

Geopolitical Consequences of the 21st Century New Maritime Silk Road for Southeast Asian Countries

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Abstract

One of the major elements of the One Belt, One Road initiative launched by China in 2013 is the concept of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The author aims to give a summary of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, and the Chinese intentions in general, then to present in detail the participation of the Southeast Asian countries in the project, and the geopolitical consequences of this cooperation for the region. Of all the ASEAN countries, Indonesia showed the greatest enthusiasm towards the Chinese plans, but Malaysia, Myanmar and the Philippines have aspired to join the Chinese-led project as well. According to my conclusion, the Maritime Silk Road has great significance in a geopolitical sense, because it has become the decisive element of Chinese foreign policy. In the case of ASEAN countries, it especially has a greater strategic goal: reinforcing China's influence in the region in the field of both economy and politics enjoys priority, due to the rivalry between China and the United States.

Keywords: *China, Southeast Asia, One Belt One Road, New Maritime Silk Road, geopolitics*

1. Introduction

One of the major elements of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative launched by China in 2013 is the concept of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The aim of this megaproject is to revolutionize deep-sea trade from Southeast Asia through Africa to Europe, and put the participating countries on the track of economic development with the help of the infrastructural developments along the coastline.

Of the ASEAN countries, Indonesia showed the greatest enthusiasm towards the Chinese plans, since modelling the maritime infrastructure of the island state is one of the most important political goals of President Joko Widodo. (Duquennoy and Zielonka, 2015). Besides, Malaysia, Myanmar and the Philippines – after the inauguration of President Rodrigo Duterte in June 2016 – have aspired to join the Chinese-led project as well. Actually, all the Southeast Asian countries having a seacoast more or less intend to participate in its realization.¹ Undoubtedly, these states can benefit much from the success of the OBOR in economic terms. At the same time, it is also obvious that the Maritime Silk Road is also significant in a geopolitical sense because it has become the decisive element of Chinese foreign policy; furthermore in the case of ASEAN countries, it has a greater strategic goal: reinforcing China's influence in the region enjoys priority in the field of both economy and politics, due to the rivalry between China and the United States.

According to my hypothesis, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road helps China make the ASEAN countries dependent with economic tools, and if it succeeds, it can convert this dependency into geopolitical

benefits. Despite the support of the United States, the Southeast Asian countries are compelled to cooperate with China in economic terms; however, in this way they become dependent upon Beijing. Consequently, the influence of the USA is expected to decrease, and the region is forced to adapt to the Chinese policy more than before.

In this paper, I first outline the main characteristics of the One Belt, One Road project, and then I continue with the description of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. I intend to thoroughly analyse the attitude of the Southeast Asian countries towards the Chinese ideas, mainly in strategic, political and economic aspects. The presentation of the geopolitical consequences necessitates the introduction of the South China Sea dispute and the China-US rivalry since the relationship system of the Southeast Asian states could not be interpreted without this background. In the concluding part, I attempt to verify my hypothesis and summarise the conclusions at the same time.

My paper basically focuses on the Maritime Silk Road and its geopolitical effects exerted on the Southeast Asian region; therefore, this study cannot undertake to exhaustively analyse the complex relations of China, Southeast Asia and the United States, and present the South China Sea conflict.

2. The One Road, One Belt Initiative

In the autumn of 2013, China furnished another proof of its intensifying global role, when it launched the One Road, One Belt initiative, with an aim as ambitious as to revive the traditions of the old Silk Road. China's attachment to the past and the remembrance of ancient times resonates throughout the OBOR scheme. In geographical terms, one can talk about two main routes: the one connected China and the Korean Peninsula, and the other crossed the South Chinese Sea along the shores of South and

Southeast Asia as far as the Persian Gulf. Maritime routes were already used several thousand years ago, well before the continental routes evolved. In China, greater attention has been paid to sea trade since the Han dynasty (209 BC – AD 8), and since the 7th century, when the role of the Arabs intensified, maritime routes were preferred for security and financial reasons (Iftikhar and Abbasi 2016). During the 15th century, the voyages of Admiral Zheng He symbolised China as the maritime great power; Chinese sailors got to the coast of Africa, promoting the extension of political-economic relationships. Regarding their significance, these enterprises may be considered as the precursors of today's concepts.

Beijing committed itself to build and upgrade transport networks following the traces of the one-time caravan routes connecting Europe and Asia, and, naturally, to boost the regions concerned economically. Basically, we can talk about a long-term international development scheme managed (funded) by China, which also satisfies the geostrategic goals of Beijing by linking the remote regions with major trade routes.

