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Chances and Challenges for Kazakhstan, the EU and Austria in Chinese project “New Silk Road”

Abstract. Today, the geopolitical, geostrategic and geo-economic significance of the silk road transport corridor connecting Western China and Western Europe complements new research areas. In this regard, the article will also examine the role of Kazakhstan, Austria, the European Union in the project “one belt – one road” in the course of participation in this project, opportunities, readiness for challenges, advantages and threats, namely, both positive and weak, negative sides in the case of participation in the project in the analyzed countries. In General, the issues of participation in the implementation of this project and the effective use of new opportunities and advantages of regional cooperation were conducted in accordance with the concept of foreign policy of the participating countries on the basis of theoretical analysis. As a key final thought, pointing out that the post-Soviet countries (including Kazakhstan) and the countries of the Western European EU (including Austria) relate to this project from different points of view, the Asian vector of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy due to its geopolitical position is the object of intense competition from regional and non-regional powers.

Keywords: New Silk Road, National Congress, infrastructure connectivity, Western European EU members, Declaration, transport infrastructure.

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Introduction. China’s “One Belt, One Road”, or OBOR, initiative, in the public better known under the name “New Silk Road”, is a plan to build a vast network of roads, rail lines, ports, and other infrastructure improvements in up to 80 countries. It is an effort designed to radically expand trade and investment in Asia and around the Indian Ocean. The costs are, so far, unclear; many sources use the figure of \$1 trillion, but it is possible to find sums up to \$26 trillion of infrastructure investment by 2030. In any case it will be the biggest international development program since the U.S. launched the Marshall Plan after World War Two.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping said in his report at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party in October 2017: “We must actively participate in and promote economic globalization, develop an open economy of higher standards, and continue to increase China’s economic power and composite strength” [1]. The Chinese side claims advantages of its initiative in the following areas: infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, closer people-to-people ties, and industrial cooperation[2]. This – and many other statements by Chinese officials, but above all practical policies – leaves no doubt about Beijing’s intention to give the next phase of the globalization Chinese traits. And OBOR is a crucial part of this policy.

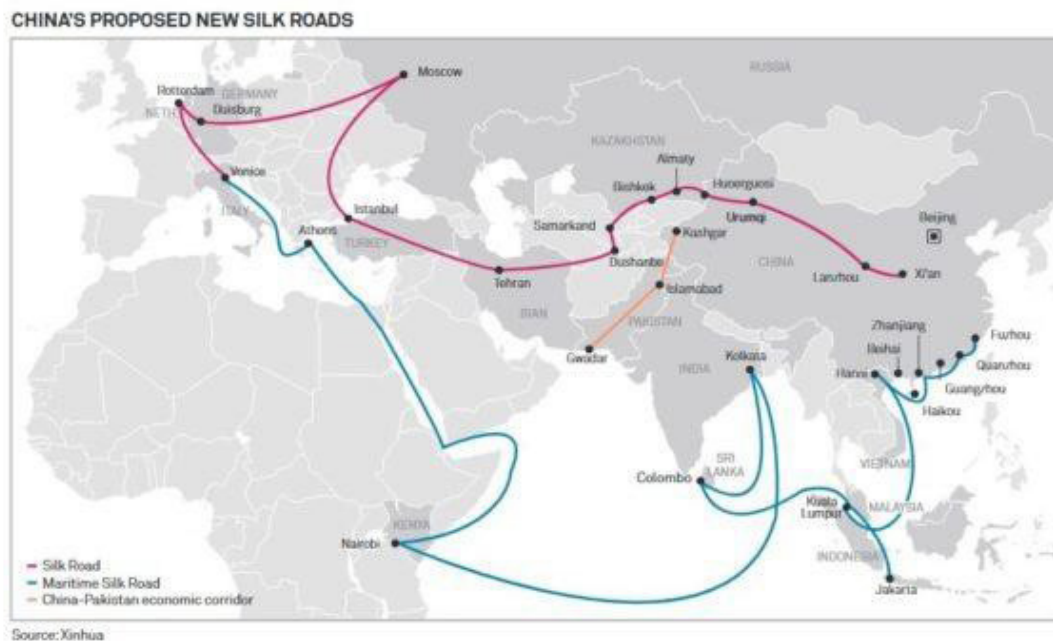


Figure 1 – China’s proposed New Silk Roads

Methodology. Theoretical analysis and understanding of the “New Silk Road” were carried out in accordance with the foreign policy concept of a number of countries. The article uses the methods of historical, comparative analysis and grounded theory for conceptualization of the patterns observed.

