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The “Polar Silk Road” and Chinese interests in the Arctic

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Introduction

The Arctic is experiencing rapid changes as a result of global warming and more intense human activities therein. Sovereignty claims and competition to acquire its resources have characterized the last few years, involving not only circumpolar nations but also the ones from outside the Arctic Circle. For this reason, now more than ever the far north is a worldwide stake: because of climate change, the events happening there will affect the future of the whole mankind. Huge energy and mining reserves will be available soon thanks to melting ice, which will also allow navigation through new maritime routes. Moreover, the North Pole region has favoured modern forms of governance, promoting cooperation among several countries and welcoming the collaboration of non-Arctic states as well. Recently, the Arctic has been attractive to many, especially to China: its attention to polar riches had increased so much that on January 2018 the government officialised its vision about the Arctic in a white paper, highlighting the importance of Chinese commitment to the region development.

Beijing has gained greater centrality on the international stage, in particular since 2013, when President Xi Jinping proposed the grandiose design of reviving the ancient *Silk Road* for the first time. Later referred to as the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), the project responds primarily to China’s need for energy resources due to its accelerated economic growth; indeed, enormous investments in land and port infrastructure are mainly directed at facilitating oil and gas imports. In addition, the financing of ports, roads and railways aims to enhance international trade, in line with the domestic strategy of opening up to the outside world. The initiative goal to embrace and benefit as many countries as possible extends even to the Arctic, where Beijing’s fate intersects that of Moscow.

The Russian Arctic is becoming increasingly important from both an economic and geopolitical point of view: immense natural resources and shorter sea passages make this space extremely profitable, while diplomatic tensions around it put Russia and its strategies at the centre of the international relations system. Hence, the effects of Arctic

transformations at the global level will depend on Moscow's perception and evaluation of this area.

Essentially, this thesis focuses on the Arctic extension of the most famous BRI and on the stakes that China has in the far north. The main objective is to address the following questions: which geopolitical background is the proposal to build a "Polar Silk Road" inserted in? What are the future prospects for Chinese participation in Arctic affairs? In general, the work is organized in four sections: starting from an overview of China's foreign policy in recent decades, the text moves to the description of the BRI ambitious plan; then it proceeds with the presentation of the country's interests in the Arctic and related proofs.

More specifically, chapter I traces how China's assertive approach to diplomacy originated. Inward-oriented until the late seventies, it had an exception in the decolonization process culminated in the Bandung Conference, with Chinese representatives expressing a spirit of friendship and cooperation towards "Third World countries". Afterwards, space is given to policies and ideas that complied with globalization, properly contextualised in the "Five-Year Plans" during which they were introduced. The "Going Out" strategy - pushing domestic firms to invest abroad - and China's admission to the *World Trade Organization* (WTO) are the first examples. The theory of "Peaceful Development" (former "Peaceful Rise") followed, combining modernization and internal growth with international peace. The 11th "Five-Year Plan" (2006-2010) prioritized a better regional integration and the development of rural west; it also proposed the concept of "harmonious society", consisting in balancing political, economic, environmental and legal aspects to achieve social stability. Started in 2012, the Xi Jinping era is marked by the "China Dream" (all-round renewal to restore the state leading position worldwide) and the goals to build a «moderately prosperous society» and a «harmonious socialist modern country» by 2021 and 2049 respectively. The so-called "Peripheral Diplomacy" based on good relations with the neighbourhood was also established to help attain these targets. The Chinese President then launched the idea of "Community of Common Destiny", meaning that different peoples share the same future and concerns and presenting it as the greatest aim of the BRI. The latter appeared

in the 13th “Five-Year Plan” too, serving as a driver to improve western connectivity through regional and interregional nodes and infrastructure.

The BRI is explored in chapter II, which begins by describing the 2013 proposals to build the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. One would boost cooperation across Eurasia on land, the other at sea. Initially translated as “One Belt One Road” (OBOR), the project was later called BRI not to restrict the range of multiple infrastructure linking Asian and Europe. According to the Chinese, it is above all an economic strategy also for the benefit of neighbouring states. However, it clearly aims at facilitating connectivity among nations in «policy coordination, infrastructure construction, trade facilitation, financial integration and people-to-people exchanges». The presentation of the financial institutions that fund the plan comes after; the *Silk Road Fund*, the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* and the *New Development Bank* contribute the most. The description of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” implies mentioning the six economic corridors that together make up the BRI. Furthermore, the first Chinese overseas military base in Djibouti for logistic and security purposes is pointed out. The idea of an Arctic extension for the renowned initiative concludes the section. Formalized in a white paper in January 2018, the “Polar Silk Road” would consist in a passage through the Arctic to promote its sustainable development. Global warming has caused icy waters to melt, opening up shorter, safer and less polluting shipping lanes compared to the traditional way via Suez. Therefore, everyone is attracted by new Arctic opportunities in terms of trade, energy supply and resource development, China included.

Chapter III opens with some features of the far north. Several international agreements regulate the sovereignty of coastal nations there, but non-Arctic states share freedoms in the high seas of the Arctic Ocean in any case. By virtue of these rights, the Chinese declared their vision of and intentions in the region in the 2018 “China’s Arctic Policy”. They pursue the goals of understanding, protecting, developing and participating in the governance of the Arctic. Next, five areas of Chinese interest are examined, as they appear in the white paper: «deepening the exploration and understanding of the Arctic; protecting the eco-environment of the Arctic and addressing climate change; utilizing Arctic resources in a lawful and rational manner; participating actively in Arctic

governance and international cooperation; and promoting peace and stability in the Arctic». The text continues presenting China's position on the Arctic before the policy release, mentioning its application to become an Observer to the Arctic Council and its special relation with Iceland. Nonetheless, according to the Chinese the primary stake in the polar region is scientific research. The expansion of Beijing's strategy to the north has its foundation in its new international role, as reported at the end of the section. In fact, China already ranks first in the world economy, outdoing the US at *purchasing power parity* (PPP) and currently accounting for 19% of global GDP. Additionally, Ignazio Musu's analysis of contemporary China provides an interesting insight to understand its transformation into a world power.

The fourth and last chapter focuses on the evidence of Beijing's interests in Arctic shipping, natural resources and scientific issues. Regarding navigation, the involvement of the Chinese is most tangible in the Northwest Passage (NWP) and in the Northeast Passage (NEP, also defined Northern Sea Route - NSR): they first navigated the former in 2017, although its commercial feasibility is lower than the latter one due to thicker ice. Actually, if it is true that the NSR allows tremendous time and fuel savings on the way from China to Europe, still it is a *complement* rather than an alternative to Suez. Russian huge investments in the NSR are interconnected with the Chinese presence in the Arctic, in view of a cooperation to build the "Polar Silk Road". Nevertheless, increasing shipping activities in the north pose serious environmental concerns, to which Beijing is sensitive. Then, the text addresses Arctic resource development: attention is paid to China's cooperation with Russia on the "Yamal LNG" project and its engagement in infrastructure building. The country's intervention in the region also affects fishing, as testified by an important agreement signed in 2018. Finally, scientific research is presented as a further proof of Chinese commitment in the Arctic, particularly in relation to the latest Sino-Russian (strategic) collaboration in this field.

Concluding remarks outline a complex foreign policy framework around the Arctic, involving Washington, Beijing and Moscow. Progressively stronger ties emerge between China and Russia, which is supposed to decide the future directions of the northernmost region of the world.

CHAPTER I

CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

1.1 Premise

The People's Republic of China, the most populous country in the world according to estimates of the *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA)*¹, has gained a new position at the diplomatic and economic level² and consequently in the international arena. It was only in recent times that China registered an unprecedented growth due above all to the country integration into the global trade system, but also to a stringent policy; this determined different business and financial relations in the world, shaping the new Chinese role towards both advanced and developing countries³.

As a matter of fact, generally speaking, between 1949 and the seventies China's foreign policy was widely affected by a centralized approach to international issues, as argued by Graziani and Samarani (2017): efforts to maintain an autonomous ruling over domestic as well as foreign policy were made to oppose American and Soviet attempts of geopolitical submission. Indeed, being the Maoist period essentially characterized by a rural society, the main political actions were addressed to the country internal needs⁴. Despite the condition of international marginality in a broader sense, in those years China developed a diplomacy that was substantially oriented to the "Third World"⁵,

¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017), *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision, DVD Edition*: <https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>. See estimates related to China in the Standard Projections file "Total Population - Both Sexes".

² Castelnovi, M. (2015), *Cina, Demografia e geografia economica* (entry), in *Enciclopedia Treccani*, Appendice IX, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma, p. 261: <http://hdl.handle.net/10278/3680361>.

³ Smargiassi, G. (2015), *Cina, Politica economica e finanziaria* (entry), in *Enciclopedia Treccani*, Appendice IX, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma, p. 264: <http://hdl.handle.net/10278/3680361>.

⁴ Cavalieri, R. (2015), *Brics: una nuova geografia economica?* in ID. *et al.* (eds.), Franco Angeli, Milano, vol. 1, p. 52: <http://hdl.handle.net/10278/3680858>.

⁵ Expression coined by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952 indicating a group of countries that did not belong to the Western bloc or the Soviet bloc and shared common features like underdevelopment and high population growth. Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (2017), *The emergence of the Third World*: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_emergence_of_the_third_world-en-908b6884-2751-481c-877c-a97058fc8251.html.

feeling part of it and behaving as its authoritative leader (Samarani, 2017). For this reason, it is worth outlining the Chinese position during the decolonization phase - especially in the context of the Bandung Conference - before examining the major changes that have occurred in the country foreign policy over the last two decades.

1.2 China's role in the decolonization process: the Bandung Conference

After the end of World War II, many Asian countries stated their independence while a number of African peoples were still trying to free themselves from colonization⁶. Therefore the Bandung Conference, also referred to as the Asian-African Conference, was called in Indonesia from 18th to 24th April 1955⁷. It gathered participants from twenty-nine states, i.e.: Afghanistan, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the People's Republic of China, Egypt, Ethiopia, the Gold Coast (Ghana), India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Laos, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Turkey, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnam and Yemen⁸.

Bringing together the representatives of countries that accounted for almost two-thirds of the world population, the meeting denoted a time to stand out against European imperialism, a time for political changes and new scenarios⁹. On that occasion, the President of Indonesia Soekarno declared that «[...] we (members of the conference) were from different nations, different historical social and cultural background, different religion, different politics, and even different colour of skin, though it was so, we could be united, united by bitter experience of colonization and by the same wish and fight in promoting world peace»¹⁰. Indeed those leaders reunited in Bandung to claim their independence and reject to align with the USA or the USSR, because they wanted

⁶ Museum Konperensi Asia-Afrika, *The History of the Asian-African Conference*: <http://asianafrikanmuseum.org/en/sejarah-konferensi-asia-afrika/>.

⁷ China Daily (2005), *The Bandung Conference of 1955*, 20th April 2005: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-04/20/content_435929.htm.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Fakhri, M., Reynolds, K. (2017), *The Bandung Conference*, Oxford Bibliographies, 30th March 2017: <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199796953/obo-9780199796953-0150.xml#obo-9780199796953-0150-bibliItem-0001>.

¹⁰ See note 6. The whole speech was called "Let a New Asia and a New Africa be Born".

decolonization and freedom, as well as peaceful coexistence, economic development and non-intervention in domestic affairs¹¹. Nevertheless, the participating states held dissimilar positions at the conference: delegates from Burma, Egypt, India, and Indonesia were “non-aligned” and therefore neutral, whereas the ones from Ceylon, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Philippines, and Lebanon were anti-communist and favoured the West; finally China and North Vietnam were communist countries with ambiguous relations with the USSR¹².

The conference resulted in the so-called “Final Communiqué” about the following themes: economic cooperation; cultural cooperation; human rights and rights for self-determination; colonies problems; and declaration in promoting world peace and international cooperation¹³. The “Final Communiqué” ended with the “Ten Principles of Bandung”, a ten-point declaration unanimously adopted that promoted world peace and international cooperation and conformed to the principles of the UN Charter¹⁴. In the end, the Bandung Conference strongly opposed imperialism and it allowed “Third-World” countries to arise on the global stage¹⁵, highlighting the idea that any community and culture had a central function in international law, not just the European powers¹⁶.

However, during the meeting, attempts to murder the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and split the assembly were made, causing the death of three Chinese representatives, besides other Chinese and foreign journalists. In spite of this, China embraced a positive approach and it promoted cohesion among countries for peace, defended national independence and laid the foundation for setting and improving the relationships with the participating states¹⁷. Premier Zhou Enlai supported non-aligned countries¹⁸ and played a key role in conciliating between some anti-communist leaders

¹¹ Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (2017), *The Bandung Conference*: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_bandung_conference-en-3da59f16-567b-4b2d-8060-4c2482e56dd9.html.