The One Belt, One Road initiative includes two megaprojects: one of them is the Silk Road Economic Belt, and the other is the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The former links China with Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe on land, while the latter unites the major maritime trade routes of Africa, Europe and Oceania as well as South and Southeast Asia. The two schemes are inseparable, and the aim is their parallel implementation (Scott, 2016). Although the significance of high-speed railways and motorways is unquestionable, maritime transport still plays a primary role regarding the volumes of transport. Therefore, in a global sense, the Maritime Silk Road has an even greater significance than the “economic belt” encompassing continents.

The plan of the Maritime Silk Road became public in early October 2013 in a speech which was delivered in the Indonesian Parliament by

Xi Jinping, the President of China. The head of the Chinese state committed himself to the necessity of building a modern maritime infrastructure and developing transport routes, primarily between China and the ASEAN states (Roell, 2016). Since Southeast Asia had already been considered as the centre of long-distant trade, this region plays an especially important role in the project for China. The venue and time of the announcement was not a coincidence, either. The Chinese government had launched the One Belt, One Road project just a few weeks earlier, of which, in addition to the continental one, the Maritime Silk Road forms an organic part, since the two schemes mutually complete each other.

According to China's National Development and Reform Commission, the One Belt, One Road initiative is in line with the 5 principles of the United Nations: mutual respect, mutual nonaggression, mutual non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence (NDRC, 2015: II. Principles). Consequently, the New Maritime Silk Road – similarly to continental projects – is expected to extend beyond “mere” infrastructural developments funded by China (for example, constructing ports and shipyards). Its real aim is to promote regional collaboration, financial integration, free trade and scientific cooperation.² Naturally, the largest merchant nation of the world did not forget about financial conditions, either. The planned investments will be funded by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Maritime Silk Road Bank. In the case of the former institution, China provided half of its equity of USD 100 billion, and as for the latter one, its entire equity of USD 16 billion was provided by the state. In addition, the Chinese government deposited USD 40 billion for the Silk Road Fund (Foo, 2015).

In the beginning, Beijing considered only the participation of the countries situated along the marine commercial routes between China

and Europe, but the New Silk Road Plan published in 2015 already specified greater ambitions. The action plan would have intended to connect the South American countries into the initiative though the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (Putri, 2017).

For centuries, the original Maritime Silk Road enabled the peaceful interaction between different cultures and civilisations, contributing to the development of long-distance trade as well as ensuring the creation of a new international economic and political system, in which China's leading role was indisputable. The concept of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – building on the successes of the past – is attempting to emphasise the positive effects of globalisation, and argues for mutual benefits, peaceful collaboration and the sustainable development of the maritime world.³

3. Southeast Asia and the New Maritime Silk Road

In recent years, China has tried to do everything it could, to obtain the approval of foreign countries for the implementation of the scheme. In 2014, the Maritime Silk Road, and in 2015, its joint creation, was the central theme of the China-ASEAN Expo (Tiezzi, 2014). The foreign travels of the leaders of the states also fit into this pattern. On the whole, most of the countries concerned have reacted positively to the Chinese initiative. Until today, more than 50 states and organisations, including the European Union and ASEAN, have reassured China of their support. According to the original plans, the main branch of the Maritime Silk Road leaves from Guangdong and then goes along the Asian shores; its main stops are Kuantan, Jakarta, Colombo and Calcutta, and via Mombasa, on the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, it reaches Europe, where the destination is Athens (Duquennoy and Zielonka, 2015). The other branch passes Southeast Asia and then continues toward the Pacific

islands. Naturally, we can hardly speak of concrete routes, because – apart from current investments – the political position of the countries concerned has not been clarified yet.

However, there is one great difference between the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road: the routes outlined by the Maritime Silk Road have been operating with full capacity for a long time, thus developments would limit to the construction of new ports, and would aim at increasing the volume of trade through them. On the continent, roads and railways, at best, exist, but the construction of railway lines is still pending at most places. We should not forget that the continental and maritime components of One Belt, One Road are closely related, during which the priority is the construction of ports, and the construction of railways into the mainland only comes second (van der Putten and Meindjers, 2015: 28).

After China, the second most important region of the Maritime Silk Road is Southeast Asia. The Straits of Malacca and Singapore are of strategic significance, but due to the power of the city-state, Chinese influence may be considered minimal here. That is the reason why China mainly tried to engage Malaysia and Indonesia in the investments. Nevertheless, China also committed itself with Singapore to strengthen the cooperation. In 2016, considerable progress was made in this respect since according to the agreement between the China Construction Bank Corporation and International Enterprise Singapore, 21 billion dollars were allocated to support infrastructure projects (Xinhua, 22 December 2016). At the Belt and Road Forum in 2017, however, the country was only represented by National Development Minister Lawrence Wong, which indicates that the city-state, though aiming at cooperation with China, intends to achieve greater independence against its neighbours, when forming bilateral relations (Chan, 2017).

