen accepted enormous investments from China. Now, after many years of no transparency and corruption, the new Maldivian government fears the "national sellout" (Mundy et al. 2019). The port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka was also expanded under the BRI and due to the inability of the country to pay back the loans, it was forced to lease the port and an industrial area to a Chinese company for 99 years. However, European countries can also fall into the debt trap. For example, the majority shareholding of the Greek port of Piraeus is already in Chinese hands (Crolley 2018).

Countries such as France, Germany and the USA are quite critical of China's initiative. Newspapers speak of power, influence, lack of transparency and unfair competitive conditions (Spalinger 2019). In contrast, there is a certain economic dependence. There is also criticism that many BRI projects use Chinese companies and workers, which in turn is bad for local labour markets. The European Union has discussed the increasing presence of China, especially in the context of the BRI, and formulated ten actions for global cooperation and a more balanced economic relationship with China" (European Commission 2019). In these points, sustainable development and environmental protection are discussed implicitly and explicitly and are regarded by the EU as essential in the cooperation with China.

Sustainability is a major issue in the debate on the "Silk Road" for other organisations and institutions too. The International Monetary Fund has already drawn China's attention to the environmental compatibility and sustainability of BRI projects (Partington 2019). Sustainability is a broad term that should include society and the financial aspect, for example debt, along with environmental protection. The BRI policy documents speak a lot about renewable energy projects and cooperating in this field with countries in Africa and the Arctic region, but de facto China invests in more coal-fired projects than in renewable power plants. However, due to several huge domestic hydropower production projects, China's investments seem to be higher in renewable energies (Eder and Mardell 2019). The PRC wants to cut domestic emissions and is transitioning to clean energy sources, thus, it is transferring its domestic coal fired power companies to other countries (Eder and Mardell 2019).

Insights from the Academic Discussion on China's BRI

To date, the so called New Silk Road has been widely studied by scientists from different disciplines (e.g. Islam 2019; Deepak 2018; Kasimov and Kotlyakov 2017; Mayer 2018). The following paragraphs should give an overview of the most recent research available.

First, ecology and sustainable development issues are quite salient in the literature. For instance, Evseev et al. (2019) claim that the preservation of traditional nature areas for the use of indigenous populations is essential for local ecological and social stability in the Arctic. In their view, New Silk Road projects may be a chance to restore sustainable development on a regional level by restoring the ecosystem. Kuang and Ou (2019, p. 84) also emphasise the importance of the Arctic area of the BRI, which, they state, "promotes peace, stability and the sustainable development of the region". However, to protect vulnerable environments in BRI countries, Li et al. (2015) suggest more scientific research, international collaboration and education as steps to build a more sustainable New Silk Road.

Second, scholars discuss the complexity of the project with the objective of identifying the benefits and risks in various fields (Belova et al. 2019). Some researchers (e.g. Zhang and Ji 2019; Wang and Ye 2019) present a positive view of the implications of the Belt and Road strategy. Conversely, Peyrouse and Raballand (2015) argue that the BRI promotes infrastructure projects in many countries of Central Asia without tackling obvious barriers to trade, such as production patterns, widespread corruption, and poor management practices at borders. Others address the BRI and its related impacts on political or economic issues from the perspective of individual countries (Choroś-Mrozowska 2019; Kokushkina and Soloshcheva 2019). Especially vulnerable regions such as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), where about eight million Uyghurs live, have become the focus point of many studies. The XUAR has become an important element of the BRI due to its geographical location. According to Hayes (2019, p. 1), Chinese repression there, which goes hand in hand with serious human rights violations, "demonstrates Beijing's acute anxiety over opening this region up to external influences, particularly from Central Asian and Middle Eastern SREB [Silk Road Economic Belt] states". Scholars express doubts about mutual benefits for European countries too. According to Holslag (2017), while China's markets grow enormously, European member states have already lost market shares. Furthermore, Sárvári and Szeidovitz (2016) categorise the New Silk Road as a tool of Chinese foreign policy that aims to contribute to the establishment of a new multipolar world order.

Lastly, logistics and supply chains are of great interest. In an exploratory analysis of the drivers and processes of the BRI in relation to local service industry development in Georgia, Pechlaner et al. (2019) underline the need for a national strategy and transnational governance system in order to counterbalance a possible dependency on China's financial investments. Moreover, Thüerer et al. (2019) refer to new risks and sustainability issues that are introduced to areas where China creates new supply chain routes within the BRI.