¹² See note 9.

¹³ See note 6.

¹⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica (2018), *Bandung Conference, Asia-Africa [1955]*: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Bandung-Conference>.

¹⁵ See note 11.

¹⁶ See note 9.

¹⁷ See note 7.

¹⁸ Encyclopædia Britannica (2019), *Zhou Enlai, Premier of China*, 13th February 2019: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zhou-Enlai#ref978341>.

about China's position¹⁹. Furthermore, he announced that the Chinese delegation truly desired peace and friendship and that the conference would have overcome any sabotage and succeeded. Although some states condemned communism and suspected China of undermining stability in neighbouring countries, he affirmed: «The Chinese Delegation has come here to seek unity and not to quarrel, to seek common ground and not to create divergences. There exists common ground among the Asian and African countries the basis of which is that the overwhelming Asian and African countries and their peoples have suffered and are still suffering from the calamities of colonialism. All the Asian and African countries gained their independence from colonialist rule whether these countries are led by the communist or nationalists. We should seek to understand each other and respect each other, sympathize with and support one another and the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence may completely serve as a basis for us to establish relations of friendship and cooperation and good neighbourliness». Eventually China's representatives not only encouraged the pursuit of common goals and the smoothing of differences, but also increased connection and cooperation with other countries, thus contributing to the successful outcome of the Bandung Conference²⁰.

1.3 Signals of change in Chinese foreign policy

The eighties marked the start of a policy agenda aimed at developing a process of modernization and opening up under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC)²¹. Nonetheless, it was around the end of the following decade that China's foreign policy showed an increasing attention to globalization, as evidenced by the implementation of the so-called "Going Out" strategy - also said "Going Global" strategy or "Go Out" policy - and the admission to the *World Trade Organization* (WTO). At the same time, China became more and more aware of the importance of its image on the

¹⁹ See note 15.

²⁰ See note 7.

²¹ Samarani, G. (2015), *Cina, Storia* (entry), in *Enciclopedia Treccani*, Appendice IX, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma, p. 266: <http://hdl.handle.net/10278/3680361>.

outside world and it realized that its choices about major global issues were carefully observed by other states and international entities²².

1.3.1 "Going Out" strategy

Launched in 1999, the "Going Out" strategy tried to replace the self-reliance typical of Mao's government by encouraging domestic companies to profit from flourishing international trade to invest overseas: this indeed reflected the country desire for global leadership and collaboration²³. Thus, a growing number of Chinese firms set up businesses abroad starting from the 21st century²⁴. Hongying and XueYing (2017) report that "according to the American Enterprise Institute's China Global Investment Tracker, Chinese outbound foreign direct investment (OFDI) *flow* rose annually, from \$10.2 billion in 2005 to \$92.8 billion in 2014"; in less than ten years, China turned from a state with few outgoing investments to the third largest direct investor in the world. In addition, late studies forecast that - based on the current data - the Chinese stock of OFDI will reach \$1-2 trillion by 2020²⁵.

Since China has come up as a major FDI-originating country after thirty years as fundamentally a recipient, it is important to consider the driving forces of the country new attitude towards foreign policy, above all the impact of domestic politics and political economy. In this regard, Hongying (2016) argues that domestic politics has defined the way China fosters the internationalization of its currency, the renminbi (RMB). The state control of finance has always been vital even to dominate local authorities and large companies; then in order to protect such power in promoting the currency international use, the government has opted for offshore RMB centres. In the last few years, China has also found a channel for RMB internationalization in the so-called Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which will be further explored in Chapter II.

²² Graziani, S., Samarani, G. (2017), "La politica estera cinese in prospettiva storica", *Nuova Secondaria*, 34, pp. 30-33: <https://www.lumsa.it/sites/default/files/UTENTI/u78/08%20APRILE%202017.pdf>.

²³ China Policy (2017), *China Going Global, between ambition and capacity*, Beijing, April 2017: <https://policycn.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-Chinas-going-global-strategy.pdf>.

²⁴ Hongying, W., Xueying, H. (2017) "China's "Going-Out" Strategy and Corporate Social Responsibility: Preliminary Evidence of a "Boomerang Effect"", *Journal of Contemporary China*, 26:108, pp. 820-833: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2017.1337301>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Concerning national political economy, the issues with the old growth model, the new relationship between the administration and state-owned companies and banks, and the general discontent with the foreign reserves management were responsible for raising OFDI and aid programmes. Moreover some features of the “Go Out” policy, for instance the link between foreign aid and exports, resource-backed investment financing and scarce corporate social responsibility by Chinese firms overseas, are entrenched in the domestic institutions²⁶.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the strategy in object was issued in the context of the Ninth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (1996-2000). Accompanied by the “Long-Range Objectives to the Year 2010”, it was the first medium-term plan delivered by a socialist market economy and its primary goals were: to realize the modernization process; to limit population growth to 300 million by 2000; to quadruple per capita GNP compared to 1980; to eradicate poverty; and to accelerate the formation of a modern enterprise system²⁷. According to a report on the Outline of the Ninth Five-Year Plan, the path of economic development that China was following would have been reinforced by the making of reforms and opening up to the outside world. The latter is a recurring concept that is bound to many factors, first the relationships between reform, development and stability; in fact, if reform is the basis for the country development, political and social stability is the precondition for both. Second, «the shift from a planned economy to a socialist market economy and from extensive mode to intensive mode in economic growth» to be achieved through more adequate allocation of resources, economies of scale and scientific and technological progress²⁸.

To conclude, Chinese imports and exports at the turn of the century proved remarkable: indeed they increased by 69% and 67% respectively compared to 1995, with a total

²⁶ Hongying, W. (2016), “A Deeper Look at China’s “Going Out” Policy”, Centre for International Governance Innovation, Commentary, March 2016: https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/hongying_wang_mar2016_web.pdf.

²⁷ China.org.cn, *The 9th Five-Year Plan (1996-2000)*: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/MATERIAL/157627.htm>.

²⁸ Li, P. (1996), *Report on the Outline of the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1996-2000) for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-range Objectives to the Year 2010 (Excerpts)*, delivered at the Fourth Session of the Eighth National People’s Congress on March 5, 1996: <http://www.china.org.cn/95e/95-english1/2.htm>.

volume of \$474.3 billion in 2000 and exports amounting at \$249.2 billion²⁹. Therefore, under the Ninth Five-Year Plan, China has opened to the outside world reforming the foreign trade system and developing an export-oriented economy³⁰.

1.3.2 Admission to the WTO

China's entrance into the WTO coincided with the first years of the "Going Out" strategy³¹ and it clearly represented the country willingness to play an active role in the international community³². After a fifteen-year negotiation, on 11th December 2001 the People's Republic of China became a member of the WTO for two main reasons: firstly, since it had acquired a relevant weight in the global trading system, its exclusion from a universal institution would have been paradoxical; secondly, the recognition of the government results in reforming and opening up was necessary³³.

Chinese economic growth was driven by investments and international opening, the latter acquiring new importance thanks to the increasing "trade openness" index, i.e. the ratio of the sum of imports and exports to the GDP: in fact, this index went from 39.7% to 63.2% in the period 2000-2005. Starting from the accession to the WTO, Chinese foreign trade expanded by 20% per year due mainly to equipment and electronic materials exchanges and foreign investments rose in the sectors of services, telecommunications, banking, financial, insurance and commercial services. China's opening to the outside world revealed itself also through the increase in direct investments from abroad, whose annual flow amounted to \$40 billion in 2000 and grew to 60 and then 90 billion dollars in 2005 and 2009 respectively. Moreover, such opening process was marked by a strong link between the promotion of exports and the development of investments from abroad; indeed foreign investors were encouraged to finance companies which in turn exported, the so-called Foreign Invested Enterprises (FIE), and that have become crucial to widen Chinese international trade (almost 90% of

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ People's Daily Online, *Facts & Figures: China's Progress in 9th 5-Year Plan Period*: <http://en.people.cn/features/lianghui/2001030600A185.html>.

³¹ See note 22.

³² Samarani, G. (2017), *La Cina contemporanea. Dalla fine dell'Impero ad oggi*, Einaudi, Torino.

³³ Cavalieri, R. (2003), *L'adesione della Cina alla WTO: implicazioni giuridiche*, Argo, Lecce.

high technology products is exported by them). At the beginning, the connection between foreign investments and firms materialized in the form of joint ventures and development projects with the presence of local partners, but after 2001 the foreign company has become autonomous and it can operate without Chinese partners³⁴.

China's admission to the WTO also occurred at the same time of the issue of the Tenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2001-2005). Chinese firms could increase their global competitiveness thanks to their right to access WTO markets, for which the government had engaged in important internal market-opening concessions³⁵. Indeed «making reform and opening up and technological progress the driving force» of the country economic development was a major guiding principle described in the Report on the Outline of the Tenth Five-Year Plan³⁶. The latter explains that China would have continued with reforms and a wider opening to the outside world in order to encourage growth, as well as with other relevant actions. First, the government planned to stimulate state-owned companies to embrace the share-holding system and list their shares on the stock market, so that they could compete internationally; second, it urged the improvement of market laws and regulations and supervision systems; third, it considered necessary to revise finance, taxation, banking and investment. In addition, it was felt the need to set up foreign trade and economic cooperation suitable to both international and national rules, with a focus on exporting high-end products and technology; regarding imports, it was stressed the importance of advanced technology, basic equipment and essential raw and processed materials. Lastly, the state would have favoured foreign investments in the central and western areas of the country, as well as the continuation of the "Going Out" strategy, inviting companies to invest abroad, to employ foreign resources with local partners and increase labour export³⁷.

³⁴ Musu, I. (2011), *La Cina contemporanea*, Il Mulino, Bologna.

³⁵ Nash, P. (2012), *China's "Going Out" Strategy*, Diplomatic Courier, 10th May 2012: <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/china-s-going-out-strategy/>.

³⁶ The State Council of the People's Republic of China, *Report on the Outline of the Tenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2001)*, delivered at the Fourth Session of the Ninth National People's Congress on March 5, 2001: http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2005-07/29/content_18334.htm.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

1.4 From “Peaceful Rise” to “Peaceful Development”

In the very first years of the new century, many Asian countries started to wonder about the future prospects of China’s great economic growth and its impact on stability in East Asia: it was in this general background that the theory of the “peaceful rise” came to life³⁸. It was officially exposed for the first time in 2003 by the President of the Chinese Reform Forum Zheng Bijian³⁹, who believed that China’s path aimed at combining national growth with the search for international peace and participating in the globalization process⁴⁰. Thus, the effort to boost economy was closely related to the protection of global stability and good relationships with neighbouring countries; furthermore, the concept of “rise” differed from the one during imperialism and it was intended as to achieve security in Pacific Asia through cooperation. However, since the expression “peaceful rise” caused criticism and doubts because it seemed threatening, the idea of “peaceful development” - new in form and content - was introduced⁴¹.

As a matter of fact, the *State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China* published a white paper entitled “China’s Peaceful Development Road” on 22nd December 2005⁴². The document is made up of five parts: Peaceful Development Is the Inevitable Way for China's Modernization; Promoting World Peace and Development with China's Own Growth; Developing by Relying on Its Own Strength, Reform and Innovation; Seeking Mutual Benefit and Common Development with Other Countries; and Building a Harmonious World of Sustained Peace and Common Prosperity⁴³. As noted by Graziani and Samarani (2017), the link between domestic growth and international peace is recurrent throughout the white paper. Indeed the first three parts highlight that “peaceful development” matches with the principle of peace and cooperation among peoples and that Chinese economic and social development needs a pacific international context. The last two sections instead stress China’s awareness of

³⁸ See note 22.

³⁹ Mondo Cinese (2005), *La teoria dell’“ascesa pacifica”*: alcuni contributi recenti, Mondo Cinese n. 125, ottobre-dicembre 2005: https://www.tuttocina.it/Mondo_cinese/125/125_doc1.htm.

⁴⁰ See note 22.

⁴¹ See note 22.

⁴² Gov.cn (2005), *White paper on peaceful development issued*, Thursday, 22nd December 2005: http://www.gov.cn/english/2005-12/22/content_133985.htm.