The Malaysian government also reacted positively to the announcement of the OBOR initiative; however, in the beginning neither the Chinese nor the Malaysians took actual steps for closer cooperation under the project. However, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road was already included in the Joint Communiqué published on the 40th anniversary of the Malaysia-China diplomatic relations in May 2014 (Lockman, 2015).

Later the two governments agreed on the establishment of the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park, as a result of which China will implement infrastructural investments of a value of almost USD 2 billion in the port of Kuantan, located on the eastern shore of Peninsular Malaysia. In 2016, Malaysia and China signed the Malacca Gateway Project, which includes the establishment of a vital deep-water port in the Strait of Malacca. The Malacca industrial park is also one of the main components of the project. Within this framework, the aim is to build 3 reclaimed artificial islands and develop one natural island for touristic purpose except Pulau Melaka, which has to become a maritime activities centre (*FMT*, 11 January 2017). According to some opinions, as in Malaysia the overall infrastructure risk is lower than in the other ASEAN countries the state is far better placed than its neighbours to exploit the opportunities created by the Chinese infrastructure developments (Teo, 2017).⁴ In May 2017, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak also travelled to Beijing, and as a result, China and Malaysia signed memorandums of understanding to the value of more than 7 billion dollars, primarily in the fields of infrastructure developments and agricultural cooperation (Xinhua, 16 May 2017a). Chinese investments also contribute to the development of the Malaysian economy, so Kuala Lumpur is considered one of the key allies of China with respect to the OBOR project.

For China, Indonesia is the most important Southeast Asian state for geostrategic and geo-economic reasons. Besides the Strait of Malacca, both the Lombok Strait and the Sunda Strait allows the largest country in the region to control the strategically important maritime trade routes along which most of the Chinese export-import passes. Therefore, it can be stated that without Indonesia's participation the whole New Maritime Silk Road would fail (Putri, 2017). Fortunately, the Indonesian and the Chinese heads of government soon agreed: according to President Jokowi's concept, Indonesia wishes to become a kind of a "coastal axis" between the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, and Chinese plans are completely adapted to this idea. Although Indonesia is the world's biggest archipelago the infrastructure is far underdeveloped. Presently Indonesia is the biggest economy in the ASEAN and by 2030 is projected to be the 7th biggest economy in the world, hence for China the bilateral relationship is especially important. When in November 2014 President Jokowi announced his ambitions to turn his country into a "global maritime fulcrum" he pledged himself "to improve Indonesia as a trade nation through the construction and upgrading of its maritime infrastructure, including 24 strategic ports and five deep-sea ports" (Duquennoy and Zielonka, 2015). The total estimated cost of the ports to be built between 2015 and 2019 is USD 57 billion and will be placed along strategic maritime highways to boost Indonesia's connectivity, trade opportunities and attractiveness for foreign investments. According to the plans, the most important ports are Kuala Tanjung in North Sumatra and the Port of Bitung in North Sulawesi. China correctly realized that it is enormous business, since Jakarta wants to build these facilities all over the country in the near future, mainly with the help of Chinese companies. At the Belt and Road Forum held in May 2017, the country was represented by President Jokowi in person, and during the

bilateral discussions the parties signed several memorandums of understanding for the deepening of strategic partnership, including a contract concerning the establishment of a corridor ensuring economic connectivity (Xinhua, 16 May 2017b).

The Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte realized that the improvement of the economic relations with China was of strategic importance. After his presidential election victory in May 2016, Duterte started to form his new, admittedly “independent” Philippine foreign policy, which – in contrast with his predecessor, President Benigno Aquino – has totally redefined the country’s foreign and security policy strategy, the most striking aspect of which is its turning away from the United States and the opening toward China. Duterte tries to establish good relations with both the rivalry major powers, and he would not like to relinquish the US investments either, but whereas these have not been able to meet even the infrastructural needs, it is clear that there is a need to look for new partners (Billington, 2016).⁵ China’s positive attitude paved the way for Duterte’s official visit to the country, held between 18 and 21 October. It is no coincidence that he was accompanied in his visit to Beijing by more than 400 businessmen: the improvement of the economic relations was of key importance. Finally, 21 different agreements have been signed in total, worth USD 24 billion, of which USD 15 billion is Chinese investment, together with a credit facility of USD 9 billion. The country would not like to be excluded from China’s 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Project; therefore, most of the investments are infrastructural developments. According to the plans, the reclamation of the Davao coastline and port development project sums up USD 780 million, for the Cebu International and Bulk Terminal Project USD 328 million, for the Manila Harbor Center Reclamation project USD 148 million; moreover, building of highways and railway lines are also part of the concepts (Smith, 2016). Recently, during his