Research on the implications for cultural and social aspects, such as the study on higher education and how China is developing its higher education system to cooperate academically along the New Silk Road with new partners and to attract talent, are quite rare (Kirby and Van der Wende 2018). Technological aspects (Fung et al. 2018; Vila Seoane 2019) are also rarely discussed.

In sum, the areas of interest and studies described are only a few recent examples to give an idea of the academic discussion in different disciplines. The following section gives a broad overview of conceptual and theoretical approaches in the literature and proposes a framework that could help researchers apply an inter- and transdisciplinary approach to their analysis.

Finding a Theoretical Framework

This section explores the conceptual roots of research on the BRI, related to guiding questions and different perspectives. First, the BRI has the potential to accelerate economic development (“The Belt and Road Initiative Progress, Contributions and Prospects” 2019) which should lead to an increased availability and distribution of basic life-sustaining goods, a raised standard of living and an expansion of the range of economic and social choices (see UN SDG, Todaro and Smith 2015, p. 24). Such economic development can be regarded as a multidimensional process, which involves not only the economic system, but also the entire social system. This requires a multi-disciplinary view of the BRI, which is not limited to infrastructure and economic discussions. Against this background, Fig. 1.2 provides a framework of selected theoretical and conceptual approaches by different disciplines in social science on the New Silk Road. It serves as an orientation in discussing several concepts within the BRI, for example in business economics, the availability and distribution of financial instruments for infrastructure projects or the implementation of transport services within the transport geography. By recognising the limitations of each discipline and hybrid forms in multi-disciplinary research, this framework can only serve as a broad framework rather than being complete in itself. Beyond social science, the BRI is also highly relevant in terms of technical disciplines that are responsible for implementing BRI projects, such as engineering and the construction industry or energy supply.

Second, the theoretical approaches presented and their application within the BRI framework can be summarised by some guiding questions:

1. How can the projects of the BRI be put into practice and what economic opportunities and challenges need to be recognised?
2. Under what circumstances and conditions is the BRI a feasible tool for regional development? How is the transport system of the BRI distributed and how will it influence the mobility of information, peoples and goods?
3. How do states and state communities react to the BRI and what are the geopolitical profiles of attending and non-attending countries?
4. What actions do states undertake to promote development based on the BRI in domestic or international relations—or what alternatives do exist?

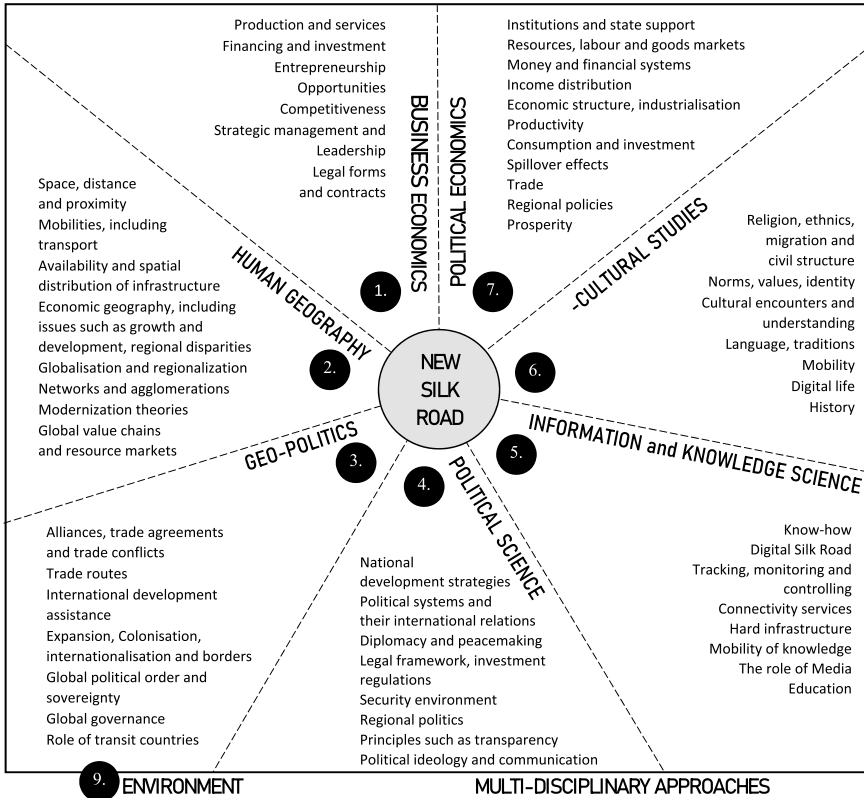


Fig. 1.2 Selection of conceptual and theoretical approaches to the New Silk Road (own elaboration)

5. What level of know-how is needed in order to achieve a better connectivity in terms of infrastructure, communication and digital services?
6. In what way will societies be affected by the BRI and what are its possible disruptive or supportive factors?
7. How will the BRI change national and international economic structures?
8. How can it be secured that the BRI follows a green development?