Currently, there is a certain theoretical and practical experience in the field of studying the interaction of Kazakhstan and the participants of the countries on the “New Silk Road”, which in recent years have occupied a certain niche in the system of regional processes. In this regard, the Asian vector of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy is very important, due to its geopolitical position, the object of intense competition from both regional and non-regional powers.

The European Union and OBOR. Anyone who wants to participate in OBOR has first to sign a seemingly harmless “Declaration of Intent”. Beijing already proudly lists more than 80 states, including many Eastern European countries, that are hoping for investments. China is also targeting larger states. It absolutely wants Western European countries to sign as well, which Italy, a member of the G7 group of the seven leading industrial nations, did in March 2019. Italy traditionally has to struggle with high budget deficits and is very much hoping for Chinese investments[3]. Austria has not yet signed, although China has unmistakably “urged” it to do so.

The European Union is investigating a showcase Chinese rail project that aims to extend OBOR into the heart of Europe. The commission’s probe is into a planned 350 kilometres high-speed railway between the capitals of Serbia (which is not an EU member), Belgrade, and Budapest in EU member state Hungary. European officials said that the investigation was assessing the financial viability of the \$2.89 Billion railway and looking into whether it had violated EU rules stipulating that public tenders must be offered for large transport projects. Thus, no contract for the \$1.8 Billion Hungarian section of the railway appears to have been made public. Any legal setback to China’s first railway project in Europe would be a diplomatic embarrassment for Beijing, which made the railway its cornerstone offering to win support from Central and Eastern European states.



Figure 2 – China’s proposed “Land Sea Express Route”

The planned railway, which is supposed to cut the travel time between Belgrade and Budapest down to about three hours from the current eight, is also important to China in a practical sense. It comprises a crucial section of a so-called “Land Sea Express Route”, which China agreed in 2014 to build with Hungary, Serbia and North Macedonia. This route is aimed to link up with Piraeus, the Chinese-owned Greek port on the Mediterranean. Without the Serbian-Hungarian rail link, China could struggle to realise its aim of being able to export products by rail to Piraeus and thereafter by sea to destinations in Europe, Africa and beyond [4].

OBOR does not mobilize the public in the EU countries: No one has heard of any significant demonstrations against it, and this is in line with Chinese plans. The few demonstrations against China and visits of its politicians to Western Europe mostly concerned Beijing’s Tibet policy.

The OBOR also reveals – not for the first time – a massive structural problem for the EU: The Union with its 28 members (soon only 27 due to the Brexit) has, of course, much slower decision-making processes than the highly centralized China. And Beijing can play different EU members off against each other.

Austria and OBOR. At the end of 2017, OBOR made it for the first time into a coalition agreement, in particular between the then new federal government (which collapsed in May 2019), consisting of the Christian-Democratic Austrian People’s Party and the right-wing populist Austrian Freedom Party. This document states unequivocally that the Austrian government supports OBOR. Austria, it also says, “is located in the centre of Europe and thus represents an important [transport] hub due to its geographical location alone”[5].

