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A NEW GEO-STRATEGIC INITIATIVE; CHINESE ONE BELT ONE ROAD (OBOR) PROJECT

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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ROAD (OBOR) PROJECT**

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INTRODUCTION

China had been steadily increasing its political and economic clout in world affairs against the backdrop of its phenomenal financial success over the past few decades. Beginning in 1978, China started its economic reforms, opening the country to foreign investment.¹ What followed for next two decades was the focus on domestic development and increasing the standard of living of Chinese people, while keeping a low profile on international stage.² At the turn of the century, China entered into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and ushered into a new era of economic growth.³ By the time Hu Jintao handed over the reins to Xi Jinping in 2013, Chinese economy had risen to be the second largest in the world behind United States and the owner of world's largest foreign exchange reserve.⁴ With the new leadership in power and firm economic stability to back it up, it was time for China to take important strides on international stage.

It all started in September 2013 when President Xi Jinping, during his visit to Kazakhstan, spoke of the revival of historic commercial trade route of Central Asia and proposed the establishment of a Silk Road Economic Belt.⁵ The announcement failed to grasp the attention of local and international media until President Jinping visited

¹ Zhang Yunling, "One Belt, One Road: A Chinese View", *Global Asia*, Fall 2015, Volume 10, 8

² Peter Ferdinand, "Westward Ho—the China dream and 'one belt, one road': Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping", *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, 942

³ Ibid, 941

⁴ Michael, M, Du, "China's One Belt, One Road Initiative: Context, Focus, Institutions, and Implications", *The Chinese Journal of Global Governance* 2, 2016, 33

⁵ Ibid, 31

Indonesia in October 2013, where he highlighted the need to develop a maritime silk route of 21st century.⁶ It took further two years to formalize the concept into an actionable plan, when the idea of One Belt One Road (OBOR) project was adopted into a structured mechanism with set priorities and principles by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce on 28 March 2015.⁷ Since then, OBOR initiative has formally become the centrepiece of Chinese international economic strategy as well as the foreign policy.⁸

OBOR initiative has since gained lot of importance on the regional as well international stage and is debated amongst the contemporary academics and policy-makers both within and outside the country. The project is often dubbed as Chinese “Marshall Plan for Asia”⁹ and its efforts to hone on the vast economic resources of Central, South and South East Asia. It allows China to sustain its “new normal” economic growth, focussing on both an inward and outward approach.¹⁰ However, the project also raises serious questions about Chinese real intentions behind the initiative. Is it aimed at only expanding China’s economic influence in the region or is it a leverage to gain significant geo political clout in Asia Pacific region? How will it impact the regional and global dynamics?

⁶ Michael, M, Du, “China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative: Context, Focus, Institutions, and Implications”, *The Chinese Journal of Global Governance* 2, 2016, 31

⁷ National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, with State Council authorization, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Vision & Actions)*, March 2015. www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1249618.shtml

⁸ Michael, M, Du, “China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative: Context, Focus, Institutions, and Implications”, *The Chinese Journal of Global Governance* 2, 2016, 31

⁹ Gisela Grieger, “One Belt, One Road (OBOR): China’s regional integration initiative”, *European Parliamentary Research Service. Briefing to European Parliament*, July 2016, 7

¹⁰ Michael, M, Du, “China’s One Belt, One Road Initiative: Context, Focus, Institutions, and Implications”, *The Chinese Journal of Global Governance* 2, 2016, 32-33

Chinese One Belt One Road (OBOR) project is a strategic initiative, which is not only aimed at domestic and regional economic development, but is primarily focussed to increase its notion of power beyond its near abroad.

The paper will use diplomatic, informational, military and economic instruments of national power; more commonly known as DIME model, to analyze OBOR initiative. It will be argued that this project has a much broader scope in terms of political, economic, diplomatic and even informational application of national power. This paper will briefly highlight the historical context and geographical layout of the initiative, as both are directly linked to the informational and geo-military aspect of power. It will be followed by analysis of the project in various spheres of national power. However the paper will not delve deeply into the details of the implementation mechanism, financial structures supporting it and challenges to its execution and the success.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT, GEOGRAPHICAL LAYOUT

OBOR has its roots in the historical Silk Road, which was a network of trade routes formally established during the Han Dynasty. In the East, the road originated from Xian city, passing through Central Asia and Europe, terminating in the Mediterranean in the west. It further linked Indo Pak sub-continent, Persia, Middle East and Roman Empire with China. Since silk was the major trade commodity thus it was coined as the “Silk Route” by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877.¹¹ This route not only provided the necessary outreach to Chinese commodities, but also introduced Chinese culture and heritage beyond its own borders and into the numerous regions of greater Eurasia.