Third, because of the multi-dimensional nature and specialties of the BRI it is necessary to consider and understand it from different perspectives (Fig. 1.3). In a temporal perspective, research and discussions on the Silk Road can be rooted in a historical context, but also in recent history and future prospects. For research purposes, it can be also fruitful to transfer research results from studies on pre-BRI cases, such as TRACEA or historical studies on the current Belt and Road activities. Furthermore, it is crucial that the current discussions on infrastructure issues are widened to include political and social perspectives. By means of a geographical scale, the BRI influences numerous levels that need to be analysed in their entirety and interaction. Moreover, reflected discussion needs to address the questions of who

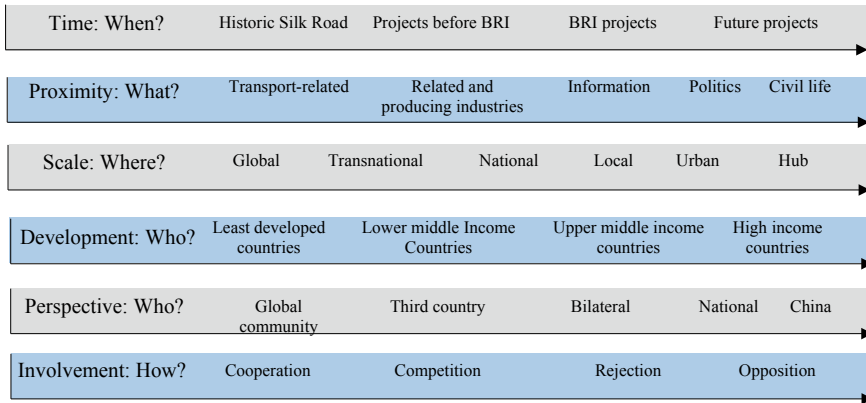


Fig. 1.3 Perspectives on the BRI (own elaboration)

is discussing what about which country with which status of development. While the BRI has led to numerous cooperation agreements on different scales, it also faces competition on projects, rejection or even opposition.

This selection of perspectives can be combined with the selection of theoretical approaches in order to discuss the causes and relations of the BRI within a more holistic framework. Nevertheless, the BRI is also embedded in global challenges and influenced by a broad set of conditions.

The Aims of This Book Project

The main objective of this edited volume is to discuss regional consequences of the Chinese project. The book addresses the global phenomenon based on theoretical models and concepts as well as on empirical investigations and case studies. Possible consequences and implications of the New Silk Road will be identified for different regions alongside possible challenges and benefits.

When ideating and structuring the edited book, the following questions were set to be answered:

- What does this development mean for countries and their regions along the Silk Road?
- What aspects have to be considered in regard to this project, especially for politics and the economy? What are the economic prospects and opportunities of this cooperation and connectivity?
- What are the challenges and risks that arise from the New Silk Road initiative?

Within this book, experts from different disciplines such as geography, economics, political science, history, tourism, and environmental science use case studies and analysis to show the effects of BRI at a regional level and discuss current challenges and possible future developments.

Against this background, the book has been divided in four parts. The first part concentrates on how a global project launched by just one country—China—can influence local and regional political, economic and cultural structures in different parts of the world. The discussion is intended to highlight the research and action needs of the Chinese project and explain OBOR's contemporary history and background. Concretely, Peter Frankopan investigates the challenges faced by the BRI in China and elsewhere by outlining the relevance of looking into the origins, context and nature of the BRI. Dominic Sachsenmaier provides insight into China's future global role in relation to the BRI by presenting its domestic and international challenges—apparently very similar to those faced by Western countries. The fact that China's government is uniquely in command domestically and internationally is questioned. Roland Benedikter and Verena Nowotny discuss various pros and cons of the New Silk Road and through reviewing many current actions and projects that fall within the scope of the BRI, they try to understand and explain the Chinese logic.

