
Belt and Road Initiative in the Age of COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for the Development of the Strategic Project of the People's Republic of China

Submitted 03/08/20, 1st revision 15/09/20, 2nd revision 23/10/20, accepted 11/11/20

Marcin Górnkiewicz¹ Jarosław Zelkowski²

Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of the study is to determine the impact of the pandemic on the current implementation of the New Silk Road project and its future in light of changes worldwide.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study used empirical methods (source material review, expert opinion surveys, diagnostic survey) and theoretical methods (analysis, synthesis, comparison, modeling, and inference).

Findings: The COVID-19 pandemic is associated with societies worldwide with China and, in extreme cases, entire East Asia. This belief has affected mass attitudes and social phenomena concerning the People's Republic of China's foreign policy in different parts of the world. Therefore, a correlation between changes in worldwide societal attitudes towards the People's Republic of China and the perspective for developing the Chinese New Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative) project has emerged. However, another implication concerns the deteriorated structure of the global economy due to COVID-19, which had a significant impact on the change in many states' strategic position.

Practical Implications: The conclusions will compare the knowledge resulting from the literature review with the outcomes of this article's own research.

Originality: Because of it, it will be possible to identify not only the main assumptions of the New Silk Road but, above all, to present a foresight for the development of this flagship project of the PRC in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, New Silk Road, People's Republic of China, strategic sciences, national security, international security.

Paper Type: Research in Security Studies.

¹ Military University of Technology, Warsaw Poland,
e-mail: marcin.gornkiewicz@wat.edu.pl;

² Military University of Technology, Warsaw Poland, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6698-2938>, e-mail: jaroslaw.zelkowski@wat.edu.pl;

1. Introduction

The New Silk Road (Belt and Road Initiative) is a particularly important project in the People's Republic of China's strategic vision. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly slowed down its implementation, which is not in line with China's international security policy's short- and long-term assumptions. It may not be that the pandemic happened at the worst possible time for the implementation of China's plans to build a New Silk Road, but it seems to be a significant obstacle to the success of the entire project within a reasonable time frame.

It is impossible to understand the intentions accompanying the launch of the discussed project without first viewing the Chinese perspective of international affairs, hence viewing the Chinese decision-making process in foreign affairs, and, more specifically, international security, both in the regional and global dimensions. First, a synthetic literature review on the Chinese perception and implementation of the New Silk Road will be presented. Using selected qualitative and quantitative methods, the Chinese perception of international reality and Beijing's decision-making process regarding the New Silk Road will be mapped.

The conclusions will compare the knowledge resulting from the literature review with the outcomes of this article's own research. Because of it, it will be possible to identify not only the main assumptions of the New Silk Road but, above all, to present a foresight for the development of this flagship project of the PRC in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Literature Review

Piotr Łasak (2018), referring to his numerous collected sources, pointed out that the New Silk Road is often described as a type of economic initiative, also known interchangeably as One Belt One Road or Belt and Road Initiative - BRI). The key objective accompanying this idea of the Communist Party of China is developing communication routes from China to Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. On the other hand, taking a broader perspective, one can see a huge variety of economic investments supporting the development of the economy of the emerging power. Although the New Silk Road may be considered very recent in Chinese terms of the perception of international relations, it has already gained the opinion of the most important economic initiative implemented by the Chinese government since the beginning of the transformation started in 1978 (Łasak, 2018). Wang Yiwei points to the main reasons for initiating the New Silk Road by the Middle Kingdom, identifying them as:

- oriented towards improving the situation in the world economy;
- related to the development of the Chinese economy.

According to W. Yiwei, the indicated reasons, which can also be understood as project objectives, are to be implemented by finding a way to stimulate global economic

growth after the recent financial crisis, restore global balance in the dimensions of peace, universal security, and prosperity, and create a new model of regional cooperation in XXI century [Łasak, 2018]. M. Kaczmarek pointed to the vision presented by Xi Jinping in 2013 to create international trade routes based on a network of inter-modal connections between China and the countries of Central Asia and Europe. Simultaneously, this idea be a form of a dialogue between China and other countries, serving to weaken the negative impression created by the expansionary economic policy and assertive foreign policy. Kaczmarek paid attention to implementing the New Silk Road that would probably strengthen Chinese influence in Southeast Asia. At the same time, it creates an alternative to the foregoing advantage of Russia and the USA (Kaczmarek, 2015) that despite the extensive discussion forums devoted to the displayed project, the idea of the New Silk Road is still blurred.