¹¹ Francis Cheung, Alexious Lee, “A brilliant plan, One Belt, One Road”, <https://www.clsa.com/special/onebeltoneroad/>

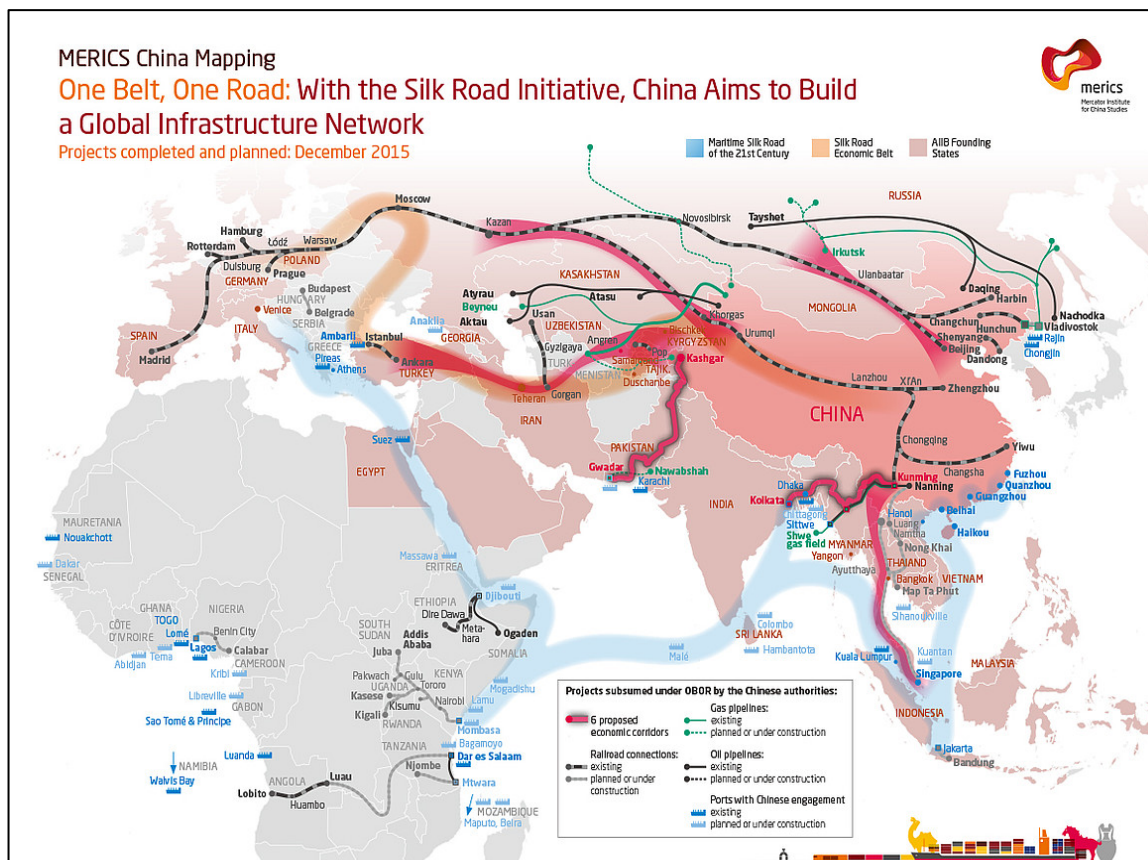


Figure 1: OBOR – Geographical Layout¹²

OBOR is an inter connected network of East West and North South trans-regional corridors as shown in Figure 1, that runs parallel to or links the “belt” and the “road”.¹³ These corridors are different in their scope and size. They also incorporate some of the existing infrastructure projects, which are either already completed, under construction or newly planned.¹⁴ The project’s scale as a whole is huge, as it is estimated that the network will eventually encompass almost 4.4 billion people (63% of the world’s population), 64 countries and a combined economic output of 21 trillion dollars (roughly