⁴³ China.org.cn (2005), *White Paper on Peaceful Development Road Published*, 22nd December 2005: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Dec/152669.htm>.

still being a developing country⁴⁴, whose per-capita GDP ranked 129th out of 208 nations and with 26.1 million poor rural inhabitants in 2004⁴⁵. The document defines the theory and practice of the peaceful development road, that is a way for China to achieve modernization by unifying internal development with opening to the outside world and linking domestic interests to the ones of the whole mankind, without seeking supremacy or threatening other states. Since China's progress is relevant to global progress, it needs a peaceful international environment: in few years, China had grown its per-capita GDP from US\$300 to US\$1,400, it had improved the political and legal system guaranteeing citizens' rights and freedom, it had enhanced education, technology and health, and it had also made efforts to keep social stability. Chinese contribution to the world peace and development is evident even in the establishment of friendly relationships with other Asian states and cooperation with major powers and developing countries: the area surrounding China benefited from its growth and peaceful attitude and some South Asian nations received aid and assistance after being hit by tsunami and earthquakes in 2004 and 2005. Moreover, despite serious global economic fluctuations, China had become a driving force to the world development contributing 13% to universal growth in the period 2000-2004. The white paper also recalls Chinese participation in international trade through the WTO, in fact since 2001 China favoured a multilateral exchange system by revising rules and regulations, improving foreign trade laws, reducing tariffs to 9.9% and opening wider to the outside world. In addition, it promoted regional economic cooperation and by 2004 it had signed bilateral trade agreements with more than 150 states. China acquired a crucial role in the international labour distribution - and consequently in the global value chain - because it had such an abundant workforce that 70% of its exports to the US, Japan and the European Union were labour-intensive, whereas 80% of its imports were capital, technology and knowledge intensive. Furthermore, a number of foreign investors gained advantage from Chinese economic growth, indeed from 1990 to 2004 they made US\$250.6 billion profits, while at the end of 2004 China's foreign direct investments in 149 states touched US\$44.8 billion, 75% of which addressed to Asia. In the end, the Peaceful Development Road embraces the idea of encouraging multilateralism in order to realize common

⁴⁴ See note 22.

⁴⁵ See note 43.

interests and security, as well as facilitating a fair and open trade and investment system for a sustainable and equitable growth. This materialized in China's support for the UN role in international affairs, the settlement of boundary issues through regional treaties and the provision of assistance to Least-Developed Countries (LDCs) in terms of debt reduction or cancellation, zero tariff treatment for certain goods and preferential loans. Such commitment to cooperation and mutual tolerance aimed exactly at enhancing exchanges and dialogue between different civilizations⁴⁶.

1.5 Eleventh "Five-Year Plan"

China's Eleventh Five-Year Plan for the period 2006-2010 defined few quantitative goals, rather it presented a broad economic programme conceived to guarantee a sustainable growth in the long run and the equal distribution of the results thereof⁴⁷. It followed two main ideas - the Scientific Concept of Development⁴⁸ and the construction of a harmonious society - and it pointed out the government strategic actions for the greater purpose of creating a wealthy society on the whole⁴⁹. During the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, the domestic economy was expected to increase by 7.5% per year thanks to the improvement of the industrial sector and energy efficiency; also, the deepening of reform and opening-up would have strengthened the market economy system, indeed by 2010 imports and exports were supposed to reach \$2.3 trillion USD and \$400 billion USD respectively. However, being "agriculture, rural areas and farmers" considered as top priority issues, the Chinese administration committed to a more balanced urban and rural development (with an urbanization rate to be raised to 47% in the countryside) and environmental protection, above all in the populated territory. For this reason, it promoted a better integration of the Eastern, Central and Western areas and the

⁴⁶ See note 43.

⁴⁷ Naughton, B. (2005), "The New Common Economic Program: China's Eleventh Five Year Plan and What It Means", *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 16: http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/clm16_bn.pdf.

⁴⁸ "Scientific development is, in essence, a euphemism used by the Chinese leaders for economic growth that takes into consideration the welfare of disadvantaged people and regions as well as environmental concerns". See Fan (2006).

⁴⁹ National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), People's Republic of China (2003), *The 11th Five-Year Plan: targets, paths and policy orientation*, 23rd March 2006: http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/200603/t20060323_63813.html.

reduction of regional disparity concerning living standards and public services⁵⁰. As reported by Fan (2006), the Plan focused on inequality and urged to allow less developed regions and its inhabitants to benefit from national economic growth. In this regard, the concept of “new socialist countryside” became decisive, as it aimed at the following targets: to raise agricultural production, ease non-agricultural sectors development and the transfer of labour to them, decrease taxation for farmers, provide better healthcare in the countryside, impose nine-year mandatory education to poor districts, and enhance rural infrastructure. Additionally, the “coordinated development among regions” acquired special importance, for it took into consideration underdeveloped zones: it was the case of “western development” to be achieved through policies and fiscal transfers to western China, but also of the reform of state-owned companies in the northeast and industrialization and urbanization in the central areas. These ideas were proposed as a response to the regional inequality that increased between the 1980s and the 1990s. Indeed the gap among eastern, central and western regions widened as the former advanced more quickly than the others, for example the average annual growth rate of per capita GDP was 11.59% in the east, against 9.71% in the central area and 9.33% in the west. Also rural-urban disparity grew from 1990 to 2004, as the average annual growth rate of urban income went from 7.75 to 10.69%, whereas the one of rural income stood at 7.2%⁵¹.

In order to promote western development, the Plan included some tangible actions mainly related to the energy field, such as the building of three channels of West-East Power Transmission Project to enlarge the power distribution network and guarantee energy supply safety at the country level; the construction of the West-East Oil Transmission and the second West-East Gas Transmission Pipeline. Similarly, an expansion of the road network was planned in the west, as well as the strengthening of

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Fan, C. (2006), “China's Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010): From "Getting Rich First" to "Common Prosperity"”, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 47:6, pp. 708-723: <https://doi.org/10.2747/1538-7216.47.6.708>.

infrastructure and the building of cross-border and transregional railways, a new channel for West-East Coal Transport and inter-provincial highways⁵².

To summarize, the increasing attention to rural development in the west (and in the inland in general) was in perfect accordance with the idea of creating a “harmonious socialist society” while seeking “common prosperity”.

1.5.1 “Harmonious Society”

The notion of “harmony” is a social ideal belonging to Chinese philosophy, particularly to Confucianism, that does not exclude opposition and disparities; it was embodied in the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010) together with the “scientific development concept” and it was embraced by the Chinese government of the time to attain social stability. The definition of “harmonious society” as «democratic and ruled by law, fair and just, trustworthy and fraternal, full of vitality, stable and orderly [...]» involved not only political and economic dimensions, but also rural and regional development, education, public health, environmental protection, and the legal and fiscal system. This idea was deemed the solution to social inequality and disputes generated by an accelerated economic growth, while the scientific development concept was the means to make China develop in a more balanced and coordinated way. Hence, the Chinese administration committed itself to “common prosperity”, i.e. the equal distribution of the fruits of economic growth, with the aim of reducing regional gaps. Moreover, it shifted the focus of development from GDP growth to putting human nature first and taking into consideration other issues; in fact, comprehensiveness was fundamental for the scientific development concept⁵³.

⁵² Asia Pacific Energy Portal, “Guidelines of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development”: <https://policy.asiapacificenergy.org/node/115>.

⁵³ Chan, K. (2009), “*Harmonious Society*” (entry), in *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, New York: Springer, pp. 821-825: https://www.cuhk.edu.hk/centre/ccss/publications/km_chan/CKM_14.pdf.

1.6 The Xi Jinping Era

On 15th November 2012, Xi Jinping became general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee⁵⁴ and he was elected China's President and chairman of the Central Military Commission on 14th March of the following year⁵⁵. After gaining leadership, Xi contributed to national renewal through strong resolutions such as heavy anti-corruption campaigns, concentration of decision-making power and implementation of his ideas about economy and domestic and foreign policy. Given the country extraordinary growth, he also tried (or better, he is still trying) to let it emerge among major global players and shortly after his election he presented the so-called "China Dream", referring to the Chinese intention to regain international centrality⁵⁶. This more pro-active attitude towards foreign policy replaced the "peaceful development" phase that characterized China in the previous decades: as a matter of fact, his vision of a renewed state with a stronger role in the world shifted diplomacy from being responsive to external changes to actively participating in the international arena⁵⁷.

1.6.1 "China Dream"

Iconic slogan of Xi Jinping's presidency, the "China Dream" relates to the economic, cultural and military renovation directed at restoring the country central position at the regional and global level⁵⁸. Although it might somehow recall the American Dream, from

⁵⁴ China.org.cn (2012), *Xi Jinping elected general secretary of CPC Central Committee*, Xinhua, 15th November 2012:

http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/201211/15/content_27121146.htm.

⁵⁵ China.org.cn (2013), *Xi Jinping takes a bow as China's president*, Xinhua, 15th March 2013: http://www.china.org.cn/china/2013-03/15/content_28249150.htm.

⁵⁶ Magri, P. (2015), Introduction to Amighini, A., Berkofsky, A. (eds.), *Xi's Policy Gambles: The Bumpy Road Ahead*, Epoké-ISPI, Novi Ligure, pp. 7-11: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/xis-policy-gambles-bumpy-road-ahead-12911>.

⁵⁷ Wacker, G. (2015), "The Irreversible Rise. A New Foreign Policy for a Stronger China" in Amighini, A., Berkofsky, A. (eds.), *Xi's Policy Gambles: The Bumpy Road Ahead*, Epoké-ISPI, Novi Ligure, pp. 65-77: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/xis-policy-gambles-bumpy-road-ahead-12911>.

⁵⁸ Magri, P. (2016), Introduction to Amighini, A., (ed.), *China Dream: Still Coming True?*, Epoké-ISPI, Novi Ligure, pp. 7-11: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/china-dream-still-coming-true-15412>.

which it differs profoundly⁵⁹, this expression substantially embodies the President's new and more assertive approach to international affairs⁶⁰.

In November 2012, Xi Jinping spoke for the first time about renewing China as «the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history», which would have led to a «moderately prosperous society in all respects» by 2021, hundredth anniversary of the CPC foundation, and an «affluent, strong, civilized and harmonious socialist modern country» within the centenary of the PRC foundation in 2049. Rejuvenation is a key concept of the China Dream, as it calls for people's responsibility to take back the central role (from the Chinese point of view) of the millennial Middle Kingdom. Actually, according to the official presentation, the China Dream does not entail the rise of the country as a superpower; rather it conveys the idea of recovering its past leading position. In this regard, such "historical" rationale also distinguishes the Chinese Dream from the American one: indeed the latter concerns the achievement of happiness and individual success, while the former is about the collective commitment to develop the whole nation, which is complementary but prior to self-realization⁶¹. However, the content, fields and objectives of the China Dream are quite nebulous and, as indicated by Amighini (2016), this allows Xi space to undertake any economic or political measures, without being tied to clear-cut results⁶².

In addition to the general considerations on the China Dream, it is worth observing that this label also includes the aspect of foreign policy because it claims greater Chinese participation in the international context. The Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) reported that China's new foreign policy was made up of the following four principles: relations with major powers (I), neighbourhood policy (II), relations with developing countries (III) and multilateral diplomacy (IV).

⁵⁹ "The American Dream [...] is a national ethos promoting the achievement of individual success without regards to birth and class origin". See Fasulo (2016).

⁶⁰ See note 58.

⁶¹ Fasulo, F. (2016), "Waking from the China Dream" in Amighini, A., (ed.), *China Dream: Still Coming True?*, Epoké-ISPI, Novi Ligure, pp. 13-31: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/china-dream-still-coming-true-15412>.

⁶² Amighini, A. (2016), "Beijing's Economy: Dream a Little Dream of China?" in ID. (ed.), *China Dream: Still Coming True?*, Epoké-ISPI, Novi Ligure, pp. 33-48: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/china-dream-still-coming-true-15412>.

- I. In 2012, Xi Jinping mentioned a “new type of major power relationship” between his country and the United States based on dialogue, and not conflict, reciprocal respect and cooperation to favour both. Russia and the European Union instead are strategic partners for China, but with different features. China approached Russia after it was sanctioned by the west because of the annexation of Crimea; moreover, both countries feared that Western pressure could cause internal clashes. Concerning the EU, it remained China’s biggest market, thus there were no relevant changes in their relationship.
- II. The idea of “greater neighbourhood” was first introduced by President Xi in 2013 and it comprised two main initiatives - the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” - which aimed at improving not only connectivity in the region but also China’s image to neighbours’ eyes in order to gain their support.
- III. China portrayed itself as the representative of the developing world and its commitment in this sense emerged within the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). In particular, Beijing contributed to the settlement of the New Development Bank, focused on infrastructure and sustainable development, and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement, a reserve currency fund.
- IV. Multilateralism is the fourth area of interest for China, which focused on organizations where the US was not present and consequently it could play a more active role. China mainly engaged in the so-called “host diplomacy”, offering to host international conferences with a positive and open attitude. Such meetings also complied with the neighbourhood policy, since the majority of them was about Asia. Interestingly, in October 2014 Beijing received twenty one states for the signing ceremony of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; a month later, China hosted the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit to encourage the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific agreement.

