

UDK 355/359

CODEN SMOOAM

ISSN

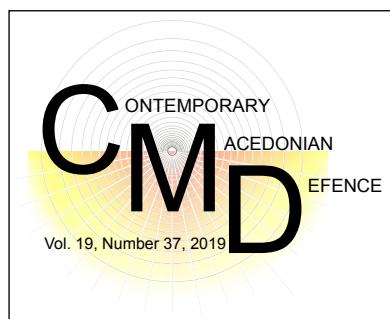
1409-8199

МЕЃУНАРОДНО НАУЧНО СПИСАНИЕ

СОВРЕМЕНА МАКЕДОНСКА ОДБРАНА



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA



37

VOL. XIX
SKOPJE
DECEMBER 2019

СОВРЕМЕНА МАКЕДОНСКА ОДБРАНА	Год.	Број	Стр.	Скопје
CONTEMPORARY MACEDONIAN DEFENCE	19	37	1-127	2019
	Vol.	No	pp	Skopje



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

СОВРЕМЕНА МАКЕДОНСКА ОДБРАНА **CONTEMPORARY MACEDONIAN DEFENCE**

ISSN 1409-8199
e-ISSN 1857-887X

Година 19, бр. 37, декември 2019 / Vol. 19, No. 37, December 2019

Skopje
December 2019



СОВРЕМЕНА МАКЕДОНСКА ОДБРАНА

Издавач:

МИНИСТЕРСТВО ЗА ОДБРАНА НА РЕПУБЛИКА СЕВЕРНА МАКЕДОНИЈА

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WEB на Министерството за одбрана:

<http://www.morm.gov.mk/sovremena-makedonska-odbrana/>

Списанието излегува два пати годишно.

ISSN 1409-8199

Скопје, декември 2019 година

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CONTEMPORARY MACEDONIAN DEFENCE

Publisher:

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE OF THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Ministry of Defence

„CONTEMPORARY MACEDONIAN DEFENCE“

„Orce Nikolov“ 116 1000 Skopje

Tel.: 02 3128 276, 02 3113 527

Internet address:

WEB of the Ministry of Defence:

www.morm.gov.mk/contemporary-macedonian-defence/

The magazine is published twice a year

ISSN 1409-8199

Skopje, December 2019

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CONTEMPORARY MACEDONIAN DEFENCE

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC JOURNAL OF
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ONE BELT ONE ROAD – HOW DOES IT AFFECT THE EURASIAN ECONOMIC AND SECURITY ISSUE

Aleksandar PETROVSKI¹

Nenad TANESKI²

Abstract: *China has long posited that common security can be improved through economic development and cooperation. Infrastructure, in turn, is one of the essential foundations of economic development and cooperation—no economically prosperous state has been able to progress without it. As the Chinese people say ‘if you want to be rich, first build a road’. China’s “One Belt, One Road” project is comprised of two components: the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)—that were announced separately in 2013. Each component has the potential to transform the global geopolitical landscape through the construction of interrelated infrastructure projects including ports, highways, railways and pipelines.*

Large parts of Asia have a critical lack of basic infrastructure such as roads, rail tracks, bridges, airports and power grids, which current national and multilateral developmental institutions are unable to address. The MSRI is a geopolitical project that involves a number of actors (governments, private companies and Chinese state-owned enterprises) at a number of geographic scales (cities, provinces, states and continents). It is an ambitious multi-decade vision to physically, digitally and culturally connect Eurasia, pursue closer Eurasian economic cooperation and mitigate poverty. This grand vision has become the pillar of President Xi Jinping administration’s foreign policy.

The EU and China both have an interest in promoting greater connectivity and stability in Eurasia. In China’s case, this is largely achieved through its visionary Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). So far, the EU has given the initiative a welcome and is still thoughtful how to engage it strategically. This is partly because the BRI remains operationally uncoordinated, and the EU remains concerned about commercial feasibility, transparency, sustainability and environmental issues.

Moreover, the differences in needs, interests and strategic planning among EU member states in relation to China slow down their common response. While the EU’s cautious approach could certainly lead to a more well-informed and gauged response, an overly long delay may come at the risk of the EU being left behind as China takes a stronger lead in shaping the Eurasian security.