visit to Beijing on 23 January 2017, the Filipino finance minister Carlos Dominguez has signed an agreement of 30 joint projects with China worth USD 3.7 billion (Reuters, 23 January 2017). In May 2017, Rodrigo Duterte also travelled to Beijing in person to make the cooperation between them even closer, following the negotiations with Xi Jinping in October 2016. During the negotiations, the parties signed several economic and energy agreements. Duterte stood up for the increasing of Chinese investments and the infrastructure projects planned in the southern areas of the country, which can also facilitate the settlement of the Moro conflict, allowing for both peaceful development and efficient connection to remote markets through the New Maritime Silk Road (Xinhua, 15 May 2017). Furthermore, if Latin America joins, the Philippines would also become more and more important in strategic terms since it could mean the main link between China and the above-mentioned region.

As for Thailand, the idea of building a canal intersecting the Kra Isthmus already came up in the late 20th century but it could not be realised for economic and political reasons. Singapore opposed the project all the while because the avoidance of the Strait of Malacca would have reduced the traffic of the harbour to a considerable extent (Billington, 2017). These days both the Chinese and the Thai governments are interested in the implementation of the plan, because in an optimal case Thailand may become a new centre for Far Eastern trade. For China, the planned project similar to the Panama Canal would decrease the security risk of navigating through the Strait of Malacca by presenting an alternative route for the Chinese energy import (Wheeler, 2016). Although the launching of the investment has numerous advantages, in spite of the discussions due to mainly cost and environmental concerns no decision has been reached yet. Although Thailand could not be represented at the highest level at the Beijing

Forum in 2017, the Thai delegation including the 5 ministers entirely agreed with the Chinese plans. Thailand would like to connect to the China-Indochina Economic Corridor by building the Eastern Economic Corridor and its ultimate purpose is to ensure the connection of China and Southeast Asia with the help of the OBOR (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand, 16 May 2017).

In order to decrease the dependency on the Strait of Malacca, China is also interested in the cooperation with Myanmar. The parties have agreed upon the construction of a deep-sea port and an industrial park in Kyaukphyu. In consequence of using the deep-water port facilities, and oil and gas pipeline in the city, the direct shipping from China to Kyaukphyu via the Strait of Malacca started bypassing Singapore (Wheeler, 2016). For Myanmar, the infrastructural investments are badly needed, and China can secure those in accordance with its own political and economic interests. In this aspect, Myanmar can be seen as a central and key player for China. After all it is not surprising that the participation of the actual leader of the country, State Counselor of Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi was welcomed by the Chinese leadership at the Multilateral Forum in May 2017. At the Myanmar-China bilateral discussions 5 memorandums of understanding were also signed, which expect the parties to cooperate more closely in the fields of both infrastructure developments as well as agriculture, healthcare and the protection of historic buildings. Concerning the development of Myanmar's economy, Chinese investments play a decisive role, clearly proven by Suu Kyi's visit.⁶

Similarly to other countries in the region, Brunei would not like to miss the Chinese plans, so it has supported the idea of the OBOR since the beginning. With regards to this, in early 2017 a joint venture company formed by China's Guangxi Beibu Gulf Port Group and Brunei's Darussalam Asset took over the operation of Muara Container

Terminal, the largest container terminal in the country (Xinhua, 22 February 2017). At the Belt and Road Forum held in May 2017, the delegation representing the sultanate conducted successful negotiations on further details of deepening the cooperation.

4. The Global Importance of the Maritime Silk Road

As we have seen above, the countries of Southeast Asia positively reacted to the Chinese initiative as they have expected considerable economic benefits from it. For the fulfilment of the strategic purposes related to the OBOR, we should also see the attitude of the states of South Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe actually to the ambitions of Beijing.

In South Asia, the main partners are Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Pakistan. Sri Lanka welcomed the “Colombo Port City” project of USD 1.4 billion two years ago, which would have meant a 20 billion dollars Chinese investment, due to the port in Hambantota and the new district to be constructed around it. However, the country has become indebted (its debt has reached 8 billion dollars), so the new government, which took office in 2015, is not really enthusiastic about the participation in the Chinese project (Moramudali, 2017). During Xi Jinping’s visit in 2014, the Maldives committed itself since a contract on constructing a bridge linking the capital and Hulhule Island was concluded, in addition to developing the airport and the road network.