In conclusion, China shaped its foreign policy in such a way that it could be more powerful in newly created multilateral institutions and at the same time play a more active role in the already existing ones, usually run by the west, like the United Nations or the G-20⁶³.

1.6.2 “Peripheral Diplomacy”

The link between the China Dream and the Two Centenary Goals might explain Beijing’s special attention to neighbourhood policy. Xi Jinping himself considered a good peripheral diplomacy necessary to achieve the objectives of 2021-2049 and national rejuvenation, and he suggested working hard to realize an «excellent peripheral environment» beneficial to the development of China and neighbouring countries⁶⁴. Indeed, it was during the Work Forum on Peripheral Diplomacy held by the Communist Party of China on October 2013 that President Xi underlined the importance of a diplomatic work on the periphery⁶⁵, i.e. land and sea areas next to China⁶⁶.

One reason that motivated the meeting was to improve China’s relations with its neighbourhood and integrate periphery diplomacy in the broader strategy to accomplish national security and development. Actually, it is reasonable to assume that the forum was held for two other objectives. Firstly, mitigate tensions between Beijing and bordering states over regional and resource conflicts⁶⁷, relieve neighbours’ concern of Chinese assertiveness and raise their awareness of China’s key interests; secondly, set up a favourable environment for the country growth and, accordingly, reach new markets, ensure energy supply and develop an effective transport system through strong economic ties with neighbouring countries⁶⁸. In order to achieve the above-

⁶³ See note 57.

⁶⁴ China-US Focus (2013), *China’s Periphery Diplomacy Initiative: Implications for China Neighbors and the United States*, 7th November 2013: <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/chinas-periphery-diplomacy-initiative-implications-for-china-neighbors-and-the-united-states>.

⁶⁵ Sobol, M. (2018), “China’s peripheral diplomacy: Repeating Europe’s errors in dealing with the neighbourhood”, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, pp. 1-15, 23rd August 2018: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891118796344>.

⁶⁶ Swaine, M.D. (2014), “Chinese Views and Commentary on Periphery Diplomacy”, *China Leadership Monitor*, No. 44, 19th February 2014: <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/clm44ms.pdf>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ See note 65.

mentioned targets, China increased its commitment to nearby states by encouraging bilateral and multilateral organizations⁶⁹. Thus, the features of peripheral diplomacy complemented recent foreign policy initiatives: for instance, in September 2013 Xi Jinping visited central Asia to increase security and energy linkages within the “Look West” policy and afterwards Premier Li Keqiang signed some agreements in Southeast Asia to promote China-ASEAN (*Association of Southeast Asian Nations*) collaboration⁷⁰. However, the most relevant economic plan was the BRI - consisting of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” - that aimed to connect more than sixty countries through a huge infrastructural network⁷¹. In short, all these actions indicated that Chinese relationships with adjacent nations started a period of “upgrade, acceleration, and added power”⁷².

1.6.3 “Community of Common Destiny”

In the last few years, Xi Jinping and the Chinese administration in general have increasingly referred also to the “Community of Common Destiny” (CCD) in the international arena. Despite the vagueness in meaning, this expression was used at first to smooth out tensions with neighbouring countries because of regional conflicts, then it reflected China’s intention to keep a «peaceful period of strategic opportunity» to grow itself. In January 2017, at the World Economic Forum in Davos, President Xi stated «Mankind has become a community of common destiny that one is inseparable from the other, and their interest is highly inter-mingled and inter-dependent». The following month, the UN Commission for Social Development mentioned the creation of «a shared future, based upon our shared humanity», recognising Chinese contribution to global governance through such an important concept. Similarly, during the Belt and Road

⁶⁹ See note 65.

⁷⁰ See note 64.

⁷¹ See note 65.

⁷² See note 64.

Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017, Xi declared the greatest aim of the BRI was «moving closer towards a community of shared future for mankind»⁷³.

With regards to the meaning, Denghua (2018) reports that a CCD is a group of people or countries linked by shared concerns and future. According to Xi Jinping himself, a CCD involves five aspects such as political cooperation, security issues, economic development, culture and environment, which however remain quite unclear. In practical terms, this idea requires that China and other states solve universal problems for the benefit of all; instead, from a theoretical point of view it calls for harmony, cooperation and peace. Although the CCD reveals Chinese desire to preserve global stability, China itself claims that both developing and developed countries should have the same role in international affairs, thus belonging to the CCD implies equality in global governance. Nevertheless, a more subtle aspect needs attention: President Xi promoted the creation of a CCD between China and developing countries in Africa, Asia and South America and he used the term in various multilateral meetings, whereas he defined the partnership with developed nations as a «community of common interests». After all, this distinction is in line with China's dual diplomatic logic of considering developing states as basic partners, while seeking economic linkages with developed ones⁷⁴.

A major reason to propose the CCD concept was the increasing territorial conflicts between Beijing and other countries in the South China Sea, in contrast with the realization of Chinese neighbourhood policy. Another cause was the necessity to reduce the worries of advanced nations about China's rise and ensure a fertile ground for Chinese rejuvenation and economic growth. Indeed, differently from the "peaceful development" in progress when China kept a "low profile" at the international level, the CCD idea was introduced to support Xi's more assertive and proactive foreign policy. Finally, the actual creation of a CCD might be difficult as it depends on other countries acknowledgment. Therefore, the building of a "period of strategic opportunities" for

⁷³ Denghua, Z. (2018), "The Concept of 'Community of Common Destiny' in China's Diplomacy: Meaning, Motives and Implications", *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 196-207: <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.231>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

China could start from greater clarity on the meaning and the solution of regional disputes, above all in the South China Sea⁷⁵.

1.7 Thirteenth “Five-Year Plan”

The focus of the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China (2016-2020) is to build a “moderately prosperous society”⁷⁶ in all respects, the completion of which involves doubling the country 2010 GDP and per capita income by 2020. Peace, development and globalization were still the central topics on the international arena, while on the domestic side the government planned to adopt the «philosophy of innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared development». Beijing wanted to attain economic, political, social, cultural and environmental progress, as well as lay the foundation for the China Dream and the second Centenary Goal (see subparagraph 1.6.1) by putting people first, pursuing an appropriate development model, respecting Chinese law, and enhancing the CPC self-governance⁷⁷.

In line with the aforesaid targets to build a “moderately prosperous society in all respects”, there were also the following goals: to seek innovation-driven development through advances in key science and technology sectors; to better coordinate development among regions and continue the opening up to the outside world; to improve living standards and reduce the income gap and poverty in all areas; to raise people’s awareness of Chinese values; and to obtain energy resources more efficiently and reduce pollution⁷⁸.

In the context of a more coordinated regional development, the Plan itself presented the BRI as a point of reference for the creation of north-south and east-west “economic belts” mainly along the coast, the Yangtze River and primary transportation lines. Hence,

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ See note 61.

⁷⁷ National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), People’s Republic of China (2016), *The 13th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development of the People’s Republic of China (2016-2020)*, Central Compilation & Translation Press:

<http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/policyrelease/201612/P020161207645766966662.pdf>.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

the development of west, northeast and central China, and a higher assistance to the leading eastern area remained a priority. In particular, the BRI had to drive the improvement of connectivity in the West through international and interregional routes, as well as regional nodes, adequate infrastructure and transportation corridors, especially in remote or border areas. Likewise, supportive measures were also taken to develop central China by building new transport and logistic systems that link the north to the south and the east to the west⁷⁹.

In the end, it is possible to state that all these actions aimed at increasing the openness of cities and regions and - consequently - of the whole country, in order to enhance Chinese economic performance and achieve the objectives at the basis of the Plan.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER II

BELT&ROAD INITIATIVE: A TOOL TO IMPLEMENT FOREIGN POLICY

2.1 From OBOR to BRI

Chinese President Xi Jinping raised for the first time the vision of building a “Silk Road Economic Belt” during a state visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013, while delivering a fundamental speech at Nazarbayev University called “Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future”. Of course, the focus was the friendly relationship with Kazakhstan, which was an important node along the ancient Silk Road joining East and West, yet Central Asia was also involved in Xi’s oration because it was part of Chinese neighbouring policy and could benefit from the initiative as well. Thus, the renewal of the Silk Road was in line with a major target of Beijing’s foreign policy, namely the improvement of relations with Asian and European countries. As conveyed by China’s President, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” would make economic linkages and cooperation stronger among Eurasian nations in many fields. Firstly, it would allow the states in the region to exchange information regarding development policies and establish cooperative measures together. Secondly, it would improve connections in the whole Asian continent through an efficient overland transportation network. Furthermore, trade and investment among the participating countries would be facilitated, as well as the circulation of local currency and the increase of competitiveness of the area at the global level. Finally, the plan would enhance important principles such as friendship and mutual understanding⁸⁰.

One month later, on the occasion of the APEC (*Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation*) Summit in Indonesia, Xi Jinping proposed to construct the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” together with the ASEAN to reinforce their cooperation at sea⁸¹. Indeed, he stated

⁸⁰ Belt and Road Portal (2013), *President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries*, 7th September 2013: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/hyygd/1849.htm>.

⁸¹ Wang, Y. (2015), “China’s “New Silk Road”: A Case Study in EU-China Relations” in Amighini, A., Berkofsky, A. (eds.), *Xi’s Policy Gambles: The Bumpy Road Ahead*, Epoké-ISPI, Novi Ligure, pp. 93-109: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/xis-policy-gambles-bumpy-road-ahead-12911>.

«As a well-known Chinese saying goes, “The interests to be considered should be the interests of all,” China is ready to open itself wider to ASEAN countries on the basis of equality and mutual benefit to enable ASEAN countries to benefit more from China’s development. China is prepared to upgrade the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area and strive to expand two-way trade to one trillion US dollars by 2020». Then he added the following: «Southeast Asia has since ancient times been an important hub along the ancient Maritime Silk Road. China will strengthen maritime cooperation with ASEAN countries to make good use of the China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund set up by the Chinese government and vigorously develop maritime partnership in a joint effort to build the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century. China is ready to expand its practical cooperation with ASEAN countries across the board, supplying each other’s needs and complementing each other’s strengths, with a view to jointly seizing opportunities and meeting challenges for the benefit of common development and prosperity»⁸². With his speech at the Indonesian parliament, Xi also suggested to set the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to fund infrastructural works and enhance regional integration⁸³.

More importantly, the whole project - *Yi Dai Yi Lu* in Chinese and literally translated as “One Belt One Road”⁸⁴ - makes a clear reference to the ancient Silk Road (figure 1). The latter was historically a set of routes that connected the East with the West, allowing different civilizations to communicate, while today it has been brought back to life in the form of a key plan to support China’s opening up to the outside world⁸⁵. In ancient times, people travelled between Asia and Europe along multiple paths by land and by sea, trading silk and other goods and exchanging culture and knowledge. Although the export of the precious fabric dates back to the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), the expression “Silk Road” is quite modern (the old ways were not labelled), in fact the German

⁸² China Daily (2013), *President Xi gives speech to Indonesia’s parliament*, 2nd October 2013: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013xiapec/2013-10/02/content_17007915_2.htm.

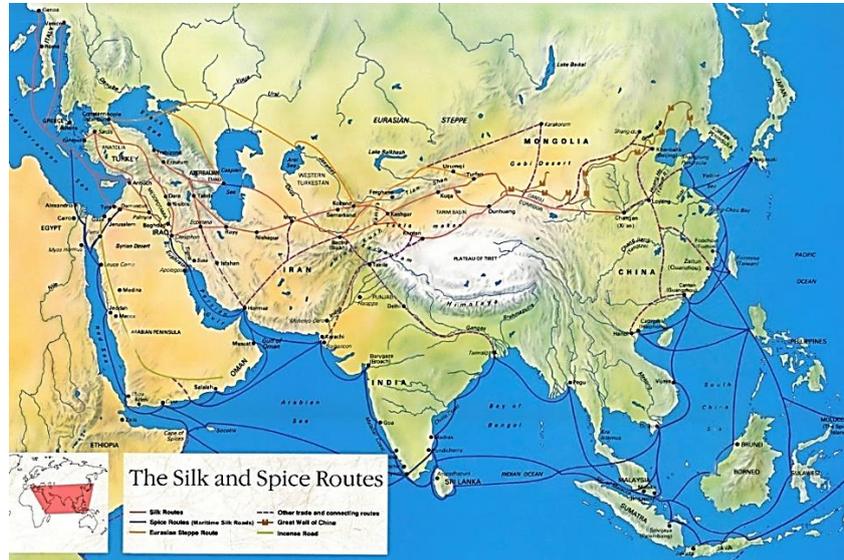
⁸³ The State Council of the People’s Republic of China (2015), *Chronology of China’s Belt and Road Initiative*, 28th March 2015: http://english.gov.cn/news/top_news/2015/04/20/content_281475092566326.htm.