The Austrian Economic Chamber plays an important role in political lobbying for OBOR. This organisation is controlled by the People’s Party and strictly capitalist on the one hand, but on the other it has no problem promoting trade with China, where the ruling party still calls itself Communist. The Freedom Party has a very pro-Russian and pro-Chinese foreign policy platform; its representative Norbert Hofer from December 2017 until Mai 2019 was Minister of Transport and thus responsible for the implementation of OBOR in Austria. In July 2018, the press service of the Transport Ministry quoted him as follows: “During my visit to China in April [2018] I signed a binding declaration on the Silk Road. This still makes us the ‘first mover’ in the Silk Road on a European level”. Hofer continued that the “New Eurasian Land Bridge”, as he called OBOR, will also form an important axis between Western Europe, Eastern Europe and Russia – with the centre in Austria[6]. – However, this seems to be a drastic overestimation of the possibilities of

tiny Austria.

According to information from the Austrian Ministry of Transport, it is planned to extend the Russian broad-gauge line from its current end point in the Slovak city Kosice to eastern Austria. For the construction of the 420 kilometres long single-track line, a bridge over the Danube river and several tunnels with a total length of about 40 kilometres would have to be built. The costs for the project amount to 6.5 billion euro, the Austrian share would amount to around 1 billion. 800 million euro would be spent on the “heart” of the project alone: a freight terminal that is to make Austria an important distribution hub for OBOR. The terminal is to be five kilometres long and 300 metres wide, so that trains up to one kilometre long could enter – 50 a week. The earliest possible start of operation of the line was determined at the beginning of 2033. So far, however, there has been no decision on a specific location, not least because no community wants to accommodate this gigantic project.

But even without such a terminal, a direct railway connection between Austria and China has already been established: Austria’s political leaders – President Alexander Van der Bellen, Federal Chancellor (= Prime minister) Sebastian Kurz (People’s Party) and Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl (nominated by the Freedom Party without being its member) – were present when on 12 April 2018 a 600 metres long freight train left the Chinese megacity of Chengdu for Vienna. Chinese trains, just like in most of the European countries, run on the standard gauge of 1,435 millimetres, Russia, however, on the broad gauge of 1,520 millimetres. A train from China to Austria must therefore, as it travels through Russia, be re-tracked twice on its way. When the train arrived at the South Vienna freight centre after a journey of more than two weeks and 9,800 kilometres, the Austrian President (a former head of the Greens) was already waiting at the track, alongside with the Minister of Economic Affairs of Austria and, of course, the Chinese Ambassador to Austria. All this makes it more than clear that official Austria – across all party lines – stands behind the country’s participation in OBOR. The Chinese ambassador to Austria, Li Xiaosi, praised his host country – and rightly so in his view – for its participation in OBOR[7].

Kazakhstan and OBOR. It was by no means a coincidence that in September 2013, Xi Jinping chose Kazakhstan’s capital Astana to announce OBOR. This is an economical integration project that will provide a unique geographical location and geopolitical benefit from Kazakhstan’s initiative. It should be noted that Kazakhstan has been chosen to give a broad profile to the concept of the “Silk Road Economic Belt”. The Chinese leadership views Kazakhstan as a major and promising trade and economic partner in Central Asia. In addition, Kazakhstan has the largest economy in the region and accumulates more than 70% of China’s trade turnover with Central Asian countries. OBOR opens up an opportunity for Kazakhstan to become a major link in world trade. This is the greatest growth opportunity that Kazakhstan has received since independence. Kazakhstan must think through alternative forms of growth not only to natural resources, but also through diversification and innovation. OBOR will attract Chinese resources and technologies for Kazakhstan, so it can become a crucial transit hub for Eurasia and export natural products to China. The largest stakeholders in the country are national companies, which should be prepared to support a large volume of transit through the country in the coming years, recognizing the importance of OBOR and paying due attention to it. This means that major transformations are needed in the near future.