The second part of the book explores the global phenomenon from different regional views, which are very diverse in their cultural, political, economic, religious and demographic characteristics. This diversity is the reason why the perspectives and consequently the expectations and doubts regarding the New Silk Road differ. In this section, different perspectives will be presented in order to illustrate the complexity of the project. The first four chapters focus on regional issues. Stephan Barisitz addresses the risks and opportunities for the European region within the BRI framework with respect to exposition to debt distress and a danger of fuelling corruption as well as the opportunity for south-eastern countries to capitalize their peripheral position in Europe. Moreover, Maksim Vilisov reflects on the implementation of the BRI in Eurasian countries with opposing interests by analysing the challenges faced by authorities at national and regional level. In his contribution, Matthias Schmidt addresses the hopes and fears raised by the BRI in Central Asia and investigates new dimensions of external influences. Anna Scuttari outlines theoretical concepts coming from the mobility theories in regard to the BRI and sets a research agenda. The following chapter of Matteo Bressan provides insight into the impact of the New Silk Road on the Mediterranean and Italy—the only G7 country to sign a memorandum of understanding on cooperation within the BRI framework.

The third part of the book presents different viewpoints on the political, socio-economic, cultural and ecological implications of the New Silk Road project. Consequences and opportunities for cooperation and the impact of digitisation on the BRI will be discussed, with particular attention paid to its ecological implications. The paradigm of sustainable development has become an important goal in the twenty-first century, especially in Western societies. The aim is to treat the economy, society and ecology equally and thereby promote a development that serves the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The extent to which the New Silk Road plays a role within this context shall also be illustrated in this chapter.

The next three chapters focus on the environmental and political impacts of the BRI. Fernando Ascensão outlines the infrastructure development in Africa within the BRI as a threat to biodiversity and the economy while simultaneously being a

great opportunity for broadening education to a greater population and increasing food production. Run Wang and Run Liu analyse the role of China in water issues, especially related to international rivers, underscoring the relevance of an active and cooperative leadership for China in resolving disputes. Furthermore, Sebastian Purwins provides insight into the specific case of Ghana within the Bauxite for Infrastructure Deal and related ecological and economic risks. Kerry Brown and Anna Burjanadze reflect on China's push for digitalisation, discussing the reasons behind it and the compatibility between a digitally undeveloped Europe and a digitally developed China. A cultural perspective is addressed by Ma Li, with respect to the role of music and music making as a means for intercultural cooperation and cultural exchange. This is followed by a chapter by Wei Manske-Wang, who gives advice to German SMEs on how to understand and participate in a changing global economy scenario and within the BRI framework, which sees China as a global leader.

The final section highlights the tourism perspectives of the Silk Road project, as tourism has established itself as an important economic sector in many regions along the historic Silk Road. Tourism has the potential to promote regional development and can contribute to the prosperity of a region. Therefore, this part of the book deals with the historical but above all with the New Silk Road in relation to tourism development. Alla Peresolova reflects on the history and recent developments of the Silk Road tourism concept, arguing that there is a need for reliable research and data on this subject. The subsequent paper by Hannes Thees and Arne Schuhbert discusses factors of cross border tourism in the Southern Caucasus. Shiheng Zeng, Qiuju Luo, Xiangru Qin, and Xiaoqing Li address aspects of the growth of Chinese outbound tourism, such as behaviour and preferences. The potential spill over effects of the BRI on the tourism market in Australia are then addressed by Xiumei Guo, Michael Volgger, Songshan Huang and Li Xu with respect to the geographical proximity of Australia to southeast Asian BRI countries. In their contribution, Jana Kučerová, Tomáš Gajdošík, and Andrea Orelová address the relations between Slovakia and China on tourism benefits and risks after sanctions against Russia and within the "16+1" initiative framework.

The New Silk Road—A Strategic Leadership Perspective?

Strategy means, for example, to adapt Moltke's further advancement of the originally leading idea accordingly to the constantly changing conditions (Moltke 1890). The Silk Road can be a case study showing the basic features of strategic thinking and acting. The guiding idea of the Belt and Road Initiative has to do with the claim to leadership, the desire to show global presence, to increase influence at the global level, to expand the scope of validity, or to internationalize the sphere of interest. The central element of a strategy is the preservation of freedom of action and the creation of space for autonomous, regional and international development strategies. This can go hand in hand with the creation of technological standards in a large number of sectors and industries. Ideally, one of the central tasks of the major political contexts of the

USA or Europe, in the sense of global responsibility, is to enable similar leadership and strategic competence within the framework of democratic-political, economic, social and military perspectives. Furthermore, leadership consists of dealing with contradictory times and the New Silk Road offers enough opportunities to deal with them strategically.

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