Key words: *China, economy, EU, security, belt, road.*

Introduction

Connectivity, including infrastructure, projects have long been recognized as an integral element of global political and economic change, as well as a reflection of new political and

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economic realities. Many have started to consider the political and economic implications of the MSRI and SREB for China's economy, provinces and cities and multinational corporations (MNCs), the geo-political and geo-economics order in the Asia-Pacific Region, Central Asia, South Asia, global power structures, and patterns of investment, trade and people-to-people exchange regionally and globally.

However, the EU first requires a more comprehensive understanding of the Belt's strategic implications in their totality - and how they might relate to its own security and foreign policy objectives. There exists a vast vacuum of critical infrastructure in large parts of Eurasia, which many relevant states are not able to fill, even with the aid of existing multilateral development funds. The Belt intends to fill much of this vacuum, and while the political endurance of the initiative and the efficacy of its implementation remains to be seen, it has been received with enthusiasm throughout many parts of Eurasia. It has the potential to become a leading model of bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation in Eurasia.

But what is clear is that the Belt is driven by a wide range of motivations, including enhancing China's domestic economic security by increasing its global economic and, particularly, financial clout, mitigating security threats, and garnering strategic space. Political tensions and the Silk Road economic belt disorder within Eurasian states may impact the Belt, but the Belt itself also interacts mutually with these dynamics. For now Belt does not structurally conflict with Russian security or Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) objectives, whether nationally or in Central Asia.

EU economic and security interests

First of all, we know that Silk Road Economic Belt touches a number of EU foreign and security priorities, including global governance, state-societal resilience and cooperation among regional orders. Second, it is largely in line with the EU interests in Central and South Asia, although the implications for the EU normative and value-based agenda remain in question. Third, it has at this stage, limited prospects as a platform for EU-China hard security cooperation, but it does offer greater cooperation potential in relation to human security.

In coordination with the EU, it should strategically utilize opportunities to engage China and other relevant actors, and calibrate the Belt to contribute towards a 'rules-based global order' in line with its own interests and values. Then, it should think about forging closer strategic relationships with key stakeholders such as China, India and Russia in the interest of a more stable Eurasia, with the Belt as one possible impetus for this. Furthermore, it should think and plan more strategically about its own vision for a more secure Eurasia, and develop a more coherent position on Eurasian integration visions such as the Belt. And it will need to allocate greater institutional and human capital to continuously study and monitor the Belt and its political, economic and security implications.³

³ THE SILK ROAD ECONOMIC BELT Considering security implications and EU-China cooperation prospects, SIPRI 2018



Picture 1. China project SREB and MSRI

The EU 2016 Global Strategy states that the EU will ‘pursue a coherent approach to China’s connectivity drives westwards’⁴. Overall, there needs to be greater integration of development as a core tenet of security, inclusion and stability within the EU’s regional engagement of South East Asian and IOR states. While this need not obviate the EU’s pursuit of democratic and human rights ideals, a failure to take better account of local demands and need for growth will leave the EU marginalized.

Greater EU attention to maritime security in the SCS and especially the IOR is firmly recommended as its relevance to economic and security interests cannot be overstated. In the SCS, China may through the Road gain the leverage to achieve its maritime claims over time, thereby possibly impacting the security of EU SLOCs. This is a red line and the EU is advised to engage with China, ASEAN and other stakeholders to stress its concerns. In the IOR, the EU should utilize the emerging interplay and merger of maritime and terrestrial security spaces to its economic, diplomatic and security advantage.

The belt should contribute to a “global rule based on rules” in accordance with its own interests and values. Next, it should consider establishing closer strategic relationships with key stakeholders such as China, India and Russia in the interest of a more stable Eurasia, with the Belt as a possible impetus. In turn, it needs to think and plan strategically for its vision of a safer Eurasia and to develop a more coherent position on Eurasian integration visions such as the Belt. Greater institutional and human capital will need to be allocated for the continuous study and monitoring of the belt and its political, economic and security implications.