⁸⁴ Institute for Security & Development Policy (2016), *The Belt & Road Initiative — 一带一路*, October 2016: <http://isdpc.eu/content/uploads/2016/10/2016-The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf>.

⁸⁵ See note 81.

geologist Baron Ferdinand Von Richthofen invented it in the mid-nineteenth century to indicate the above-mentioned network⁸⁶.

Figure 1. The Silk Road.



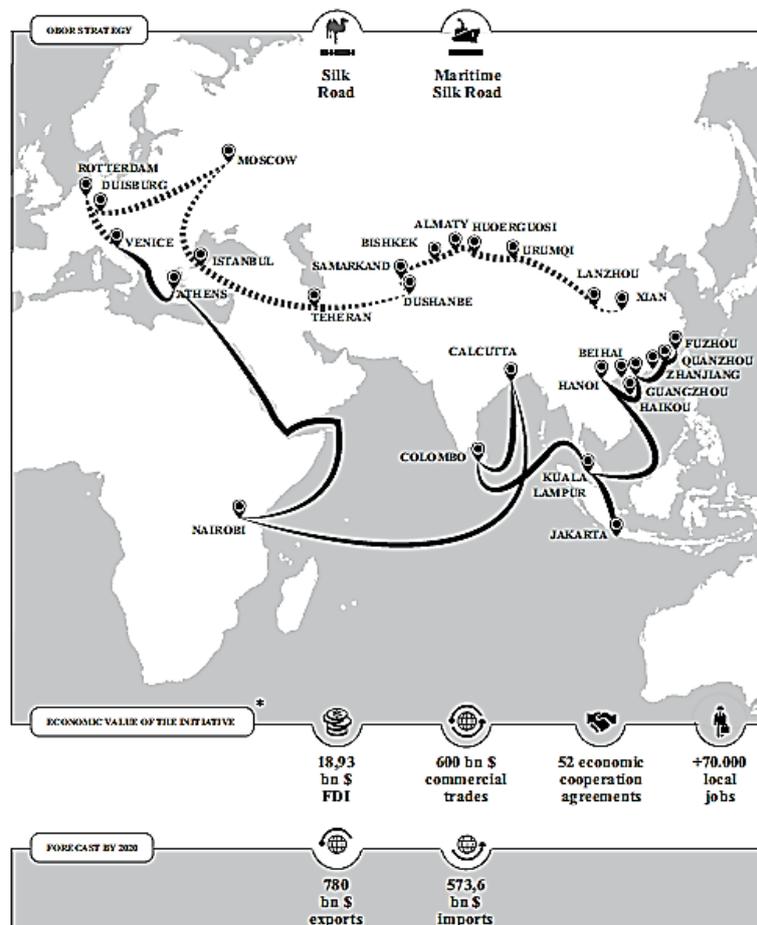
Source: UNESCO, https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/sites/silkroad/files/SilkRoadMapOKS_big.jpg.

Starting from the development of transport infrastructure (not just maritime) and logistics, the OBOR strategy (figure 2) aims to endorse China's role in global relationships, encouraging international investment flows and commercial terminal for Chinese production. In particular, the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" skirts East and South Asia, reaching the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal. Hence, OBOR should ease the connectivity and efficiency of trade routes, decreasing the costs of goods transportation, while increasing the security of enormous Chinese import and export flows⁸⁷.

⁸⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *About the Silk Road*: <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/about-silk-road>.

⁸⁷ Studi e Ricerche per il Mezzogiorno (2017), *Italian Maritime Economy, Scenari e geomappe di un Mediterraneo nuovo crocevia: l'Italia sulla Via della Seta*, Rapporto Annuale 2017, Giannini, Napoli.

Figure 2. One Belt One Road.



Source: SRM, *Italian Maritime Economy, Scenari e geomappe di un Mediterraneo nuovo crocevia: l'Italia sulla Via della Seta*, Rapporto Annuale 2017.

* First eight months of 2016.

Since its presentation in 2013, this initiative has been at the centre of international debate for its majestic development and even its peculiar name caught attention. The official literal translation was “One Belt One Road” but interestingly, from September 2015 onwards, it was modified because of two main reasons. First, in the 90’s Japan disclosed a “Silk Road Diplomacy” to improve its position in Central Asia; in the same way, in 2011 the United States introduced the “New Silk Road” to link Afghanistan to Central Asia and exploit it as a passage between European and eastern Asian countries. China differentiated the name to detach from both the American and Japanese programmes (which were not successful), as the Chinese one concerned a comprehensive network to cooperate and integrate the regions, and not to establish

control. Second, the label One Belt One Road could acquire an inaccurate meaning, for in the English language the structure “one..., one...” stresses the idea of “single” or “equal”, contrary to the original Chinese version that applies to more abstract concepts; therefore another English title was suggested. In addition, the project evolved from just one belt and one road to “many belts and many roads”, hence its formal English name turned from “One Belt, One Road” to “The Belt and Road Initiative”⁸⁸.

The principles, framework and priorities for implementing the strategy were included in an action plan on the BRI. Issued by the Chinese government in 2015, it reported that the BRI complies with the goals and standards of the UN Charter and supports «the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence». The project extends over the territory of the ancient Silk Road, but it is not restricted to it, and it is inclusive and open to any country and organization for collaboration, so that a broader zone can profit from its outcomes⁸⁹.

A further consideration regards the logic behind the BRI. Some scholars argue that it is China’s plan to hide military and security objectives; comparisons with the Marshall Plan and definitions as a threat to the West are not lacking. Some others define it as an economic design to integrate the national market into the international one, or as a political initiative to improve Chinese diplomacy with the participating states. Instead, according to China’s government the BRI is primarily an economic strategy based on win-win situations that could benefit Beijing and other countries. However, given the multitude of factors involved, both domestic and global aspects of the project should be taken into account to fully understand its rationale⁹⁰.

As indicated in the 2017 ISPI report about China, the BRI broader goal of enhancing connectivity among Asia, Europe and Africa materializes in five geostrategic fields:

⁸⁸ Li, Y. (2017), “Belt and Road: A Logic Behind the Myth” in Amighini, A., (ed.), *China’s Belt and Road: a Game Changer?*, Epoké-ISPI, Novi Ligure, pp. 13-33: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/chinas-belt-and-road-game-changer-16775>.

⁸⁹ The State Council of the People’s Republic of China (2015), *Full text: Action plan on the Belt and Road Initiative*, 30th March 2015: http://english.gov.cn/archive/publications/2015/03/30/content_281475080249035.htm.

⁹⁰ See note 88.

«policy coordination, infrastructure construction, trade facilitation, financial integration and people-to-people exchanges». In fact, if it is true that this plan aims at improving socio-economic relations with neighbouring states, at the same time it provides new drivers for growth targets pursued by Beijing in the last decades. Firstly, the BRI allows to look for new markets to export Chinese production and import raw materials, above all in Central Asia where exchanges with China increased from US\$1.8 billion to US\$50 billion between 2000 and 2013. The nations along the “belts” and the “roads” will develop thanks to infrastructural works, and their demand for (Chinese) goods and services will grow accordingly. Additionally, the participating countries (up to 65) represent two-thirds of global population, one-third of the world GDP, three-quarters of total energy resources; hence lower trade barriers might lead to greater exchanges. Moreover, 2009 registered a drop in Chinese exports of manufactured goods due to global recession, thus the administration increased infrastructure and transport investment. This measure became unbearable in 2014, as the sectors were saturated; as a consequence, Chinese companies were encouraged to export such overcapacity abroad and were supposed to carry out the projects under the BRI⁹¹. Secondly, together with hard infrastructures, soft infrastructures are also relevant to better connect the states along the BRI: indeed the “digital Silk Road” will promote e-commerce and internet banking among the nations involved, although its development is difficult due to Beijing’s high trade barriers to services, such as licensing needs and complicated ruling. Furthermore, China expects the renminbi to acquire the role of international reserve and, since it is used more and more, the plans under the BRI would foster loans provided in this currency. Another important target of the BRI is to support the “go west” strategies that consisted in smoothing economic inequalities between advanced coastal regions and underdeveloped inner areas: a network of routes and oil and gas pipelines could serve the latter, where the greatest consumption growth prospects lie. Finally, the BRI will contribute to decrease transport time and costs, in the interest not only of China but also of its business partners. As a matter of fact, in 2015 the European Union represented 12.5% of all Chinese imports and it was the second major destination

⁹¹ In this regard, note the phenomenon of the “tied lending”: in case of infrastructural works promoted by China in developing countries, Chinese financial institutions grant loans on condition that Chinese companies construct or export. See note 87.

for Chinese exports after the United States; likewise, China grants 17.6% of EU imports and it is the second biggest exporter after the US. Almost all exports from China to the EU and vice versa - 92.3% and 96.4% respectively - are shipped by sea: therefore, a good network of roads and railways would significantly cut China-Europe transport time from 37-45 days by sea to 16-21 days by railroad⁹².

Financial integration is also crucial under the framework of the BRI and China relies mainly on the Silk Road Fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) to support the project.

The Silk Road Fund was set up on 29th December 2014, with a contribution from the State Administration of Foreign Exchange, China Investment Corporation, China Development Bank and Export-Import Bank of China of 65%, 15%, 5% and 15% respectively. With a total capital of USD 40 billion and RMB 100 billion, it is organized in board of directors, board of supervisors and management team, in accordance with the *Company Law of the People's Republic of China*. «Following a philosophy of openness, inclusiveness and mutual benefit», the Fund finances commercial and economic integration in the context of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”; another objective is the promotion of development of China and any state participating in the BRI, in partnership with national and international institutions. As reported on the official website, the areas of interest are «infrastructure, resources and energy development, industrial capacity cooperation and financial cooperation» in the regions involved in the BRI to guarantee acceptable returns on investment⁹³. Moreover, the Fund has a medium to long-term horizon and the types of investment range from equity investment - in the form of greenfield or brownfield investments, mergers and acquisitions - to loans and bonds⁹⁴.

⁹² Amighini, A. (2017), “Towards a New Geography of Trade?” in ID. (ed.), *China's Belt and Road: a Game Changer?*, Epoké-ISPI, Novi Ligure, pp. 121-139: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/chinas-belt-and-road-game-changer-16775>.

⁹³ Silk Road Fund, *Overview*: <http://www.silkroadfund.com.cn/enwap/27365/27367/26761/index.html>.

⁹⁴ Silk Road Fund, *Types of Investment*: <http://www.silkroadfund.com.cn/enwap/27377/27383/25128/index.html>.

The role of multilateral development banks is important too⁹⁵. Indeed the building of logistic infrastructure is also supported by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which has provided 1.7 billion dollars for nine loans under the BRI and also has Italy among its founding members with a 2.8% capital ratio (almost as much as France, Germany and United Kingdom)⁹⁶. Operational since January 2016, the AIIB has its headquarters in Beijing and counts 93 approved members from all over the world. Its mission is to promote social and economic development in Asia: by financing sustainable infrastructure and other productive sectors, the AIIB «will better connect people, services and markets that over time will impact the lives of billions and build a better future»⁹⁷. China is the leading country of this institution, which was proposed by Xi Jinping in October 2013 (and formally established at the end of 2015) to boost connectivity and economic integration in the Asian region and cooperate with already existing multilateral development banks. Despite the inclusion of European nations and other advanced economies as members, the Chinese BRI still attracts funding the most: as a matter of fact, the majority of plans backed by the AIIB - in the form of loans or equity investment - largely overlap with the geographic area of the BRI⁹⁸.

Similarly to the Silk Road Fund and the AIIB, also the New Development Bank - the Shanghai-based BRICS bank - backs the BRI projects⁹⁹. Established in 2014 during the sixth BRICS Summit in Brazil, the Bank had an initial authorized capital of one hundred billion dollars, with founders contributing in equal parts to the fifty billion dollars initial capital subscription, as reported in the Fortaleza Declaration. The NDB primary goals were to enhance cooperation among the founding states and to help the work of financial institutions to achieve a fair and sustainable growth¹⁰⁰. In particular, this multilateral development bank collaborates with governments and social organizations

⁹⁵ *Multilateral Development Banks* (MDB) are supranational institutions made up of states, their shareholders. Their common goal is to promote economic and social progress in developing countries by financing projects and supporting investments. The most renowned multilateral development bank is the World Bank, which provides loans to many countries. See note 87.

⁹⁶ Studi e Ricerche per il Mezzogiorno (2017), *Presentato il 7° Rapporto Annuale di SRM su "Le Relazioni Economiche tra l'Italia e il Mediterraneo"*, Comunicato Stampa, 20 ottobre 2017: https://www.sr-m.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/CS_Med_SRM_BDN_20172.pdf.