¹² Moritz Rudolf, “One Belt, One Road: The Silk Road“, *Infographic/China Mapping Silk Road Initiative, Mericator instute of Chinese Studies*, <https://www.merics.org/en/merics-analysis/infographicchina-mapping/china-mapping/>

¹³ Gisela Grieger, “One Belt, One Road (OBOR): China's regional integration initiative”, *European Parliamentary Research Service. Briefing to European Parliament*, July 2016, 4-5

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 5

twice the annual gross domestic product (GDP) of China, or 29% of global GDP).¹⁵ The five key cooperation priorities for the project, as highlighted by the Chinese Government include policy coordination, facilitate connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people to people bond.¹⁶

DIPLOMATIC / POLITICAL INFLUENCE

China is using OBOR to ensure a substantial increase in its diplomatic and political power in international interactions. Using developmental projects to further its political goals has recently become a key consideration for China. The fact that official Chinese action plan on OBOR has been jointly prepared by Foreign and Commerce ministry justifies the importance of project as a diplomatic/political tool.¹⁷ As per the action plan, Chinese President and PM have visited more than 20 countries in a short span of time to promote the OBOR project in bilateral and multilateral forums.¹⁸

Professor Ming Du, an expert in Chinese and comparative law at Surrey University claims that with the finalization of action plan in 2015, OBOR has become the centrepiece of its foreign policy.¹⁹ Similarly, Dr Feng Zhang, a Chinese foreign policy expert at Australian National University gives another interesting geo-political perspective by terming the project as Chinese counteroffensive to the United States Asia-Pacific pivot, which was aimed to contain Chinese growing political influence. He argues

¹⁵ Feng Zhang, "China as a Global Force". *Special Issue - Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, volume 3, 2015, 123

¹⁶ National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, with State Council authorization, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Vision & Actions)*, March 2015. www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1249618.shtml

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Michael, M. Du, "China's One Belt, One Road Initiative: Context, Focus, Institutions, and Implications", *The Chinese Journal of Global Governance* 2, 2016, 31

that OBOR is Chinese pivot to whole Eurasia with greater focus on regional diplomacy and backed by solid financial contribution, thereby rivaling US policy of pivot.²⁰ Another important political consideration of the OBOR is its comparison to “US Marshall Plan” during the Cold War, whereby China is using loans and investment to stimulate growth and prosperity in the lesser developed regions of Asia and in the process gain unimpeded political and diplomatic power in Asia like United States did it in Europe.²¹

The political and diplomatic significance of OBOR for China cannot be underestimated because it is a project of gigantic proportion engaging a substantial population of approximate 4.4 billion, a large number of important states (to some estimate 64) and numerous regions of the world including South East Asia, South Asia, and CARs.²² Post-World War rise of Germany and Japan based on economic strength and fall of USSR due to lack of such, reinforces the concept that future political dominance will be largely centered on relative economic influence. Another aspect is that United States disengaged significantly from Central Asia after Afghanistan drawdown which provided an opportunity for China to make inroads into the region. The fact that Chinese president announced the project in Kazakhstan and linked it to the revival of historic silk route highlights Chinese political overtures for the region. Moreover the idea of Chinese pivot to Eurasia is supplemented by the fact that Russia has aligned its own Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with OBOR.²³ It is also being used to further strengthen its position and influence in multilateral organizations like Shanghai Corporation

²⁰ Feng Zhang, “China as a Global Force”. *Special Issue - Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, volume 3, 2015, 125

²¹ Yu, Hong. “Motivation behind China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank”. *Journal of Contemporary China*, November 2016, 6

²² Feng Zhang, “China as a Global Force”. *Special Issue - Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, volume 3, 2015, 123

²³ Gisela Grieger, “One Belt, One Road (OBOR): China's regional integration initiative”, *European Parliamentary Research Service. Briefing to European Parliament*, July 2016, 7