It is currently a kind of collection of many different initiatives taken by the People's Republic of China on the global forum. Such an approach is not surprising, considering the Chinese, centuries-old tradition of communication, full of various metaphors and avoidance of direct expression of thoughts. Behind such an approach as behind all other time-honored Chinese people's customs, there is usually pure pragmatism. The precise definition of own position causes later difficulties in changing it to adapt to the changing situation: political, economic, social, and finally military. Thus, a very general and vague formulation of the vision of the New Silk Road is nothing more than striving to achieve the goal by adapting to a situation that will undergo many and very profound changes over the next decades, and even more so over the course of hundreds of years (Górniewicz, 1984).

Returning, however, to the present day, which Chinese decision-makers associated with the initiation of this huge and centuries-old project, it is important to map the original path in such a way as to eliminate potential threats that may limit or block trade for a long time. Given the above, it is worth paying attention to the opinion expressed by Jacek Bartosiak, who noticed the link between political destabilization in the Middle East (the so-called Arab Spring), the uncertain internal situation in Ukraine, and the still relatively stable and safe situation in Central and Eastern Europe enabling the connection to be made with Asia via Poland, Belarus, Kazakhstan (NELB corridor) (Winięcki, 2017; Bartosiak, 2016; Bartosiewicz and Sztelik, 2019). Of course, this was the case until social protests broke out in Belarus over the suspicion that the Lukashenka regime had manipulated the presidential elections' results, and then people's peaceful protests were brutally pacified. This special situation, related to both the COVID-19 epidemic and the protests in Belarus, seems to be a spectacular treat to the implementation of the New Silk Road by blocking the stable connection between Europe and East Asia. On the other hand, given China's ability to plan its own long-term actions in the perspective of not only decades but hundreds of years, the question can be posed: Do decision-makers in Beijing really perceive the current situation as a true problem in realizing their grand vision, or rather a temporary inconvenience? The author will try to provide a comprehensive answer to this question.

Summing up the literature review, it allows us to assume that, according to the official version of the representatives of the People's Republic of China, the New Silk Road is an economic project aimed at integrating the states involved in it, contributing to the mutual economic impact-oriented towards the economic development of these countries. At the same time, along with the increase in the power of the Middle Kingdom, one can note the publication of statements of at least ambiguous nature, which show that China is seeking complete control over the project, and thus retaining the right to decide which countries and to what extent will be admitted to this project.

Considering that participation in the New Silk Road contributes to the economic growth of the involved societies, countries remaining insufficiently good relations with the Chinese power will have the opportunity to achieve the most. However, this is not all, as China is currently showing little willingness to allow foreign exports to enter its own market, but Beijing is vitally interested in gradually strengthening its own export offer to the countries that are to establish the New Silk Road. Simultaneously, an advanced investment process in promising foreign enterprises, especially those with high technological and ICT potential, is taking place in the background.

Outstanding scientists from almost all countries can, in turn, benefit from a wide and generous scholarship offer in exchange for building teams and laboratories in China and conducting research in areas that are particularly appreciated by Chinese decision-makers. As a result, the New Silk Road project resembles drainage of highly specialized personnel, combined with drainage of the most valuable enterprises and the development of a huge market for own production. On the other hand, in return for recognition of these countries' sovereignty, there is an opportunity to enter the huge market, which is just under development. Moreover, the vast majority of the market will contain the potentials of the countries involved in it. In this perspective, the New Silk Road is a strategic political and economic project designed to strengthen China's superpower role in the world, expand China's economic, technological and scientific potential, and ultimately gain the opportunity to distance the current global leader, which is still the United States.