Eurasia’s geopolitical and geo-economics landscapes are in rapid transition. While actors such as China and Russia are initiating and stimulating their own regional integration efforts such as the Belt and the EEU, the EU is facing its own internal integration challenges and is also preoccupied with crises in its immediate neighborhood.

⁴ European Union, ‘Shared vision, common action: a stronger Europe’, June 2016.

While this is underlined in the 2016 Global Strategy, a vision for Eurasia specifically is not delineated—a direct connection is made between the EU’s prosperity and security and Asian security. It is pivotal that the EU goes beyond the 2016 Global Strategy and more clearly delineates its vision for a more stable and secure Eurasia. This would need to incorporate its own strategic role in Eurasia, its views on Asian security architecture and its vision for governance vis-à-vis other important stakeholders, including not only the USA and China, but also India and Russia, middle powers, and local actors.⁵ China’s large-scale economic engagement in so many breakable, developing and even developed nations across Eurasia has important implications for global governance. Economic implications of the BRI are perhaps better understood, and the EU has already engaged with China through the EU–China Connectivity Platform on investment cooperation, which also provides the future possibility of joint investment in third countries. Development means the greatest security and master key to regional security issues as one of the keys for the success of these concepts. Analysts are providing greater security and stability in Eurasia’s volatile regions, through the stimulation of economic growth and poverty reduction brought about by investment, trade and infrastructure provision. This means that it will need hard and soft infrastructure investment which will increase the economic and geostrategic stability in EU and Asia.

The various EU interests in the One Belt and One Road Initiative

So far, the EU has given the initiative a lukewarm welcome and is still pondering how to engage it strategically. This is partly because the BRI remains operationally uncoordinated, and the EU remains concerned about commercial feasibility, transparency, sustainability and environmental issues.

But differences in needs, interests and strategic planning among EU member states in relation to China also hamper a common response. While the EU’s cautious approach could certainly lead to a more well-informed and gauged response, an overly long delay may come at the risk of the EU being left behind as China takes a stronger lead in shaping the Eurasian landscape.⁶

The BRI is China’s vision for comprehensive connectivity and economic cooperation, mostly focused on, but not limited to, the whole of Eurasia. The initiative has generated diverse degrees of interest throughout the EU. Member states in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as Greece, Portugal and Spain have mostly reacted enthusiastically to it. Given their own poor economies, these states have welcomed Chinese investment in large infrastructure projects, and they see Chinese investment as a way

⁵ Reiterer, M., ‘Asia as part of the EU’s global security strategy: reflections on a more strategic approach’, LSE IDEAS, Dahrendorf Forum Special Report, Apr. 2016.

⁶ Richard Ghiasy and Jiayi Zhouhe EU: Pondering strategic engagement with China’s Belt and Road Initiative, SIPRI, May 2017.

to boost their local economies and employment.

In Italy, commercial prospects have led local business communities to take active steps towards engaging with the BRI, and at the national level the Italian Government itself is seemingly becoming more interested. Ahead of the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing on 14–15 May 2017, Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni said that Italy is ‘enormously interested’ in the BRI.

France’s policy community interest in the BRI seems to have peaked already, although the incoming Macron administration could revisit the initiative. Many regional and municipal governments in Germany have indicated a strong desire to engage with China on the BRI, but at the national level the response has been more restrained. The German and Dutch Governments do not want to engage too closely without a better understanding of the BRI’s long-term strategic implications, and do not want to sideline the EU in the process. Nordic governments have so far not indicated much interest in the BRI, although interest in Denmark is starting to pick up.

At the supranational level, the EU has established together with China, the EU-China Connectivity Platform, through which the two have agreed to cooperate on a number of investment projects within the EU and China. This has been the EU’s most progressive response to the initiative. But beyond this limited economic cooperation, the EU has not so far engaged with China’s BRI on a more strategic level, despite it having strategic implications for the EU’s political, economic and security interests abroad.