Organization (SCO) and China – ASEAN free trade area. Although scholars like Hong Zhao, a researcher on political economy in China and Southeast Asia at ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore has argued that OBOR is significantly different from US Marshall Plan which had strong political conditions attached to it, was limited to countries allied with US centric Western and capitalist ideas and was primarily conducted through Government based institutions.²⁴ On the other hand OBOR is open to all countries of the region irrespective of political affiliations and will involve both private and public sectors of Chinese economy²⁵. However, these are differences of the implementation mechanisms or the means between the OBOR and Marshall plan. The overall concept, intentions and the end behind the two remain very similar i.e. political power in a region in particular and the world in general. In fact in the same article, Hong Zhao writes that “Beijing will use OBOR for its emerging diplomatic ambitions and for ‘the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’”.²⁶

ECONOMIC DOMINANCE

Within the context of national power, OBOR also contributes towards increased Chinese economic dominance in the world. Although, revitalizing domestic economy was a major motivation for initiating OBOR, however, the overarching purpose is to use geo-economy as tool for application of its national power. Chinese Government itself lists “connectivity” and “unimpeded trade” as two of the five key cooperation priorities for the project.²⁷ Connectivity refers to the economic activity of the construction and up

²⁴ Zhao Hong, “Trends in Southeast Asia, China’s one belt one road: An overview of the debate”, *ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute*, 2016, 19

²⁵ *Ibid*, 19

²⁶ *Ibid*, 15

²⁷ National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, with State Council authorization, *Vision and Actions on*

gradation of the communication infrastructure in the region, while unimpeded trade means ensuring that goods are transported along the route and in the region through simple custom procedure and easy market access.²⁸ Dr Feng Zang argues that “Internationally, the project is China’s economic diplomacy for enhancing its international economic and financial clout”.²⁹ He also states that “‘One Belt, One Road’ project, if it succeeds, will produce a Sino-centric Eurasian economic system with China at the centre.”³⁰ Similarly, to fund the projects of OBOR, China has established Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) providing 50 billion US dollars or half of its start-up capital.³¹ More than 57 countries have already joined the bank including US close allies Canada, UK, Germany, France, Australia and South Korea cementing the fact that China is spearheading an economic challenge to Western dominated World Bank.³² Dr Yu Hong, a senior research fellow at the East Asian Institute of National University of Singapore summarizes its significance as “AIIB is hence an important financial tool for China in increasing its geo economic influence in the region and increasing the international momentum of the OBOR strategy.”³³

OBOR is a project of immense economic value to China. Chinese rise as a global force in last few decades has been on the basis of its strong economic development, resulting in excessive financial capital in terms of foreign exchange and robust capacity

Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Vision & Actions), March 2015. www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1249618.shtml

²⁸ Gisela Grieger, “One Belt, One Road (OBOR): China’s regional integration initiative”, *European Parliamentary Research Service. Briefing to European Parliament*, July 2016, 4

²⁹ Feng Zhang, “China as a Global Force”. *Special Issue - Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, volume 3. 2015, 125

³⁰ *Ibid*, 125

³¹ John Wong, “China’s “one belt, one road” Initiative: economic diplomacy with Chinese characteristics”, *Silk Road Forum*, 2015, 7

³² *Ibid*, 7

³³ Hong Yu, “Motivation behind China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank”, *Journal of Contemporary China*, November 2016, 7

for infrastructure development. Thus, OBOR is a logical upward trajectory to expand its economic power beyond its immediate borders in a coherent, organized and deliberate manner. The concept of connectivity and unimpeded trade are actually the means to ensure that without any formal multilateral binding trade agreement which often involves tedious negotiations and controversial conditions, China would be able to trade its goods and gain significant market access along the regions of OBOR. Starting of OBOR project is not a random, spur of the moment idea. In fact, it is the continuation of number of closely inter-related economic proposals which were already under some stage of planning or implementation like China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) or economic projects under Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).³⁴ Although Justyna Szczudlik, a Chinese foreign policy expert at the Polish Institute of International Affairs argues that OBOR is not a political or economic tool rather a Chinese effort to diversify domestic economy and contribution to global economy.³⁵ However, this argument is based on Chinese official interpretation and does not represent the broad opinion of academics and experts. In fact, OBOR allows regional economies to become extensively dependent on Chinese investment, capital and trade products thus establishing Chinese economic dominance in the region and in the world.

INFORMATION / SOFT POWER PROJECTION

OBOR is being effectively used by China for information application of national power, mainly focussing on projecting its soft power image. One of the key cooperation

³⁴ Yunling, Zhang. "One Belt, One Road: A Chinese View". *Global Asia*, Fall 2015, Volume 10, Issue 3.