In conclusion, it seems that the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, which froze most of the global economy for some time, causing huge losses, was not a phenomenon conducive to the implementation of the Chinese flagship project. The author, striving to verify the literature review's conclusions, used the method of cultural foresight to reflect the Chinese perceptual and decision-making process to determine whether the above-presented content can be tied in with this process.

3. Methodology

Differences determining the world's perception and the resulting behaviors characteristic for different social groups have been and still are the subject of research in many scientific disciplines. The results of research conducted by cultural anthropologists,

sociologists, and psychologists deserve special attention. These studies aimed to identify differences in personality and social profiles of the studied groups without attempting to research the impact of these differences on the international decision-making process (Bond, 1997). This type of research combining the methodologies of anthropology, sociology, and security sciences was carried out by the author of this text, which resulted in developing a method of cultural foresight. This method is used to identify the values of strictly defined variables, which allows us to recreate the perceptual-decision model characteristic for most representatives of the studied social group.

As a result, this method enables to forecast decisions made by the studied social groups concerning other social groups. This allows for forecasting the direction of foreign policy development of any chosen society at the international level. Research conducted on ten selected societies over the course of over one hundred years allowed to achieve the average accuracy of forecasted decisions at the level of 80-100%. The society in which all decisions turned out to be predictable in the last hundred years was the Chinese (Górnikiewicz, 2018).

During the research, the author identified and defined seven culturally conditioned codes that determine selected societies' decision-making process. Each of the codes has been assigned a value from "0" to "1," reflecting the pattern of the decision-making process unique for each society. The characteristics of individual codes and their values are presented below (Cytat za Górnikiewicz, 2018):

- *High Understanding / Low Understanding (HU / LU)*

High Understanding (HU): In the case of strong societies, the tendency of weaker societies to respect and follow the states that are stronger or recognized as the leading authority, granting themselves the right to impose will on other societies and respect only states with a similar or higher status.

Low Understanding (LU): In the case of weaker societies, lack special respect, especially not following other countries only based on these countries' strong or leading position, for strong societies, considering the other to be equal regardless of their current position in the international arena.

- *Independence / Cooperation (IN / CO)*

Independence (IN): The tendency to act independently without the need for long-term cooperation with other countries, where cooperation is allowed only to achieve specific goals (even long-term ones); societies with a high level of independence do not strive to create increasingly integrated international organisms.

Cooperation (CO): The willingness to act in cooperation with other societies, creating more and more stable and internally more coherent supranational organizations.

- Competition / Stabilization (CP / ST)

Competition (CP): The tendency to compete with other societies, achieve your own goals using violence, and impose your will on others.

Stabilization (ST): Striving for peaceful coexistence with other societies, stabilization, and even forgoing certain benefits to maintain security and peaceful coexistence in the immediate international environment.

- High Uncertainty / Low Uncertainty (HN / LN)

High Uncertainty (HN): Lack of willingness to risk if it can harm the achievement of the assumed goals, striving for a slower but more stable achievement of the adopted goals.

Low Uncertainty (LN): A willingness to take risks if this can bring certain benefits: e.g., accelerate the achievement of a certain goal, even if there is a risk of suffering certain losses. Depending on other codes' influence, this risk may be more or less calculated (especially the impact of "ST").

- Long-term duration / Short-term duration (LT / ST)

Long-term duration (LT): The ability to plan own long-term actions in the international arena, the ability to predict both the consequences of her own and someone else's decisions.

Short-term duration (ST): Lack of the ability to plan in a long-term perspective, including the inability to predict the consequences of own and others' decisions / actions in the long run.

- Selectivity / Comprehensiveness (SL / CM)

Selectivity (SL): The tendency to perceive the international environment only through the prism of the closest proximity, and in the case of powers operating all over the world. Forecasting procedure: developing cultural codes on national interests, inability to a holistic view of events taking place in close and distant surroundings.

Comprehensiveness (CM): A tendency to comprehensively perceive international reality, the ability to perceive mutual relations between individual societies, regardless of the dislocation of interests and the distance between these societies.