Both China and the EU see economic development as a pillar of stability, but their development support approaches differ. China has tended to emphasize physical infrastructure and no-strings-attached investment, while the EU has tended to promote institutional reform, good governance and rule of law as pre-conditions for inclusive economic growth. Both approaches are necessary but neither are alone sufficient to achieve sustainable development. And while these different approaches in theory are complementary, the EU emphasizes normative values such as human rights, democracy and civil society in a way that makes it more difficult for the two sides to engage in cooperation.

As the BRI unfolds over the next few years and decades, the EU needs to be aware that China’s BRI efforts and stepped-up presence in Eurasia will probably be a significant shaper of future regional governance in economic, financial, political and even security terms. As China’s overseas investments and economic footprint grows, so will its political and security presence. The Chinese naval base in Djibouti is one such example of how China’s overseas interests have evolved in recent years.

Geostrategic changes and blending security spaces

The EU is a stakeholder in Asia’s security and any major security incident in Asia would have serious implications for the EU’s economic and security interests.

More recently, the ASEAN and the EU have been facing common security challenges: from the increased investment in maritime connectivity to boosting regional trade with Asian countries.⁷

Therefore, the EU has been actively participating in the ARF on maritime security cooperation, which includes the improvement of maritime awareness, surveillance and information sharing, maintenance of peace and good order at sea, and the development of environmentally friendly ports.⁸

From 2018 until 2020, the EU will co-chair the ARF's Inter-sectional Meeting on Maritime Security with Australia and Viet Nam, which will allow the EU to play a role as maritime security coordinator. Several ASEAN participants noted that they intend to pursue a process similar to the EUMSS as a medium to long-term goal.⁹

Such official activities reveal that while Asia-Pacific maritime security issues have not traditionally penetrated far into EU policies, the SCS is one of the few exceptions. This is understandable given the scale of EU member state trade traversing these waterways.¹⁰

The approach of celebratory economic initiatives and tools to geostrategic aims, which has been labeled as geo-economics, is hardly the sole preserve of China. Part of the reason why some have dubbed these activities neo-colonialist or mercantilist is that they smack of the tactics used by past empires. China's own popular series from over a decade ago, (*The rise of great powers*), presaged this fascination with how countries emerge as global powers.¹¹

China's geopolitical and military aspirations are understandable, as explained in the first part, particularly given the growth of its markets and interests throughout the SCS and the IOR.

However, when these aims start to impinge on the sovereignty and sustainability of local stakeholders, and to conflict with core EU interests in maintaining flows of information, products and resources throughout these regions, there needs to be more than simply rhetoric in response. The Road, as with the Belt, advances through trial and error. As such, China may be receptive to revising those objectives that meet its core interests, and then at least some existing approaches if a combination of the right incentives and disincentives can be applied. One such example is the first Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network Forum, which was held in November 2017 and attended

⁷ European Commission, Joint Staff Working Document: Second report on the implementation of the EU

Maritime Security Strategy Action Plan, Brussels, SWD (2017) 238 Final, 14 June 2017.

⁸ Gatpolintan, L., 'ASEAN, EU to intensify maritime cooperation', Philippine News Agency, 7 Oct. 2017

⁹ European Commission.

¹⁰ Germany, \$215 billion; the UK, \$124 billion; France, \$83.5 billion; and Italy, \$70.5 billion in 2016. Center for Strategic and International Studies, 'How much trade transits the South China Sea?', ChinaPower, n.d

¹¹ [The rise of great powers], CNTV, Nov. 2006

by more than 200 NGO delegates from over 50 countries. Such a forum would have been unimaginable in the first three years of the BRI, which shows that with the right amount of practical initiatives and through dialogue, notable changes can be achieved.¹²

The EU Global Strategy states that the EU is seeking to serve as a credible political and security player in the region.¹³ From the Strategy, it is evident that South East Asia, and in particular the freedom of navigation and the SLOCs through the SCS, maintain a stronger hold on European consciousness than the Indian Ocean and its SLOCs. This is perhaps understandable because ASEAN and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) are more akin to the EU framework, whereas South Asia lacks a cohesive grouping even under the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Moreover, there have been frequent tensions in the SCS in recent years.