⁹⁷ Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, *Introduction*: <https://www.aiib.org/en/about-aiib/index.html>.

⁹⁸ See note 87.

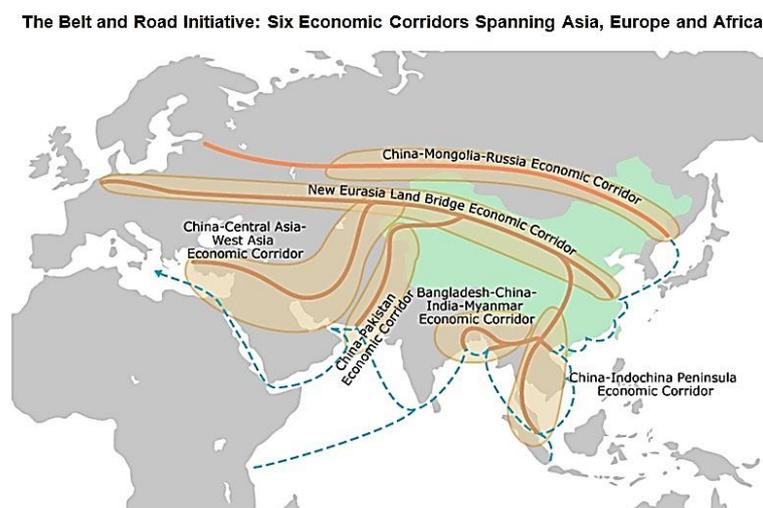
⁹⁹ Thussu, D. (2018), "BRI: Bridging or breaking BRICS?", *Global Media and China*, Vol. 3(2), pp. 117-122, 21st August 2018: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436418792339>.

¹⁰⁰ New Development Bank, *History*: <https://www.ndb.int/about-us/essence/history/>.

and it finances infrastructure and sustainability projects in emerging and developing economies through loans, guarantees and shareholding¹⁰¹.

One last observation concerns the relations between Asia and Europe. As can be seen from figure 3, the action plan of the BRI identifies six economic land and sea corridors, ways along which the main transport and energy infrastructure projects are located and that cross national designs of various countries¹⁰².

Figure 3. Six Economic Corridors.



Source: HKTDC, <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A36B7.htm>.

In summary, the economic corridors increase cooperation among Eurasian states by profiting from trans-national transport routes and important nodes such as cities and ports¹⁰³. Since they deal with the two main directions of the BRI, the following sections examine more in detail the land based “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”.

¹⁰¹ New Development Bank, *Our Work*: <https://www.ndb.int/about-us/essence/our-work/>.

¹⁰² See note 87.

¹⁰³ Hong Kong Trade Development Council, *The Belt and Road Initiative*: <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A36B7.htm>.

2.1.1 “Silk Road Economic Belt”

The “Silk Road Economic Belt” is essentially an overland path linking China to Eurasia. More specifically, it is expected to connect China with the following areas: Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic); the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. On the mainland, the BRI takes the form of four economic corridors built by profiting from international transport networks and making use of core cities and industrial clusters as cooperative platforms¹⁰⁴.

The international corridors in question are identified as follows:

- I. *New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor*: it is an international railway going from the Jiangsu province in East China to Holland, through Xinjiang (northwest China), Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus and Poland. It involves new freight rail routes connecting China to Germany, Czech Republic and Poland.
Furthermore, it is worth mentioning also the *Chengdu-Tilburg-Rotterdam Express*, «the fastest and unique direct railway connection between China and the Netherlands», which has expanded the services along the Belt since 2017 allowing containers transportation from one country to the other within 15 days.
- II. *China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor*: in September 2014, based on their long-time cooperation on various economic issues, China, Mongolia and Russia engaged in constructing the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, renewing the Russian Eurasian Land Bridge and developing the Mongolian Steppe Road. In this way, they aimed to reinforce the rail and motorway network, improve customs clearance and collaborate in trans-national connectivity.
- III. *China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor*: starting from the Xinjiang region, this corridor reaches the Mediterranean coast and the Arabian Peninsula by spanning Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in Central Asia, and Iran and Turkey in West Asia. China and the five Central Asian

¹⁰⁴ See note 89.

states agreed in 2015 to build the “Silk Road Economic Belt” together, since it partly matched their national development plans.

IV. *China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor*: in occasion of the Fifth Greater Mekong Subregion¹⁰⁵ Summit of Leaders in December 2014, China’s Premier Li Keqiang made three proposals, namely to construct a broad transport network, renew fundraising cooperation and encourage sustainable development. The six countries designed - and partially accomplished - the building of nine trans-national motorways to link north to south and east to west¹⁰⁶.

Within the broader context of the BRI, there is also the need for China to exploit the comparative advantages of its eastern, western and central areas. Therefore, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” aims at enhancing interaction among Chinese regions to further open up the national economy. In particular, concerning the north-west, Xinjiang is considered «a window of westward opening-up» able to strengthen communication and cooperation with the whole of Asia, therefore improvements in infrastructure, trade and education make it a core territory along the Silk Road. Moreover, strategic linkages, trade and logistic nodes opening to Central, South and West Asian states are possible thanks to the economic and cultural assets of Shaanxi and Gansu provinces, the Ningxia Hui autonomous region and important cities such as Lanzhou and Xining. With regards to the northeast, the target of facilitating connectivity with the north is to be reached by enhancing the railway network, above all between Heilongjiang province and Russia; intensifying collaboration on sea-land multimodal transport among Chinese Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning provinces and Russia’s Far East region; and progressing with the Eurasian high-speed transport corridor between Beijing and Moscow. Inland areas such as the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, around Chengdu and Chongqing, and central Henan province drive regional integration and industrial clustering through rich land and human resources. The improvement of railway transport and port customs clearance for the China-Europe corridor and the promotion of freight trains running

¹⁰⁵ The Greater Mekong Subregion comprises six countries, namely Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. Greater Mekong Subregion, *GMS Member Countries*: <https://www.greatermekong.org/greater-mekong-subregion-member-country>.

¹⁰⁶ See note 103.

from China to Europe are also fundamental to join the eastern, central and western zones. Furthermore, the construction of airports and land ports, a deeper customs clearance coordination between inland ports and ports, and the introduction of e-commerce services for international trade are primary concerns under the BRI. Instead, in the south west, the Yunnan province plays a pivotal role in opening-up to South because its geographic position is favourable to build economic corridors bridging China and neighbouring states, especially the Greater Mekong Subregion. Finally, the development of the Guangxi autonomous region, the Beibu Gulf Economic Zone and the Pearl River Economic Zone as economic corridors opening to the ASEAN is crucial to create a connection between the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”¹⁰⁷.

2.1.2 “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”

The design of the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” includes linkages between the Chinese coastline and Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, as well as through the South China Sea and the South Pacific. On the sea, the BRI aims at constructing safe and efficient connections between major ports along Asian, African and European coasts. In this sense, the two following corridors are fundamental to complete the project and, consequently, call for greater participation and advances¹⁰⁸:

- I. *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*: the idea to link the Xinjiang region to Gwadar Port in South Pakistan was first suggested by the Chinese Premier during his visit to Pakistan in May 2013. Later the administrations planned the realization of «highways, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines and optic fibre networks» between the two countries and formally committed to further improvements in 2015.

- II. *Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor*: following Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to India always in 2013, the “Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar

¹⁰⁷ See note 89.

¹⁰⁸ See note 89.

Economic Corridor Joint Working Group” gathered the representatives of the four states to discuss the main areas of cooperation. The governments then agreed to collaborate in the promotion of infrastructure, transports, trade and investments¹⁰⁹.

As in the case of the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, also the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” has the function of reinforcing cooperation among various Chinese regions, especially the ones along the coast. Indeed, regarding the coastal areas, the Yangtze River Delta, the Pearl River Delta, the west coast of the Taiwan Strait and the Bohai Rim (surrounding Beijing and Tianjin) have special economic strengths because of their high level of openness; the development of the China (Shanghai) Pilot Free Trade Zone and the Fujian province is also crucial for the same reason. Increasing opening-up and cooperation of Qianhai (Shenzhen), Nansha (Guangzhou), Hengqin (Zhuhai) and Pingtan (Fujian) with Hong Kong and Macao is helpful to build the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Big Bay Area. The development of the Zhejiang Marine Economy Development Demonstration Zone, Fujian Marine Economic Pilot Zone and Zhoushan Archipelago New Area, and the promotion of Hainan province as an international tourism island are also important goals of the initiative. Additionally, the promotion of the Hong Kong and Macao Special Administrative Regions and the improvement of ports in coastal cities like Shanghai, Ningbo, Shenzhen, Qingdao, Dalian, and Fuzhou are necessary to open up and develop scientific and technological innovation, thus contributing to the BRI and allowing participation and lead in the international arena¹¹⁰.

The “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” stimulated and will continue to stimulate port and maritime infrastructure not only in China, but also in all the countries concerned, allowing faster and more efficient connections and causing an increase in terms of freight transport and investments in the sector. As a matter of fact, according to 2016 data released by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, China’s direct investments in the states involved in the BRI raised by 38.6% in 2015 compared to 2014: the amount of investments was 18.93 billion dollars, 13% of total Chinese FDI (145.67 billion dollars).

¹⁰⁹ See note 103.

¹¹⁰ See note 89.

At the time, Chinese firms had already signed 52 economic cooperation agreements in the nations of interest, leading to a \$900 billion tax expenditure and the creation of almost 70,000 jobs. In the first eight months of 2016, trade between China and the countries along the Silk Road exceeded 600 billion dollars, 26% of the total volume of Chinese foreign trade. In addition, the *Shanghai International Shipping Institute* estimated that China would export to the states and regions involved in the BRI goods and services worth \$780 billion and import \$573.6 billion by 2020¹¹¹.

Besides trade and transport connectivity, another issue closely related to the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” and a major concern for China is security. This is particularly meaningful in Southeast Asia, where geographic proximity with Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines raises difficulties in managing common problems, namely drug and arms trafficking and piracy. Given the importance of the South East Asian region for Chinese neighbourhood diplomacy, the resolution of conflicts - above all in the South China Sea - is also a current challenge for Beijing¹¹².

It is worth mentioning that in line with a new but growing policy of military commitment expanding from the South China Sea to eastern Africa, there is China’s military base in Djibouti. On 1st August 2017, the opening ceremony of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Support Base was held and, since its building, it has acquired a geostrategic relevance in the Horn of Africa. Nonetheless, Beijing has always avoided describing its first overseas outpost in military terms, reporting instead that it is a logistic centre rather than an army base. The geographic position is the main strength of Djibouti: being adjacent to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait - the fourth bottleneck in the world for oil imports and exports - it allows other states to safeguard commercial interests in that shipping passage. Moreover, third countries are encouraged to run anti-piracy activities due to the strait closeness to Somalia, where pirate attacks usually originate; for this reason, the United States, France, Japan, and even Italy have army bases in this country. The Chinese presence in Africa started ten years ago and consisted of operations against

¹¹¹ See note 87.

¹¹² Pitlo, L. B. III (2016), *China-Southeast Asia Connectivity: Opportunities and Challenges for the maritime Silk Road*, China-US Focus, 15th August 2016: <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/china-southeast-asia-connectivity-opportunities-and-challenges-for-the-maritime-silk-road>.

pirates, while nowadays it upholds also «intelligence collection, non-combat evacuation operations, peacekeeping operation support, and counterterrorism». A strong navy together with a similar naval facility will contribute to China's emergence as a global power. More importantly, the base in Djibouti was realised thanks to increasing economic ties between this country and China. The Import-Export Bank of China has provided Djibouti with about a billion dollars; additionally, Beijing would finance almost 40% of its infrastructure projects, including ports, railways and pipelines. Therefore, keeping security in the African continent will be crucial in the light of future investments within the broader context of the BRI. The fight against piracy and terrorism will be equally important, mostly in territories where instability and economic opportunity are at a crossroads. Hence, the Djibouti base might be just one piece of a larger Chinese scheme in Africa¹¹³.

2.2 Latest update: the “Polar Silk Road”

A remarkable novelty that in a certain way updates and widens the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” is the idea of linking the BRI to the Arctic navigation routes. Chinese plan to collaborate with countries in that region first appeared in the “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative” issued by the *National Development and Reform Commission and the State Oceanic Administration* in June 2017¹¹⁴. According to the document, the establishment of a “Blue Partnership” to preserve and use marine resources responsibly - in a harmonious relationship between man and nature - would be useful to advance the construction of the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”¹¹⁵. Above all, the Vision suggested boosting maritime cooperation under the framework of the BRI with the creation of «three ocean-based "blue economic

¹¹³ Headley, T. (2018), *China's Djibouti Base: A One Year Update*, The Diplomat, 4th December 2018: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/chinas-djibouti-base-a-one-year-update/>.