- High Self-organization / Low Self-organization (HS / LS)

High Self-organization (HS): The ability to highly effective management and organization of own resources (both human, tangible and intangible: e.g., know-how) and management of someone else's resources (in the case of parallel occurrence of CM) accessible to achieve optimal benefits.

Low Self-organization (LS): Inability to effective management of own resources, as well as lack of the ability to proper respect of current and future opportunities arising from the proper management of own resources.

Therefore, concerning the obtained research results, the perceptual and decision-making process pattern, typical for the Chinese society, is presented below as the Matrix

of Cultural Codes. The model shows the current perception of Chinese decision-makers regarding the correlation between the COVID-19 epidemic and the direction of development of the New Silk Road, but above all, the possibility of developing a foresight of the direction of Chinese activities in the international arena in the coming years (Table 1).

Table 1. *Decision model for the development of the New Silk Road*

	HU/LUR	IN/COO	CO/ST	ST/LT	SL/CM	HN/LNN	HS/LS
System 0/1	0	1	0	0	1	1	0
Studied society: the Chinese	High understanding	Cooperation	Competition	Long-term duration	Comprehensiveness	Law Uncertainty	High Self-organisation
X1	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7
<p>X1 - Description of the specific impact of an individual code values on the Chinese perspective and the approach to the implementation of the strategic project - New Silk Road in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>A1 - From the Chinese perspective, the world is divided into superpowers and their spheres of influence that can stand out from their rivals by developing an effective methodology for controlling the effects of a global epidemic on the example of COVID-19. From the Chinese point of view, the main rivals on the international stage also in this regard are the three powers: The United States, Russia and India.</p> <p>A2 - China will strive to strengthen and develop all forms of cooperation with other countries by taking advantage of the opportunity of combating the effects of COVID-19 with the use of joint forces.</p> <p>A3 - China will strive to gradually develop the possibilities of counteracting COVID-19 on a national and international scale. This will be the stage of preparations for the development of an anti-epidemiological methodology ready to be implemented in other countries.</p> <p>A4 - From the Chinese perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic is only a short-term episode that cannot paralyze the achievement of China's strategic goals in a long-term run.</p> <p>A5 - Chinese decision-makers treating the COVID-19 pandemic as an episode will strive to use this new, global situation in the implementation of strategic goals by "integrating" this occurrence into a comprehensive plan for achieving these goals.</p> <p>A6 - Chinese policymakers may be ready to take calculated risks, where a possible failure would only delay the achievement of strategic goals, but not prevent their achievement.</p> <p>A7 - As a society, the Chinese demonstrate a high ability to mobilize the entire society in the fight against COVID-19, and then promote ready-made and working solutions to other societies affected by the pandemic.</p>							

<p>Y2</p>	<p>Due to the long-term and comprehensive nature of the Chinese perception and decision-making process, the global epidemiological situation of COVID-19 was perceived in Beijing as a challenge that could significantly accelerate the implementation of the development of the Chinese strategic project - the New Silk Road. In parallel, China could achieve a greater international authority over the powers that are less able to deal with the epidemic, and at the same time, over Beijing's major rivals: The United States, India and Russia.</p> <p>As a result, Chinese support in this area, mainly aimed at Europe, should enable further and faster implementation of the New Silk Road project. Meanwhile, the Chinese authorities perceive this challenge as at least several years long programme to develop an effective and nationwide counteraction strategy. This strategy will not only be based on the invention of medicines or vaccines, but on the comprehensive preparation of the entire society for similar and previously unknown epidemics in the future. When in a few years the PRC reaches a high readiness to organize its enormous society in such a way as to prevent from a dramatic epidemic as in the case of COVID-19, then Beijing will be able to support other countries in adopting the model of society organization developed in China. This new programme of support for other societies, with particular emphasis on the European Union, will also serve to accelerate the development of the New Silk Road in Europe, which will limit not only the Russian but, above all, the American influence. It is very possible that in China, future epidemics are predicted to be much more dangerous than COVID-19, and therefore the current epidemiological situation is being taken as a form of a gentle test for epidemics and pandemics that are yet to come. Then it may turn out that other societies, regardless of their geopolitical sympathies, will be doomed to Chinese help and support</p>
<p>Y2 - Description of the impact of the average value of the codes on the direction of development of the New Silk Road in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p>	