When observing the EU engagement with these two regions, its placement of China at the head of the chapter on Asia in the Global Strategy, combined with greater granularity on the EU-China Connectivity Platform, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and the ASEAN–EU frameworks, indicate where EU priorities lie. Nonetheless, the SCS and the IOR are interconnected maritime domains, and have a strong shared impact on Europe's intertwined economic and security interests. Certainly, the EU needs to start paying closer attention to maritime security and connectivity developments in the IOR. Indeed, EU security interests do not always coincide with those of the United States, and the EU may benefit from the opening up of the IOR maritime space and the merging with the Eurasian terrestrial security space. This may prove valuable to the EU in that it may improve the connectivity of and stimulate the development in Central Asia and South Asia. Central Asia's pathway to the Indian Ocean will mostly depend on the stability in Iran and Pakistan through China. If successful, however, the massive landlocked region of Central Asia will finally be able to connect more easily with the world's oceans and mitigate its dependence on Russian transit routes and Russian economy. South Asian intra- and extra-regional connectivity, currently in a dismal state, may also improve and expand markets that the EU could tap. From an economic perspective, the Road could thus be a positive impetus for growth.

Following the official renaming by the US Department of Defense of US Pacific Command as US Indo-Pacific Command on 30 May 2018,¹⁴ the uncertainty with which the EU has approached the concept of an Indo-Pacific will likely, of necessity, shift to a clearer stance. As it does so, even if only conceptually at this stage, it will be important for the EU to better articulate its position on how the BRI sits within this concept. This will require a country-by-country mapping and analysis of how projects are unfolding.

¹² Gon Jie, '1st Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network forum kicks off', China Daily, 21 Nov. 2017.

¹³ European Union External Action Service (EEAS), Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe, A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (EEAS: Brussels, June 2016).

¹⁴ Copp, T., 'INDOPACOM, it is: US Pacific Command gets renamed', Military Times, 31 May 2018

Conclusion

Besides the capital necessary to get its ambitious programs off the ground, there are two greater problems with OBOR. The first is that even if China and the various countries it has identified as its Silk Road partners come up with the money, OBOR does not have a centralized organizing body or a strategic goal it is meant to accomplish beyond enriching all of Eurasia.¹⁵

Looking at the projects the Asian Infrastructure Bank has approved in recent months is telling: rehabilitating a hydropower plant in Tajikistan, investing in Indian infrastructure service companies with high growth, a highway project in Georgia, a dam improvement project in Indonesia. Though they benefit local populations, they are all far-flung, one-off infrastructure projects that do not connect to form a new Silk Road and, thus, do nothing to increase Chinese power.

The second problem is that China's main goal for OBOR is to accomplish what each successive Chinese leader has failed to do: distribute the wealth of the coast to the impoverished parts of China's interior without destabilizing the country. China has chosen to dress its OBOR strategy in the raiment of the Silk Road, which to most of the world conjures up images of history and nostalgia for a simpler time. But that should not obscure the differences between the Silk Road and OBOR. The Silk Road was built on the exchange of goods between equally willing trading partners. China possessed silk. India possessed spices. The Romans and later the Europeans possessed silver and other precious metals. British historian Peter Frank pan estimates that in the 1st century nearly half the money produced by the mint of the Roman Empire was used to buy Chinese silk. The Silk Road was a constantly evolving marketplace that moved goods across a vast continent where they could be exchanged for other goods. And unlike today, Eurasia was the center of world civilization, home to the most important economies.

That world is gone, and Eurasia is no longer what it was. China may be the world's second largest economy, but the U.S. economy is still much larger. The U.S. is the largest consumer of Chinese exports and, just as importantly, it does not rely on exports for growth. The most concrete part of the OBOR action plan is how Chinese provinces are to profit from developments in infrastructure and increased trade. As the U.S.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies pointed out in a study published in March 2016, OBOR is not about China's geopolitical ambitions, but rather about achieving two domestic economic objectives.

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¹⁵ Deep Dive, One Belt, One Road: When a Trade Route Isn't a Trade Route July 13, 2017

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The magazine is published twice a year

www.morm.gov.mk/contemporary-macedonian-defence/

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