SWOT analysis for Kazakhstan

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>Favorable geographical location of the country, which allows short-term routes across Asia.</p> <p>The transport and logistics infrastructure is developed since Soviet times.</p> <p>Agreement of the state programs "Nurly Zhol" and "New Silk Road".</p> <p>Stable social and political situation in the country and its borders.</p> <p>Production growth and employment of the population due to the development of transport infrastructure.</p> <p>Ensuring high security of transit cargo flows.</p> <p>A multimodal transport system provides a wide range of routes and means of delivery.⁷</p>	<p>Lack of a unified concept for the development of the transport and logistics system in Kazakhstan.</p> <p>Low technical condition and deterioration of transport infrastructure.</p> <p>High cost of goods transit.</p> <p>Presence of transport and customs barriers.</p> <p>Lack of qualified specialists and weakness of IT-technologies.</p>
Opportunities	Risks
<p>Diversification of transport links to international markets.</p> <p>Development of transport, logistics and information and financial systems to the level of an international hub.</p> <p>Increase of investment climate and investment attractiveness of the Republic of Kazakhstan.</p> <p>efficient logistics, providing a high level of reinvestment, self-development.</p> <p>Increase of turnover.</p> <p>Research of the world market demand for the production of export-oriented products.</p> <p>Necessity of development of ports for container transportation on inland routes.</p>	<p>The traffic flow passes through the territory of sovereign states.</p> <p>Natural and man-made hazards.</p> <p>Preservation of the raw material orientation of the national economy.</p> <p>Strengthening of Chinese trade, economic and migration in Kazakhstan.</p> <p>Increased competition for Kazakhstan's enterprises.</p> <p>Increasing pressure on the environmental situation in the natural environment.</p> <p>Strengthening of Chinese priorities in the country.</p>

The Silk Road Economic Belt project creates new opportunities for Kazakhstan's participation in regional labour and cooperation, international business and investment distribution, development of trade in goods and services, and creation of new jobs and value chain development.

The implementation of the Silk Road Economic Belt project will improve transport infrastructure, ensure Kazakhstan's access to the seaports of the Silk Road countries, accelerate the supply of Kazakh goods to world markets, increase foreign and mutual trade, reduce the costs of domestic exporters, including removing trade barriers and restrictions, attract new investments and joint projects.

At the same time, the formation of the Silk Road economic belt will be limited due to the level of socio-economic development and modern differences in the living standards of the countries, i.e. insufficient development of transport and logistics infrastructure in Central Asia, weak level of transport and expeditionary services, low efficiency of the use of rolling stock, competitiveness of local entrepreneurs at the international level and unwillingness to enter foreign markets. One of the threats for Kazakhstan may be the preservation of the raw material orientation of the national economy, as the investment projects of Chinese companies, first of all, are connected with the extraction of oil and natural gas. Other risks include the intensification of China's trade, economic and migration expansion to the Kazakhstani market, the increase in dumping with Chinese enterprises, the priority for enterprises established by China in Kazakhstan, the growth of unemployment, the deterioration of the trade balance, the increase in smuggling, the growth of competition among Kazakhstani enterprises, environmental degradation, etc.

Restored on the basis of modern transport infrastructure and communications, OBOR can provide rapid development of goods, services, capital and labour between Europe and Asia, as well as countries along the Silk Road. As the largest financial center in the world, China is able to invest heavily in the development of regional infrastructure in the medium term, for which it initiated the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund.

Critics and Skeptics of OBOR

Joschka Fischer, former (1998–2005) Vice Chancellor (= Deputy Prime Minister) and Foreign Minister of Germany and still a sought-after political advisor and commentator, said about OBOR: "In fact, this project is above all geopolitically and less economically of outstanding importance, for it is the attempt of the land power China to open up the Eurasian continent beyond the influence of the sea power U.S. economically and thus also politically for itself. [...] In fact, this project will result in a strategic alternative for Europe: transatlantic versus Eurasian, Western orientation versus Eastern orientation"[8].

An important feature of most of the existing Western European (and Austrian) studies which try to examine the effects and consequences of OBOR is that they more or less ignore the geopolitical aspects of the project and portray it as nothing but a – however, quite huge – business idea.