¹¹⁴ Klimenko, E. (2018), *Shipping along the Arctic's Northern Sea Route will be determined by Russia–China cooperation in the region*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 7th February 2018: <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/expert-comment/2018/shipping-along-arctics-northern-sea-route-will-be-determined-russia-china-cooperation-region>.

¹¹⁵ Belt and Road Portal (2017), *Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*: <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wcm.files/upload/CMSydylgw/201706/201706200153032.pdf>.

passages" connecting Asia with Africa, Oceania, Europe and beyond»¹¹⁶; the Arctic Ocean - enabling to reach Europe - was considered one of them. Furthermore, China revealed its intention to participate in the Arctic question and it hoped for collaboration with the nations concerned in many fields, including scientific research on navigation and the environment, trade routes and resource exploration. In fact, as can be read in the text, China expressed availability to assist «in conducting scientific surveys of navigational routes, setting up land-based monitoring stations, carrying out research on climatic and environmental changes in the Arctic, as well as providing navigational forecasting services [...] [and] improving marine transportation conditions». On the other hand, Chinese companies were invited «to take part in the commercial use of the Arctic route [...] [and] join in sustainable exploration of Arctic resources in a responsible way». The Vision also stated China's willingness to investigate potential resources in the Arctic and create synergies for clean energy with states bordering the region, as well as to be present at events arranged by international organizations¹¹⁷.

These were the premises for the so-called "Polar Silk Road", which is the most recent tool that extends the scope of the BRI and, consequently, of the current Chinese foreign policy.

On 26th January 2018, the *State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China* released the "China's Arctic Policy", a white paper¹¹⁸ that introduced the idea of joining hands to build a "Polar Silk Road" for the first time. Given Beijing's recent interest in the convenience of northern shipping routes, in addition to its relevant contribution to the governance of Arctic affairs, the Chinese BRI would favour the participating countries in the construction of a passage to «facilitate connectivity and sustainable economic and social development of the Arctic». This project is based on a fact of great importance, namely global warming: indeed, the rise in temperature on Earth in the last

¹¹⁶ Belt and Road Portal (2017), *Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (Seven language versions)*, 20th June 2017: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/zchi/qwfb/16639.htm>.

¹¹⁷ See note 115.

¹¹⁸ "In Britain, Australia, Canada, and some other countries, a White Paper is an official report which describes the policy of the Government on a particular subject". Cobuild Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2015), *White Paper* (entry), 8th edition, Zanichelli editore s.p.a., p. 1790.

decades has reduced the general level of sea ice and snow, making the North Pole region extremely valuable in terms of scientific research, environment protection and energy resources, and paving the way for navigation through it¹¹⁹. Because of the melting of the Arctic ice cap, new shipping routes for international trade might be available in the future and the “Polar Silk Road” could embrace them. Since those paths allow an estimated time saving of around 25-30% (compared to the way across the Suez Canal and depending on the port of loading), Chinese vessels may increasingly prefer to reach central Europe through the Arctic Ocean¹²⁰ (figure 4). As a matter of fact, a typical journey of a cargo ship from Shanghai to Rotterdam - passing through the Indian Ocean, the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea - takes about 48 days in total, while it would save almost 20 days using the so-called Northeast Passage near Russia¹²¹. Moreover, navigability in the Arctic would bring advantages not only from a timing but also environmental and security point of view, allowing tremendous fuel savings and avoiding the very crowded and dangerous Strait of Malacca¹²² (a bottleneck between the Pacific and Indian oceans across which much of Chinese world shipping transits)¹²³.

¹¹⁹ The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (2018), *Full text: China’s Arctic Policy*, 26th January 2018: http://english.scio.gov.cn/2018-01/26/content_50313403_2.htm.

¹²⁰ Spalletta, A. (2018), *C’è una nuova Via della seta e passerà tra i ghiacci dell’Artico*, Agi, 26th January 2018: https://www.agi.it/estero/artico_cina_via_della_seta-3416506/news/2018-01-26/.

¹²¹ Exportiamo.it, *La Cina e la “Via della Seta Polare”*, 22nd March 2018: <https://www.exportiamo.it/aree-tematiche/13717/la-cina-e-la-via-della-seta-polare-ok/>.

¹²² International Council on Clean Transportation, *China’s Arctic Silk Road – What does it mean for the environment?*, YouTube video, 8th February 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jAmtZFjvuU>.

¹²³ The Economist, *China wants to be a polar power*, 14th April 2018: <https://www.economist.com/china/2018/04/14/china-wants-to-be-a-polar-power>.

Figure 4. The Arctic route.



Source: The Economist, <https://www.economist.com/china/2018/04/14/china-wants-to-be-a-polar-power>.

Evidently, the commercial use of sea lanes in the Arctic is a strategic reason for China, so much to affect the widening of the well-known BRI; but it is not the only one. In the end, it all boils down to the climate change that this area has been experiencing in the last few years. Gradually increasing temperatures have modified its singular natural landscape, reducing the portion of icy waters in summer. On one side, such phenomenon has resulted in global environmental problems like sea level rise and natural disasters. On the other, as previously described, the melting of sea ice has opened up new possibilities such as the exploitation of trade routes and resource development. Business in the Arctic will significantly influence shipment activities, international exchanges and energy supply, and it will determine relevant socio-economic modifications, in particular on the lifestyle of local people and native populations. Lastly, the prospect of causing environmental harm to the North Pole territory is not negligible. It follows that the above-mentioned opportunities and risks are of common interest and should be managed internationally¹²⁴. As reported also in the 2017 Arctic Yearbook, «globalization influences the Arctic, but the Arctic has also

¹²⁴ See note 119.

global influence and impact. The Arctic is a regional actor vitally important in the global context»¹²⁵, meaning that there is a mutual relationship between the two.

To sum up, the Arctic has effects on the world and vice versa: as can be deduced from the very first lines of the Chinese white paper, Beijing was (and still is) well aware of this and committed itself to international cooperation on Arctic-related issues to encourage peace and achieve sustainable development of the region¹²⁶. In this way, the BRI - traditionally oriented to the ancient Silk Road - acquires also an Arctic dimension destined to become more and more important in the future.

¹²⁵ Halinen, H. (2017), Preface to Heininen, L., H. Exner-Pirot, & J. Plouffe (eds.), *Arctic Yearbook 2017*, Northern Research Forum, Akureyri: <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2017>.

¹²⁶ See note 119.

CHAPTER III

CHINESE INTERESTS IN THE ARCTIC AND REASONS

3.1 China in the Arctic

The Arctic is the northernmost territory of the planet and it is included in the Arctic Circle - a line at 66.5° latitude north of the Equator - which comprises also the Arctic Ocean and portions of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Russia and Scandinavia (figure 5). Capped by frozen water for the most part due to the presence of glaciers and icebergs, the Arctic is characterized by salt water as well, called “sea ice” because it is usually frozen and often covered by snow. Moreover, it is rich in energy resources and, according to scientists’ estimates, it hides 13% of undiscovered oil and 30% of undiscovered natural gas at the global level; minerals and other rare elements are also abundant¹²⁷.

Figure 5. Political Map of the Arctic.



Source: Wikimedia Commons,
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/98/Political Map of the Arctic.pdf](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/98/Political_Map_of_the_Arctic.pdf).

¹²⁷ National Geographic, *Arctic*, Resource Library | Encyclopedic entry:
<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/arctic/>.

The “China’s Arctic Policy” reports that Arctic matters do not go under a single jurisdiction; instead, they are ruled by the UN Charter, the UNCLOS¹²⁸, the “Spitsbergen Treaty”¹²⁹ and other agreements. Coastal States and other nations share interests and rights in the Arctic Ocean conforming to international law. In particular, countries not belonging to the Arctic region hold rights concerning fishing, overflight, shipping, research activities, exploration and exploitation of resources, and laying of submarine cables and pipelines «in the high seas and other relevant sea areas in the Arctic Ocean», but they have no territorial sovereignty there¹³⁰.

Climate change is an extremely serious issue in the Arctic, since the sea ice is gradually reducing and while some experts predict that most of it will be dissolved in summer by 2100¹³¹, some others expect this scenario to occur by 2030¹³². In fact, in the last three decades, higher temperatures have quickly modified the environment causing the snow blanket to melt in the warmer months. As anticipated in paragraph 2.2, in addition to the dramatic impact on nature, the melting of ice in the area might bring new possibilities for development in terms of maritime routes and resource utilization. These activities would affect navigation, exchanges and energy supply at the global level, resulting in socio-economic innovations for the native populations as well; thus, the related problems should to be addressed by the entire international community. As a matter of fact, nowadays such a situation goes beyond the interest of Arctic states alone because it has acquired a strategic relevance also for the ones from outside the region. In this context the People’s Republic of China, responsive to the environmental question

¹²⁸ The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea establishes a comprehensive framework for all uses of the oceans and their resources. It was opened for signature in 1982 in Montego Bay, Jamaica, and came into force in 1994. United Nations, Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982. Overview and full text*: https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/convention_overview_convention.htm.

¹²⁹ The Spitsbergen Treaty (now Svalbard Treaty) was signed in 1920 in Versailles and came into force in 1925. It establishes Norwegian sovereignty over the Svalbard archipelago and it recognises access and the right of economic activities to signatory states. The Treaty also forbids the militarization of the area. Spitsbergen | Svalbard, *The Spitsbergen Treaty*: <https://www.spitsbergen-svalbard.com/spitsbergen-information/history/the-spitsbergentreaty.html>.

¹³⁰ See note 119.

¹³¹ See note 127.

¹³² Lim, S. K. (2018), “China’s Arctic Policy & the Polar Silk Road Vision”, in Heininen, L., H. Exner-Pirot, & J. Plouffe (eds.), *Arctic Yearbook 2018*, Northern Research Forum, Akureyri, pp. 420-436: <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2018>.

and supporting the vision of a «community with a shared future for mankind», has emerged as an active contributor to the Arctic development. Furthermore, it formalized its commitment in this territory in a document published in January 2018 asserting Chinese targets, principles and responsibilities in the area.

The Chinese presence in the Arctic dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, as reported in the “China’s Arctic Policy”. Indeed, in 1925 the country entered the Spitsbergen Treaty and began to take part in dealing with Arctic affairs, engaging in the exploration of the region, broadening the scope of action and enhancing collaboration with other states. The nineties saw China’s greater involvement in scientific research in the Arctic: in 1996 it became a member of the International Arctic Science Committee and later it arranged several scientific missions with its research ship *Xue Long* (“Snow Dragon” in English). Furthermore, in 2004 China constructed the so-called “Arctic Yellow River Station” in the Svalbard archipelago, and in the following year it was the first Asian nation to participate to the Arctic Science Summit Week, an important meeting on Arctic issues. 2013 marked the approval of the People’s Republic of China as Observer to the Arctic Council, i.e. «the leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic States, Arctic indigenous communities and other Arctic inhabitants on common Arctic issues», especially regarding environmental protection and sustainability¹³³. Beijing completed eight research expeditions in the Arctic by the end of 2017; in this way, it has progressively set up an observation system about the atmospheric, biological and geological features of the area. More recently, the Chinese intervention in the Arctic has concerned not only science, but also the commercial use of polar routes, international governance, regional cooperation, global warming, environmental changes, economy and culture. Occupying a relevant position in the international community, China could contribute to the creation of regulations and standards to administer the territory. Hence, it could present

¹³³ The Arctic Council includes the following bodies: 8 Members (Canada, The Kingdom of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation, Sweden and the United States); 6 Indigenous Permanent Participants; 13 Observers; and the Arctic Council Secretariat. Arctic Council (2018), *About Us*: <https://arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us>.

the BRI as a tool to build a "Polar Silk Road" together, in order to boost connections and promote the Arctic sustainable development¹³⁴.

3.1.1 Official interests as per "China's Arctic Policy"

In the white paper on the Arctic issued in 2018, China defines itself as a "Near-Arctic State", meaning that it is among the countries closest to the region. It also claims to have important interests there, because the rapid changes the Arctic environment is undergoing influence directly the Chinese climate and economic activities such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. Beijing's attention is attracted by other matters as well, for instance global warming, scientific research, commercial use of sea routes, natural resources, security and world governance: all of them are fundamental for the survival and progress of the whole of mankind and seriously impact also the nations from outside the Arctic. More specifically, shipping lanes and the exploration and exploitation of resources are major stakes for China, which heavily relies on trade and energy for its growth. Lastly, the concept according to which the Chinese have interests in common with circumpolar states and share destiny with the other ones is presented insistently from the first paragraphs of the policy.