4. Conclusions

The obtained results allow us to conclude that, regardless of the causes of the COVID-19 pandemic, this special situation can be used by the decision-makers of the People's Republic of China in a long-term strategy of strengthening and developing the New Silk Road project. In the next several years, the epidemic will open an opportunity for Beijing to interact with societies that have remained indifferent to or opposed to Chinese investments. Therefore, from the Chinese perspective, COVID-19 is not an obstacle, but it stands for a special opportunity to achieve strategic goals, which would be impossible to reach in the normal course (without an epidemic) or require much more effort, resources and time.

In conclusion, if, in the next few years, there are other, much more dangerous epidemics than the current COVID-19, China will have the opportunity to extend the New Silk Road, including the entire European Union. As a part of institutional, organizational, and anti-epidemiological support, an infrastructure base, strongly established and related to individual countries' economies, will be organized in parallel. It will then not matter in which geopolitical or allied system the given society has operated so far because, in the face of a devastating epidemic, it will then be the only alternative to ensure these societies the possibility of further, possibly optimal functioning.

References:

- Anastasiadou, I. 2019. Iron Silk Roads: the geopolitics of past and present initiatives for the revival of Eurasian trade through overland transport corridors. *Cambridge Journal of Regions Economy and Society*, 12, 57-76.
- Babones, S., Aberg, J.H.S., Hodzi, O. 2020. China's Role in Global Development Finance: China Challenge or Business as Usual? *Global Policy*, 11, 326-335.
- Blanchard, J.M.F. 2020. Problematic Prognostications about China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI): Lessons from Africa and the Middle East. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29, 159-174.
- Bond, M.H. 1997. (Ed.), *Working at the Interface of Cultures: Eighteen Lives in Social Science*. Routledge London, 47-61.
- Bond, M.H., Hofstede, G. 1984. Hofstede's Culture Dimensions: An Independent Validation Using Rokeach's Value Survey. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 15, 4.
- Brakman, S., Frankopan, P., Garretsen, H., Van Marrewijk, C. 2019. *The New Silk Roads: an introduction to China's Belt and Road Initiative*. Cambridge Journal of Regions Economy and Society, 12, 3-16.
- Coenen, J., Bager, S., Meyfroidt, P., Newig, J., Challies, E. 2020. *Environmental Governance of China's Belt and Road Initiative*. Environmental Policy and Governance.
- Cui, L.B., Song, M. L. 2019. Economic evaluation of the Belt and Road Initiative from an unimpeded trade perspective. *International Journal of Logistics-Research and Applications*, 22, 25-46.
- Dunford, M., Liu, W.D. 2019. Chinese perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative. *Cambridge Journal of Regions Economy and Society*, 12, 145-165.
- Gornikiewicz, M. 2018. *Prognozowanie kulturowe zagrożeń bezpieczeństwa narodowego i międzynarodowego*. Wojskowa Akademia Techniczna, Warsaw 2018.
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J. 2007. *Kultury i organizacje*. Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne. Warszawa.
- Jakubowski, A., Komornicki, T., Kowalczyk, K., Miszczuk, A. 2020. Poland as a hub of the Silk Road Economic Belt: is the narrative of opportunity supported by developments on the ground? *Asia Europe Journal*, 18, 367-396.
- Jones, L., Zeng, J.H. 2019. Understanding China's 'Belt and Road Initiative': beyond 'grand strategy' to a state transformation analysis. *Third World Quarterly*, 40, 1415-1439.
- Nakano, R. 2020. Geocultural power: China's quest to revive the Silk Roads for the twenty-first century. *Asian Studies Review*.
- Rippa, A. 2020. Mapping the margins of China's global ambitions: economic corridors, Silk Roads, and the end of proximity in the borderlands. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 61, 55-76.
- Shah, A.R. 2019. China's Belt and Road Initiative the Way to the Modern Silk Road and the Perils of Overdependence. *Asian Survey*, 59, 407-428.