³⁵ Justyna Szczudlik Tatar, "One Belt, One Road": Mapping China's New Diplomatic Strategy, *Bulletin, the Polish Institute of International Affairs*, July 2015, 2

priorities of the Chinese national action plan is the “people to people bond”.³⁶ It states that, “We should carry forward the spirit of friendly cooperation of the Silk Road by promoting extensive cultural and academic exchanges, personnel exchanges....., so as to win public support for deepening bilateral and multilateral cooperation”.³⁷ Dr Kingsley Edney, a lecturer in politics and international relations of China at University of Leeds highlights the informational campaign of China as, “it is possible for this kind of grand vision for regional development (OBOR) to also generate admiration for and attraction to China”.³⁸ In fact, Tim Winter, a research professor at Deakin University, Melbourne suggests that OBOR is actually a type of “heritage diplomacy”, in which histories of silk and other trading goods together with the ideas of civilization, legacies and traditions are used to shape the future of cooperation.³⁹ Under Silk Road project, China, Central Asian Republics (CARs) and other participating countries are working closely to nominate UNESCO heritage sites along the route and develop a comprehensive preservation strategy for them, hence another aspect of soft power projection through culture and information.⁴⁰

Despite of its low key foreign policy, often based on subtle non-committal approach, Chinese rise has been looked as a threat to Western dominance on global stage. One of the major reasons was that China lacked an articulate policy and implementation tool to project its peaceful image across the world. With OBOR initiative, China has

³⁶ National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, with State Council authorization, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Vision & Actions)*, March 2015. www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1249618.shtml

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Kingsley Edney, “Implications for China’s soft power under Xi Jinping”, China Policy Institute Analysis, <https://cpianalysis.org/2016/04/05/chinas-soft-power-under-xi-jinping/>

³⁹ Tim Winter, “Heritage diplomacy along the One Belt One Road”, *International Institute for International Studies newsletter 74*, Summer 2016.

⁴⁰ Ibid

achieved both; a concept as well a framework to aggressively pursue a soft power policy through an organized information campaign. Chinese Government machinery and state media is making lot of efforts to dispel negative perceptions about the project. The cooperation, connectivity and people to people bond aspect of the OBOR are being propagated to gain goodwill for China. Even associating the project with historical Silk route is an effort to show to the world that OBOR will bring peace, free trade and prosperity for the region like the historic silk route did few centuries ago. As Tim Winter highlights, “One of the lessons of the original Silk Road was that cross border trade and cultural exchange build mutual respect and trust”.⁴¹ OBOR is an exact manifestation of that concept. It will contribute towards Chinese respect and trust amongst the population of many of the participating states; an ideal soft power projection.

GEO-STRATEGIC / SECURITY IMPORTANCE

The military significance of OBOR for China is closely associated with its geo-strategic and security aspect. Chinese burgeoning economy is hugely dependent on uninterrupted energy supplies through maritime routes. However, its energy security is threatened by US influence in South East Asia, sometimes stated as Malacca dilemma for China.⁴² China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), often referred to as flagship of OBOR significantly addresses this issue by creating alternative energy routes, based on gas and oil pipelines running from Gawadar to Xingjian and bypassing Malacca strait.⁴³ Dipankar Banerjee, a retired Indian military officer and a leading security expert gives an

⁴¹ Tim Winter, “Heritage diplomacy along the One Belt One Road”, *International Institute for International Studies newsletter 74*, Summer 2016

⁴² Global Risks Insights, “Special Report: Can China overcome the Malacca Dilemma through OBOR and CPEC?” March 2017, <http://globalriskinsights.com/2017/03/china-overcome-malacca-dilemma-obor-cpec/>

⁴³ Ibid

interesting geo-strategic facet of the OBOR initiative. He refers to the two independent but interrelated theories of the “Heartland” and “Rimland” of global domination put forward by Halford Mackinder in 1905 and Nicholas John Spykman few decades later, respectively.⁴⁴ Mackinder argues that whoever rules Eurasia dominates the world, while Spykman counter argues that whoever rules the strip of coastal land that encircles Eurasia will have global domination.⁴⁵ Banarjee states that “Both the Heartland and the Rimland concepts are incorporated in the two principal arms of OBOR”.⁴⁶ The land based silk route is Chinese geo political dominance over Eurasia, while maritime silk route can be easily linked to the Rimland dominance.