Pakistan has a central position in China’s One Belt, One Road initiative. Although the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor – concentrating on the development of the road network – may primarily be regarded as an organic part of the Silk Road Economic Belt, it also means an important link with the New Maritime Silk Road. Pursuant to an agreement made last year, China will implement developments of

USD 1.6 billion in the port of Gwadar, partly providing an alternative to the trade routes crossing Southeast Asia. In May 2017 China also assumed to construct an airport in Gwadar (*The Nation*, 15 June 2017).

Initially, China also expected India to take part in the Maritime Silk Road, since Manmohan Singh's government supported the concept from the very start. The new Prime Minister, Narendra Modi – and his stonewalling tactics – however, made it obvious for everyone last summer that India was not enthusiastic about the idea at all. In fact, the Indian government believes that the Chinese expansion violates their own geostrategic interests, because it decreases their influence in the surrounding regions (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives), and it would give China an advantage in the rivalry between the two major powers. India was not represented at the Belt and Road forum in 2017 either and openly opposed the OBOR. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is planned to pass through Kashmir demanded by India but being under Pakistani control; the plan, however, ignores "India's sovereignty and territorial integrity" according to the Modi Government. Besides India supposes that Chinese projects lack in transparency and environmental aspects, and what is more, the long-term operation of the investments completed is not granted either. Due to the Chinese credit, the indebtedness of the countries involved is a severe danger, too, which has been proven by the case of Sri Lanka (Ayres, 2017).

The next strategically significant station of the New Maritime Silk Road is the coast of Africa. Senegal, Tanzania, Djibouti, Gabon, Mozambique and Ghana are all included in the Chinese investment plans. Like other regions, the development of ports, roads and railways are closely connected here as well. China's growing economic presence on the continent may lay the foundation of Africa's long-term development. At the end of 2015, China obtained the 10 billion USD project aiming at the development of the Bagamoyo port in Tanzania,

which is one of the greatest investments on the continent. If the plan succeeds, Bagamoyo will be the largest port in Africa, ensuring connections with several East African countries. In Djibouti, renting a naval base for USD 100 million per annum serves military as well as economic purposes but first and foremost, it is dedicated to guarantee the safety of the Maritime Silk Road. In Mozambique, China has undertaken development projects of a value of USD 1.4 billion, of which the upgrading of the port in Maputo also forms a part. In Ghana, a new port will be built at Atuabo for USD 600 million by Chinese companies. Egypt – due to the significance of the Suez Canal – is also participating in the Maritime Silk Road. The Chinese are primarily interested in upgrading Port Said and increasing the capacity of the canal. Having China as its largest investor, the Suez Canal Development Project was launched in 2014 with the aim of doubling the incomes arising from trade across the sea (Namane, 2017).

The destination of the Silk Road in Europe can be found in the port of Piraeus in Greece. Last summer, the Chinese company Cosco purchased the majority of the shares of the port, and committed itself to significant developments. The total value of the business reached Euro 1.5 billion. Piraeus, however, like Africa, cannot be regarded the end of One Belt, One Road, since its main role is to create a link between the remote parts of the European mainland through the high-speed railways to be built. At the Belt and Road Forum in 2017, the Prime Minister of Greece Alexis Tsipras stated that he intends to establish new maritime trade routes in order to exploit the location of the country, and the New Maritime Silk Road offers excellent opportunities (IBNA, 14 May 2017).

5. Geopolitics and Geostrategy: Southeast Asian Countries and Changing Power Balance of the Asia-Pacific Region

According to the official Chinese position, the sole objective of the New Maritime Silk Road and the entire One Belt, One Road initiative is of economic nature, namely “win-win cooperation”, to ensure common development and prosperity, and furthermore, to promote economic and cultural integration between China and the states involved. In fact, there is much more than that, since there are serious diplomatic, economic and strategic considerations in the background (Yale, 2015).

Indisputably, the development of trade, the reduction of costs, and the assurance of the safety of trade routes are equally important for China as well as its partners. From the viewpoint of internal affairs, the slowdown of Chinese economy and its planned restructuring require the opening of new markets, therefore major foreign investments (such as the construction of ports) are vital for giant Chinese companies. In addition, developing countries may be the newest market outlets of Chinese export (Scott, 2016). Although the “help” from China means several benefits for these countries, Beijing may establish its economic and, where appropriate, political dominance in the region.

