

COMMENTS BY**Jean Francois Di Meglio**

(Président of Asia Centre, Paris)

**THE ECONOMIC, STRATEGIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL
CONSEQUENCES OF THE NEW SILK ROAD**

Silk gave its name to exchanges more than two thousand years ago. To speak of Silk Road is to evoke a number of phenomena, which shaped Central Asia and trade exchanges between East and West under impulsion of commerce. Without the re-discovery of the kingdoms of Central Asia, particularly by the archaeologists and adventurers of the French School of Far-East as well as the Anglo-Saxons like Alexandra David-Neel, the term might have remained obscured.

Although gold, silver and precious stones were exchanged along this Silk Road, the route also facilitated political and cultural interaction between China and the West. For instance:

- The dissemination of various religions like Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Manicheism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
- The emergence of the splendid civilizations of China, India, Greece, Persia and Rome that prospered along this famous trade route.
- Various forms of art, architecture, music and cultures exchanged through the Silk Road: Sogdiana Region (present-day Central Asia) conquered by Alexander the Great, Gandhara art, which had to practically wait for the Guimet Museum, then Malraux and his work *Voices of Silence* to be re-discovered in France.
- The presence of Jewish merchants precipitated the development of Yiddish as a koine of the Central European Jewish Community.
- The invention of different forms of taxation, which include the taxes levied on trade between relay cities or within these urban communities by the Mongols, making possible the financing of their empire despite the vastness (and the discontinuity) of the territory.

By looking back at history and not ignoring the extent to which the past lessons inspire the present-day Chinese strategic approach, as worthy heirs of the Marxist philosophical and political concepts of historical cycles, naturally many of the echoes of the past will be found in the present initiatives.

In 2013, China under the leadership of Xi Jinping, launched the project 'One Belt, One Road' that aimed at connecting the three continents – Asia, Europe and Africa through land and sea. The two initiatives of the project are the Silk Road Economic Belt and New Maritime Silk Road. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of its extended route. China-UK route via Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Slovakia, Germany, Belgium and France is another important trade passage of freight train which began its service from January 2017. There is a revival of the ancient Silk Road trading routes with the West. This initiative is greeted by European and Chinese traders. However, the European governments are cautious about its future implications. For Britain, the train route is a golden opportunity to strengthen trade links with the rest of the world after Brix.

What can we say of it today? How will it be tomorrow?

- Infrastructures have already taken shape in the form of a railway links between China and Kyrgyzstan, Moscow and Kazan, and China and Kazakhstan. Also, port facilities have sprung up between Khorgos and Gwadar to transport raw materials from Central Asia.
- Passages were opened, circumventing or duplicating the strategic Malacca straits: Burmese gas pipeline, railway towards Tehran from China, convoys to Duisburg and even France from Western China.
- A Silk Road Fund, established by Chinese government, have allocated around \$40bn for these projects. Apart from this, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) set up on the initiative of China for infrastructure development in Asia has already approved \$1.7bn in loans to invest in nine major OBOR projects in 2016.

However, the huge scale of the task and the staggering amounts mentioned for the completion of all these projects (hundreds of billions of dollars according to the perimeters defined) give rise to doubts about the

possibility of their rapid implementation.

Likewise, the Chinese intentions may focus on the economic, as well as, geostrategic interests:

- A Pacific China (in all the meanings of the term) that would oppose the perspective of a continental and Eurasian China, reconstituting, from the historical point of view of direction, the flows from Europe to Asia;
- To a 'great game' in which the great powers of 19th century (mainly Russia and Britain) with implied military power confronted each other and succeed a Chinese commercial and financial strategy aimed at a subtle game of influence (without a too much comprising or costly diplomatic engagement) on the part of China;
- Possibility of pouring excess industrial capacity created in China which was previously more oriented towards internal development, but slowing down presently;
- Possibility of getting Chinese financing followed up by contributions from the target countries; and
- Future perspective, in the Mongol manner, of ensuring fiscal revenues or royalties from the completed infrastructures.

The non-Chinese perceptions come up against the stumbling block of long term thinking and look over the Chinese capacity of projecting over many dozens of years and even centuries.

More precisely, the perspectives and analyses play on unequal terms. Everything is happening as if, looking at the history of the last two millenniums, China was already situating itself in the next century or next millennium, while its interlocutors have in view the years in power of its leaders, or, at best, the perspective of the longevity of their various raw materials. But it is a question of an altogether different kind, ranging from 'soft power' (including cultural influences, because the Chinese language has begun to be promoted alongside English or Russian as a preferred foreign language in some countries along the route) to the influence of currency. Even regionalization with a dominant China, which, at the moment, refuses to see itself as a world power.