In spring 2018, 27 of the 28 national EU ambassadors (only Hungary did not take part) to Beijing have compiled a report about OBOR, which was a part of the EU's preparations for an EU-China summit in July 2018. The paper said about the project that it was designed to hamper free trade and to put Chinese companies at an advantage. And further according to the report, OBOR "runs counter to the EU agenda for liberalizing trade and pushes the balance of power in favor of subsidized Chinese companies." OBOR is pursuing Chinese "domestic political goals like the reduction of surplus capacity, the creation of new export markets and safeguarding access to raw materials." EU officials said China was trying to divide the EU to strengthen its own hand in relations with individual member states. Especially members such as Hungary and Greece, which both rely on Chinese investment, have shown that they are susceptible to pressure from China. One EU diplomat said to the press that China was very good at exploiting grey areas in WTO rules on the protection of intellectual property and did not shy away from breaking norms.

And: “When we point that out to our Chinese negotiating partners they always show a lot of understanding but in reality hardly anything changes”[9].

EU officials repeatedly pointed out the weaknesses of OBOR as a lack of transparency in public procurement, in equal conditions of competition and public tenders as well as in environmental and social standards and guarantees [10]. Business in EU member states would be interested to participate in OBOR, but so far 90 percent of the business is done by Chinese companies. And smaller and/or economically weaker countries could fall into a “debt trap” towards Beijing; as a result, China could demand the transfer of key infrastructure objects to service the loans or has already done so. This affects Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti, among others [11].

Kolkata, capital of India’s West Bengal province, is intended to play a role in OBOR. A report of the Center for Security Studies of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich stated in October 2016 about India’s view of OBOR: “In the long-term, BRI will include India but also encircle it. BRI potentially threatens Indian interests in two main ways: 1) increasing Chinese and Pakistani activity in the disputed Jammu-Kashmir region; and 2) increased Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean. As China’s economic interests shift toward Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, its naval posture will as well. Greater Chinese emphasis on the Indian Ocean will come at the cost of commensurate Indian suspicion of China’s activities in its maritime backyard”[12].

The OBOR summit, held in Beijing in May 2017, was supposed to be a celebration of China’s major Eurasian developmental initiative. But India refused to attend, which also attracted attention in Western European media. Indian diplomats pointed to a sBeijing is investing massively in one of the flagships of its initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC. Originally valued at \$46 billion, the value of CPEC projects is now worth at least \$62 billion. The money will flow into energy projects and a transport network from Kashgar in Xinjiang (China) via the Himalayas to the Pakistani town Gwadar. A deep-sea port is planned there, which would give China direct access to the Arabian Sea. On 13 November 2016, CPEC became partly operational when Chinese cargo was transported overland to Gwadar Port for onward maritime shipment to Africa and West Asia. CPEC passes through the disputed region of Kashmir where Indian and Pakistani border guards have occasionally exchanged fire across the Line of Control though no CPEC project is located near the line. Already the mere fact that Kashmir was included in OBOR has made New Delhi very suspicious of the project, even if Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov during his visit to New Delhi in December 2017 publicly called on India to join it.

Conclusion:

The historical importance of the Silk Road transport corridor, which connects Western China and Western Europe via Russia on land, must not be forgotten. It is known from history that 2000 years ago this section of the Silk Road passing through the Great Steppe was not without danger: robbery attacks on caravans with silk, forward dishes, paper, precious jewelry were quite common. It is known from history that 2000 years ago this section of the Silk Road passing through the Great Steppe was not without danger. It is not so easy, where the robber committed a robbery attack on shopping caravans with silk, forward dishes, paper, precious jewelry. Today, in this place of the Great Steppe passes the railway and automobile Silk Road is not only the safest, but also the most convenient and effective way.

It is important for Kazakhstan, as for the other Central Asian countries, to participate in the implementation of OBOR and to effectively use new opportunities and advantages of regional cooperation, as well as to minimize risks and threats. Within the framework of the concept of revival of the Chinese Silk Road, it will be carried out measures on development of various regional integration associations (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Eurasian Economic Union etc.). It is important to ensure the possibility of expansion of trade, economic and investment cooperation between the OBOR participants.