Chinese global rise is not without its consequences. Despite of the “peaceful rise of China” over the last two decades, it faced geo-strategic challenges from competing global and regional powers. US have maintained significant military presence in South China Sea and provide military support to Taiwan, Philippines, Vietnam; states that challenge Chinese dominance. Japan has been a traditional competitor to Chinese influence in East and South East Asia. India is often considered a regional rival to China on the basis of territorial disputes and dominance of Indian Ocean. OBOR in a way is the Chinese answer to these challenges. China will be able to establish numerous ports along maritime silk route especially in Thailand, Malaysia and Bangladesh. Its South East Land Corridor will allow enhanced cooperation with the regional countries thereby reducing Japanese and US dominance. While the access to ports in Indian Ocean, often referred to as Chinese “strings of pearls” strategy and significant investment in China Pakistan

⁴⁴ Dipankar Banerjee, “China’s One Belt One Road Initiative – An Indian Perspective”, *Perspective, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute*, March 2016, 4

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 4

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 4-5

economic corridor, will offset Indian advantage. Another implication of OBOR is its linkage to “China’s “New Security Concept for Asia” as highlighted by David Cohen.⁴⁷ This concept states that in Asia, China is redefining itself as the regional security provider rather than US, but based on developmental economic dependence rather than providing physical security.⁴⁸ Since OBOR is a project that encapsulates Chinese effort of development in the region, thus it can be linked to the new security concept. On the other hand, Tim Summers, an assistant professor on politics of contemporary China at the Chinese University of Hong Kong argues that OBOR is not a geo-strategic maneuver rather a state led solution to link the provincial regional economic plans to the development of infrastructure across Eurasia; a concept which he refers as “spatial fix”.⁴⁹ However, this argument is based on concept of “connectivity” and “importance of China’s various regions” as highlighted in the Chinese official document.⁵⁰ It is just a narrow interpretation of the entire OBOR initiative and fails to take into the wide scope of the project, including all the variables related to geo-strategic importance. Any economic project of this magnitude cannot be separated from its geo-political implications. Interestingly, Tim Summers himself does not deny the geo-political

⁴⁷ David Cohen, “A Clash of Security Concepts’: China’s Effort to Redefine Security”, *China Brief*, Volume: 14, June 2014 <https://jamestown.org/program/a-clash-of-security-concepts-chinas-effort-to-redefine-security/#.VcSDVU0w-Ul>

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Tim Summers, “China’s ‘New Silk Roads’: Sub-national regions and networks of global political economy”, *Third World Quarterly*, 2016, 1637-1638

⁵⁰ National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, with State Council authorization, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Vision & Actions)*, March 2015. www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1249618.shtml

relevance altogether and refers to the opinion of some commentators, that OBOR is “a geopolitical desire to enhance China’s power and influence”.⁵¹

CONCLUSION

For the world, OBOR is an ambitious project to connect the greater Eurasian region through infrastructure development, trade and economic cooperation. But for China, it is more than that. It is an economic tool to not only address its domestic trade and commercial concerns, but to enhance its economic ascendancy in the region and the world to the level, where it will be able to establish a Sino centric monopoly. It is a diplomatic and political tool to further its influence on international forums and regional countries, making them ever more dependent on China. It is mainly a geo strategic tool to address its security weaknesses and a counter play to world and regional powers dominance. Last but not the least; OBOR is an ideal platform for China to project its soft image by dispelling the confrontational perception and displaying to the world that China is more than just burgeoning economic power house. This paper has made an argument that OBOR is a comprehensive, well thought out and carefully executed geo strategic initiative of China. The project is an excellent manifestation of utilizing all elements of national power and it will ensure that China’s rise on the world stage continues unabated. It is also important to note that the project is at varying stages of implementation and not without significant challenges. The quantifiable measure of success and failure will appear over the period of time, depending upon the progress of the overall project. However, the significance of the OBOR initiative for China in particular and region in general is unquestionable.

⁵¹ Tim Summers, “China’s ‘New Silk Roads’: Sub-national regions and networks of global political economy”, *Third World Quarterly*, 2016, 1638

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