To understand China’s real intent, we should take a closer look at the Grand Strategy that includes the main national objectives of the country to be achieved in the international system, i.e. its long-term foreign policy and defence ideas (Chaturvedy, 2017). In a geostrategic sense, the Maritime Silk Road primarily aims to guarantee Beijing’s control over the most important sea trade routes and uninterrupted import of raw materials. In this, the specific ports and straits have particular significance (Morgan, 2015). Therefore, it is essential for China to ensure the control over the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, even if the latter is unlikely to be realised yet. In November

2015, China established its first foreign naval base in Djibouti, which provides great help in the military operations against piracy off the cost of East Africa. Some analysts see chiefly military ambitions in the background of the Maritime Silk Road, which can be best summarised by the “string of pearls” theory (Zhou, 2014). Its main point is that in accordance with China’s strategic interest, China will establish permanent naval bases from the Middle East to China, like a string of pearls. However, the way events are developing currently does not support the relevance of the theory; military considerations do not feature in the Silk Road project, and, for the present, the emphasis is on enhancing economic interests (van der Putten and Meindjers, 2015: 33). The OBOR project fits entirely into the strategic ideas that have been represented by Chinese President Xi Jinping since 2013 and mainly aim to realize the Chinese Dream of achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The Chinese Dream can be seen as achieving the Two Centenaries: the material goal of China becoming a “moderately well-off society” by 2021, and the modernization goal of China becoming a fully developed nation by about 2049, by the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party and the founding of the People’s Republic (Kuhn, 2013).

But the Maritime Silk Road has great significance also in a diplomatic sense. It is not a coincidence that lately it has become the decisive element of Chinese foreign policy. In the 21st Century, Beijing has extended its foreign policy from land-oriented diplomacy to ocean-oriented diplomacy in part to promote maritime relations with its neighbours (Wang, 2016: 151). Southeast Asian countries have been considered as the most important potential partners from the beginning, since the scheme primarily aims at their appeasement, against the recent assertive foreign and defence policy of China. Since obtaining the control of the South China Sea plays a decisive role for China in

economic, political and military terms, the country has taken every effort to realise this recently. In the 2000s, China gave up the former “good neighbour policy”, i.e. the policy aiming at the amiable settlement of territorial disputes and the issue of sea borders, and applied more and more violent methods to detect the possible energy sources and increased its military presence in the South China Sea region instead.⁷ Later the tendency continued, since in the spring of 2015 China started to fill up the reefs and to build airports and other objects in the disputed territories. The main source of the conflict is that owing to the unclear limits of the seas the whole or parts of the Spratly Islands are commanded by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines.⁸ The group of islands consists of 150-180 smaller islands, cliffs and reefs, of which Vietnam occupies 29, the Philippines 8, Malaysia 5, Taiwan 1 and China 7 (Dolven *et al.*, 2015: 16). The Paracel Islands includes nearly 130 islands and reefs, which have been China’s protectorates since 1974, although Vietnam and Taiwan command the territory, too. Besides the obtaining of energy resources, other strategic factors also control the parties, especially the provision of control over marine routes and the rivalry between the USA and China. Annually, goods to the value of over USD 5.3 trillion are transported across the South China Sea on the average, which accounts for 30 percent of global trade (O’Rourke, 2017: 2). Furthermore, 60 percent of China’s oil imports also reach the country along this route (Austin, 2015). In July 2016, the International Court of Justice in Hague passed a judgement in the lawsuit carried on between the Philippines and China about the South China Sea, and the decision obviously favoured Manila. The legal procedure was initiated by the Philippines against China in 2013, saying that Beijing’s excessive demands regarding the South China Sea are not in accordance with international law. Having not accepted the competence of the court since the beginning, China has not participated

in the procedure and keeps stating with reference to historical rights that the region is an inalienable part of the country. ASEAN used to try settling the conflict multilaterally – China would support the bilateral negotiations with the parties involved; however, after the execution of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002, no Code of Conduct having a binding force has been accepted up to present. In the summer of 2017, the opportunity for agreement recurred again, but actually the parties' standpoints did not approach each other. The turn of the Philippines – according to which President Duterte does not wish to enforce the judgement of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the hope of a consent – definitely favours China, but the settlement of the dispute still seems to be very far. Thus, the benevolence of the Southeast Asian countries can only be gained with economic instruments, as the reactions of the parties involved show. The New Maritime Silk Road project offers ideal means for this, and the successful realisation of the project would allow for the establishment of economic dominance.