It is quite natural that post-Soviet countries (including Kazakhstan) and Western European

EU members (including Austria) look at OBOR from different perspectives. As a matter of fact, OBOR seems to be a geopolitical project – and not a “pure” business project, as many politicians, media and managers in the EU also talk themselves into. One of the main goals of this project is to expand Chinese influence in Eurasia and the world. In the long term, the idea of an integration of Eurasia under Chinese conditions stands behind OBOR, which would change the existing world-political weights lastingly – and clearly to the disadvantage of the EU, the U.S., Japan and India, but in favour of China (and probably also Russia; at any rate, Moscow is convinced of this).

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“Жаңа Жібек жолы” қытайлық жобасы:

Қазақстан, ЕО және Аустрия үшін мүмкіндіктері мен артықшылықтары

Андатпа. Мақалада бүгінгі таңда Батыс Қытай мен Батыс Еуропаны қосатын «Жаңа Жібек жолы» көлік дәлізінің геосаяси, геостратегиялық және геоэкономикалық маңызы жаңа зерттеу бағыттарын ашып, толықтыруы баяндалады. Осыған байланысты, бұл қарастырылған мақалада қытайлық “Бір белдеу – бір жол” жобасындағы Қазақстан, Аустрия, Еуропалық Одақтың бұл жобаға қатысу барысындағы рөлі, мүмкіндіктері, шақыруларға дайындығы, артықшылықтары мен қауіпті тұстары, бір сөзбен айтқанда позитивті жақтары мен қатары, талдауға алынып отырған елдердің жобаға қатысу жағдайындағы әлсіз, негативті жақтары да салыстырмалы талдау әдісі негізінде зерттеледі. Жалпы бұл жобаны іске асыруға қатысу және өңірлік ынтымақтастықтың жаңа мүмкіндіктері мен артықшылықтарын тиімді пайдалану мәселесі теориялық талдау негізінде қатысушы елдердің сыртқы саясатының тұжырымдамасына сәйкес жүргізілді. Түйінді қорытынды ой ретінде посткеңестік елдер (оның ішінде Қазақстан) және батыс еуропалық ЕО елдері (оның ішінде Аустрия) осы жобаға әртүрлі көзқарас тұрғысынан қарайтынын көрсете отырып, Қазақстанның сыртқы саясатының азиялық векторы өзінің геосаяси ұстанымына байланысты өңірлік және өңірлік емес державалар тарапынан қарқынды бәсекелестік объектісі болып табылатындығын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: Жаңа Жібек жолы, Ұлттық Конгресс, инфрақұрылымдық байланыс, Батыс Еуропалық Одақ мүшелері, Декларация, көлік инфрақұрылымы.

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Шансы и вызовы для Казахстана, ЕС и Австрии в китайском проекте «Новый Шелковый путь»

Аннотация. На сегодняшний день геополитическое, геостратегическое и геоэкономическое значение транспортного коридора Шелкового пути, соединяющего Западный Китай и Западную Европу, дополняют новые исследовательские направления. В связи с этим в рассматриваемой статье будут изучены роль Казахстана, Австрии, Европейского Союза в проекте «Один пояс – один путь», а именно, предстоящие возможности, готовность к вызовам, позитивные и негативные стороны участия в проекте. В целом, вопросы участия в реализации данного проекта и эффективного использования новых возможностей и преимуществ регионального сотрудничества рассматривались в соответствии с концепцией внешней политики стран-участниц на основе теоретического анализа. Ключевая мысль заключается в том, что постсоветские страны (в том числе Казахстан) и страны западноевропейского ЕС (в том числе Австрия) относятся к данному проекту по-разному, азиатский вектор внешней политики Казахстана в силу своей геополитической позиции является объектом интенсивной конкуренции со стороны региональных и не региональных держав.

Ключевые слова: Новый Шелковый путь, Национальный Конгресс, инфраструктурное взаимодействие, страны-члены западноевропейского ЕС, декларация, транспортная инфраструктура.

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