The increase in Chinese investments and the expansion of commercial relations have already provided a greater geo-economic influence of Beijing within the region in recent years, but the geopolitical consequences cannot necessarily be felt. Obviously, China already hopes for a considerable political profit in return for the infrastructure investments and it shows no inclination to renounce the economic profit. The Southeast Asian countries can find the example of Sri Lanka a real danger: indebtedness and insolvency owing to the credits assumed. Besides, the relationship between China and its partners can be influenced unfavourably by political changes too, since the failure of the currently China-friendly leadership can postpone investments and make the security and political cooperation more difficult. According to certain opinions, China would also like to enforce

its ideological influence in the region entirely (Ebbighausen, 2017), which can lead to further conflicts since the countries committed to democracy and liberal principles would not be easily ready to follow the Chinese expectations.

Naturally, the US's regional role and relationship with China must also be examined within the geopolitical relations of China and Southeast Asia. The Southeast Asian power system emerged after 1945 could be characterised by the political, military and economic dominance of the United States, which, however, has affected the power relations of the region more and more recently owing to the continuous increase in China's power. The United States reacted to this with the "Pivot to Asia", and later the "Rebalancing", the new foreign policy concept announced under the Obama Administration. Organically continuing the former US regional foreign policy from a certain respect, the foreign policy plan announced under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2012 consisted of three main elements: the relocation of 60 percent of the US fleet to the Pacific region by 2020, the consolidation of the regional allies and the increasing of their activity, as well as the establishment of a free trade zone (Trans-Pacific Partnership – TPP) that would have excluded China (Clinton, 2011). This plan would have counterbalanced not only China's increasing power, but it also seemed to be suitable for the USA to maintain its rule-setting role within the region in the future too. The success of the "Pivot to Asia" policy is rather contradictory in the literature.⁹ Serving its own economic interests, the US's policy aiming to counterbalance China was enforced only at the level of rhetoric because of shifting more active participation to its allies. Washington paid less and less attention to the interests of the smaller countries, and at the same time it was also proved that the USA is less and less able to keep pace with China's economic power; therefore, the superpower undoubtedly started to be squeezed out of the region. The

first measures of the Trump Government included the withdrawal from TPP; however, although they seemed to wish to give up the previous Asia policy of the Obama Administration, actually the holding up of China remains a priority. Therefore, in various aspects the Pivot to Asia is expected to continue. At the same time, while the Obama Cabinet reacted to the announcement of the One Belt, One Road initiative negatively, Trump – taking the economic benefits into consideration – shows willingness towards cooperation and would participate in the project under appropriate conditions (*Bloomberg*, 23 June 2017).

As for the South China Sea dispute, the United States does not openly take a stand concerning the territorial disputes, but it fundamentally supports its Southeast Asian allies against China, which means that it prefers a multilateral solution. The maintenance of the Freedom of Navigation is more important than anything else to the US on the South China Sea in geostrategic terms, for the defence of which it has been carrying out aerial patrols over the Chinese artificial islands and has been sending warships to the Freedom of Navigation operations – in accordance with international law. However, the judgement passed by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in July 2016 proved more than ever that the USA cannot and would not like to enforce the international right against China, practically delivering its regional allies to the policy of Beijing.

Besides the United States, one of its main allies and at the same time China's rival, Japan, has a standpoint that cannot be neglected. Similarly to India, Japan did not accept the Chinese plans enthusiastically owing to its geopolitical interests (security of marine communication lines); however, for economic reasons and owing to its changing relations with the USA it shows willingness for a compromise with Beijing. Nevertheless, in the summer of 2017 it established the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) together with India, which

specifies similar objectives like the OBOR and aims to counterbalance the Chinese ambitions (Shepard, 2017).

China's rise and the US's loss of importance implied considerable geopolitical consequences for the Southeast Asian countries. As a result of the changed international balance of power, the Southeast Asian states will try to capitalise this trend and choose the most advantageous relationship with the rivalling Great Powers. Considering the transformation of the strategic environment, in economic terms China is far more important than the USA. This not only means that China can take "revenge" on smaller states, but it could also promise economically desirable opportunities such as the OBOR initiative or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), whose missing would imply severe economic and political risks for the given governments. Therefore, closer cooperation with China is becoming a regional interest more and more, even if that cooperation is a sensitive issue in several countries. Although the Southeast Asian nations need the presence of the USA to counterbalance China more than ever, they are compelled to adapt to Beijing's expectations more and more, whose first step is economic. Undoubtedly, however, the deepening of the economic dependence will bring a point when China can already enforce its geopolitical expectations, first maybe in the settlement of the South China Sea conflict in a form beneficial to it.

6. Conclusion

The One Belt, One Road Initiative, and the New Maritime Silk Road, is considered an exceptional enterprise from several aspects and unprecedented in history. The ambitious plan – providing proof of China's growing global role – mainly focuses on the interests of the world's most populated country, but promises profit to all participants in

the long term. Beijing was right to recognise that in the globalised world only such multilateral solutions are appropriate which allow cooperation and cultural interaction between distant regions.

On the other hand, we have to consider that the Maritime Silk Road has great significance in a geopolitical sense, especially for Southeast Asia, because it serves as an important element of the Chinese geostrategy and diplomacy. In the region, the greater strategic aim is to cooperate closely with the ASEAN states, hereby reinforcing China's influence in the region in the sphere of both politics and economy and to steal a march on the US in the global rivalry.

In this paper, I demonstrated that China intends to make the Southeast Asian states dependent with economic tools, with the New Maritime Silk Road, and in the case of successful realisation, it can use this for other geopolitical purposes in the future too. At present, it has a fair chance of success since the ASEAN countries reacted to the Chinese initiative positively and for the sake of economic favours they seem to be ready to assume some kind of dependence on China. In a global sense, the New Maritime Silk Road enjoys the necessary support since the countries of Africa and Europe also stand by it.

It is clear that the changed power balance has a significant role in the process. Diminishing manoeuvring room of the US forces the countries of the region to cooperate with China, and the US has no answer to the economic dominance of Beijing. The present policy of the Philippines illustrates this situation very well. The great question is how the Trump Government will be able to maintain, or even consolidate the US's superpower position in the region, otherwise – thanks to the New Maritime Silk Road – the Chinese economic dominance will soon be followed by the extension of the geopolitical influence and the former tributary system will be restored.

Notes

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- 1. In this respect, Vietnam is an exception since this country only participates in the development of mainland communication lines but not in the Maritime Silk Road project (Xinhua, 23 May 2017). Laos and Cambodia as mainland nations can only play an active role in the realisation of the One Belt, One Road. Of course, Maritime Silk Road is expected to bring positive results indirectly.
- 2. As Professor Wang YWei in his recent book *The Belt and Road Initiative: What will China offer the world in its rise*, phrased China “seeks to avoid the traditional risks of globalization, and create a new type of marine civilization characterized by the integration of man and the ocean, harmonious co-existence, and sustainable development” (Wang, 2016, 16).
- 3. According to Professor Yang Baoyun at the University of Beijing, “just like the historical route hundreds of years ago, the new Maritime Silk Road will bring tangible benefits to neighbours along the route, and will be a new driving force for the prosperity of the entire East Asian region.” (*China Daily*, 4 October 2013).

4. Partly contrary to this, in April 2017 five major global shipping firms left Port Klang and transferred their activity to Singapore. (*OBOR Watch*, 14 September 2017)
5. Of course, Duterte understands that at the moment the US is the third largest trade partner of the Philippines after Japan and China, as well as the second largest investor and the main development subsidy-lender.
6. However, Myanmar is not only interested in the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road project but it is also an active participant of the Silk Road Economic Belt since it takes part at the Asian Expressway and the Rail Tracks and is a member of the Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BICM), which are directly connected to the OBOR (Khin, 2017)
7. With no accurate data available, we can only rely on estimations stating that approx. 28 billion barrels of crude oil and 25 trillion cubic metres of gas can be found at the bottom of the sea (Perlez, 2012).
8. Referring to historical traditions, China supposes – but does not specify precisely – that approx. 90% of the South China Sea region belongs to the country according to the 9-dash line of 1953, while, mainly for economic reasons (oil and gas), the Southeast Asian countries insist on their demand too. The following volume of essays offers an excellent summary of the South China Sea dispute: Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Robert (2015), *The South China Sea maritime dispute*, Routledge, Abingdon. About China's standpoint, see: Shicun Wu (2013), *Solving disputes for regional cooperation and development in the South China Sea: A Chinese perspective*, Woodhead Publishing, Cambridge.
9. In a military sense it should be highlighted that 60% of the fleet will have been commanded into the region by 2020, thanks to the fiscal restrictions. (We should not forget either that the 60% proportion already refers to a fleet of a reduced size; therefore, no US military presence larger than the current one should be expected in presence.) For more details see: Robert

S. Ross (2012), “The problem with the Pivot: Obama’s new Asia policy is unnecessary and counterproductive”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 6. pp. 70-82; and Hal Brands (2017), “Barack Obama and the dilemmas of American grand strategy”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 39, Issue 4, Winter 2016, pp. 101-125.

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