The official document reports the four main targets pursued by Beijing, i.e. «to understand, protect, develop and participate in the governance of the Arctic», besides defending the shared interests and supporting a sustainable development there. As far as the understanding of the area is concerned, China has committed to enhancing scientific research and investigating the causes of global warming. Instead, "to protect the Arctic" essentially means to take action against the climate change it is going through, safeguard its peculiar ecosystem, encourage the ability to adapt of its natural environment, and respect the indigenous culture. With regards to the development in the region, China has engaged in advancing specific technological innovation for the Arctic, reinforcing environmental protection and the use of energy resources and navigation routes, and upholding the socio-economic growth of the natives. Finally,

¹³⁴ See note 119.

participation in the management of the Arctic requires that Beijing address the related issues in accordance with international law, such as the UN Charter, the UNCLOS, standards of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and other agreements on climate change and the environment. Domestic regulation will be applied as well to collaborate in Arctic affairs for the interests of both China and the international community.

The achievement of the four previous objectives will be based on as many principles, namely «respect, cooperation, win-win result and sustainability». The first concept involves that every nation complies with the rules and treaties established internationally and pays due regard to the sovereignty of Arctic States and their rights; moreover, everyone should respect the licence of non-Arctic countries to complete activities in the territory in line with the legislation. Instead, the second calls for a collaborative attitude among countries, entities and intergovernmental organizations to participate in the Arctic question, creating a network of bilateral, multilateral, regional and even global relations. The third implies that actions in this territory bring benefits to all participants, hence the stakeholders concerned should seek mutual advantage: in this way, prosperity is shared between Arctic and non-Arctic states, in compliance with the interests of local populations. Finally, the idea of sustainability is crucial for the development of the Arctic and suggests accomplishing a «harmonious coexistence between man and nature» and greater balance between socio-economic growth and natural conservation.

The five main Chinese interests in the Arctic - which can be summarized in scientific research; environmental protection; resource utilization; governance; and peace - are officially presented in the white paper as follows:

- I. «Deepening the exploration and understanding of the Arctic»

Scientific research in the Arctic is a priority for China, which indeed encourages expeditions in the region. In carrying out this activity, Beijing recognizes the exclusive jurisdiction of circumpolar states in the zones under their authority and, at the same time, it argues that every nation has the right of scientific research on international waters. Chinese studies focus on several Arctic-related

matters, such as «geology, geography, ice and snow, hydrology, meteorology, sea ice, biology, ecology, geophysics and marine chemistry»; they also contribute to tracking and estimating climate change, and measuring the quality of sea, ice, soil and atmosphere thanks to the construction of dedicated stations and the participation in the Arctic observation network. To do research, China promotes the development of suitable equipment, such as state-of-the-art icebreakers and eco-friendly polar tools for deep sea and ice areas inspection. It also takes part in the construction of infrastructure fitting the Arctic environment and it upholds technological innovation in the fields of oil and gas extraction and renewable energies. Scientific activities and research platforms in the region are largely financed by the Chinese, who also invest a lot in human capital and education centres to boost knowledge in Arctic-related natural and social subjects. Internationally, China stimulates collaboration and exchanges among academics on Arctic issues, and pushes domestic learning institutions to enter the University of the Arctic network¹³⁵.

- II. «Protecting the eco-environment of the Arctic and addressing climate change»
- China actively participates in the protection of the environment, the preservation of the ecosystem in the Arctic and the understanding of its problems, above all climate change.
- Firstly, it makes great efforts to enhance the area through the analysis of Arctic activities and their consequences on the environment; it also adheres to the Arctic states' rules on environmental protection. Marine conservation is crucial as well, in fact Beijing cooperates with coastal nations to decrease polluting substances in Arctic waters (for example waste discharge by ships) and it strives to raise public awareness on this topic.
- Secondly, Chinese research aims at estimating the effects of global warming and human presence on the typical flora and fauna of the Arctic, which should be safeguarded with the help of the international community.

¹³⁵ «The University of the Arctic (UARctic) is a cooperative network of universities, colleges, research institutes and other organizations concerned with education and research in and about the North». University of the Arctic, *About UARctic*: <https://www.uarctic.org/about-uarctic/>.

Thirdly and finally, China commits itself to addressing climate change because it is a matter of global interest. Having significantly contributed to the “Paris Agreement”¹³⁶, it has introduced actions to face this issue in its plans for national development, resulting in positive effects on the Arctic territory (in the Chinese view). The country also engages in investigating the relation between climate changes and the Arctic, with the goal of forecasting the future impact on its ecosystem.

III. «Utilizing Arctic Resources in a Lawful and Rational Manner»

Given the vulnerability of the Arctic natural environment, China recommends a conscientious utilization of its resources and pushes domestic firms to collaborate internationally for the exploration and exploitation of the area. In addition, it claims that any search for or use of these resources should comply with international law, the UNCLOS, the Spitsbergen Treaty and other agreements, as well as with the legislation of coastal states, respecting the principle of sustainability and the concerns of native populations.

The first element that explains Chinese focus on Arctic resources is navigation along its shipping routes («the Northeast Passage, Northwest Passage, and the Central Passage»), which are expected to acquire a growing importance for global exchanges due to the phenomenon of ice melting. According to China, the expansion of these sea lanes should be done conforming to international rules and treaties, and every country has the right to utilize them for shipping purposes. Above all, Beijing promotes cooperation for the development of Arctic routes to jointly construct the so-called "Polar Silk Road"; additionally, it stimulates domestic companies to take part in the building of the related infrastructure and make trial trips for commercial use. Since security at sea is a fundamental condition for shipping in the Arctic, China engages in research along these lanes to enhance transport and logistics in the territory. Furthermore, it

¹³⁶ In force since 2016, the “Paris Agreement” pushes the international community to take action against climate change «by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius». United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *The Paris Agreement*: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement>.

respects the “International Code for Ships Operating in Polar Waters” (*Polar Code*)¹³⁷ and backs the action of the IMO in setting rules for shipping in the Arctic. The availability of energy resources in the Arctic attract China’s attention as well; in any case, it abides by the sovereignty of Arctic nations over oil, gas and minerals, in compliance also with the interests of local peoples. Chinese companies are supported in the exploration and exploitation of resources, provided that they observe the principle of environmental protection in the Arctic. In addition, China commits to collaborate with other states also in the field of renewable energy with the aim of achieving a low-carbon growth.

The preservation and responsible use of fishery resources in the Arctic is of Chinese interest as well, indeed the region might become profitable because recently the fish are moving north due mainly to climate change. Although recognising the freedom of other countries concerning fishing in the high seas in the Arctic Ocean, Beijing argues that they should protect and use fish stocks in a rational way. With regards to the management of fisheries in the Arctic international waters, it encourages the institution of treaties or organizations at the global level. In conducting research on and utilizing fish stocks, China engages in the conservation of the Arctic biodiversity and in the wise exploration and exploitation of its resources.

Tourism is the fourth asset that lures China to the North. Since China itself brings tourists to the Arctic, it pushes domestic firms to collaborate in the region for the development of the tourism sector, and strives to improve security and insurance systems there. It also raises awareness of Chinese people about an eco-friendly, low-emission and responsible tourist activity.

IV. «Participating Actively in Arctic governance and international cooperation»

China works to achieve a better Arctic governance. In particular, it has made efforts to have its people and organizations operate according to both

¹³⁷ The “Polar Code” became law on the 1st January 2017 and it provides rules «to protect ships and people aboard them, both seafarers and passengers, in the harsh environment of the waters surrounding the two poles». International Maritime Organization, *Shipping in polar waters. Adoption of an international code of safety for ships operating in polar waters (Polar Code)*: <http://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/HotTopics/polar/Pages/default.aspx>.

international and national rules on environmental and natural resource preservation, and sustainable development. Moreover, it actively participates in the management of Arctic affairs focused on the UN Charter and the UNCLOS, contributes to the formulation and enforcement of related international laws, and defends the rights and interests of all states. As far as the improvement of world collaboration is concerned, Beijing has proposed the BRI as a tool to implement policy coordination, infrastructure building, financial and commercial integration, and people-to-people connectivity across the Arctic region as well. Advanced economies are exhorted by China to carry out their duties as per the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol¹³⁸, and the Paris Agreement. In addition, China calls for greater collaboration in maritime technology and in decreasing greenhouse gas emissions from shipping activities in accordance with the IMO provisions.

From the regional point of view, it strongly participates in the governance of the area: as an observer to the Arctic Council, it contributes to and backs the work of the latter on the occasion of Working Groups and Task Forces.

Regarding bilateral and multilateral relations, it supports cooperation between countries within the Arctic Circle and the ones from outside on scientific research, natural environment conservation, sea routes, exploration and exploitation of resources, and cultural exchanges. Furthermore, in the last few years it has established bilateral dialogues on Arctic-related issues with the US, Russia, Iceland, the United Kingdom, France, Japan and South Korea.

In the end, China hopes that all stakeholders in the Arctic take part in its governance at the international level.

¹³⁸ The “Kyoto Protocol” is an international agreement that was adopted in 1997 and entered into force in 2005. It attributes greater responsibility to developed countries (principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”) for the high levels of greenhouse gases emissions as a result of two centuries of industrial activity. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *The Kyoto Protocol*: <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-kyoto-protocol/what-is-the-kyoto-protocol/what-is-the-kyoto-protocol>.

V. «Promoting peace and stability in the Arctic»

Since security in the Arctic is a precondition for the afore-mentioned activities, China strives to keep peace and stability, safeguard living conditions, and protect transport and navigation operations in the region. It also encourages a nonviolent settlement of disputes conforming to international legislation and other agreements, as the UN Charter and the UNCLOS. Finally, China makes efforts to strengthen cooperation with Arctic states in emergencies, with the aim of addressing accidents, natural disasters or violations of maritime laws.

To conclude, the “China’s Arctic Policy” emphasizes again that the Arctic issue affects not only the countries closest to it, but also the ones from outside it and the whole world; therefore, all the participants are called for an active contribution to manage the Arctic. The document then reports China’s availability to join forces with its partners to face the challenges in the region and encourage collaboration within the framework of the BRI, in order to «build a community with a shared future for mankind» and develop the Arctic in a sustainable and peaceful way¹³⁹.

The active Chinese presence in the Arctic and the vision of a “Polar Silk Road” have certainly brought new questions but also opportunities for the states concerned. By giving an overview of China’s policies on its commitment in the Arctic and its reliance on international law to govern it, this white paper is a good starting point to understand Chinese position on the region. Nevertheless, although it sheds light on Beijing’s key targets, some points remain unclear. For instance, it does not specify the role played by the Arctic in the domestic military strategy; actually, it does not even suggest practical actions in order to realize the content of the policy. In short, the success of China’s design for the Arctic depends on the effectiveness of its diplomacy and cooperative attitude¹⁴⁰.

¹³⁹ See note 119.

¹⁴⁰ See note 132.

3.1.2 China's position on the Arctic before 2018

The "China's Arctic Policy" officially presented the interests of the country in the region. If it is true that this document provides a clearer understanding on Beijing concerns in the Arctic, Lim (2018) warns that it should not be considered as a disclosure but rather a statement of already existing targets and intentions. As a matter of fact, the first three principles described in the 2018 white paper were also mentioned by the Chinese Foreign Minister during a speech in October 2015. On the same occasion, the Vice Foreign Minister introduced six policies that had much in common with the aforesaid policy: «further explore and understand the Arctic; protect and rationally use the Arctic; respect the inherent rights of Arctic countries and the Indigenous people; respect the rights of non-Arctic countries and the overall interests of the international community; build a multi-tiered Arctic cooperation framework for win-win results; uphold the Arctic governance system based on existing international law»¹⁴¹. Similarly, China's application to become an Observer to the Arctic Council was an indication of its growing attention to the region, aroused by the strategies of circumpolar states to increase regional development «as a promising economic possibility and a security and governance challenge» (Solli *et al.*, 2013). China considered the Arctic important for both environmental and economic reasons. According to Chinese delegates, the northern location of their country, climate change, and possible effects of new Arctic routes on China raised interests for that area. Therefore, natural conservation and trade opportunities were equally significant: «The Chinese view on the Arctic is to preserve it to use it» (even though commercial interests in the long run might be threatened by the negative impact of climate change on Chinese agricultural and food production). Additionally, Beijing referred to the region as a "common heritage for mankind" and presented its commitment to the Arctic Council as a contribution to bring authoritativeness and credibility to it¹⁴². Another element in support of Chinese interests in the Arctic prior to the related policy of 2018 is the relationship with Iceland. The two nations have been trading for decades in the fields of fishing, geothermal energy and shipbuilding. In 2007, they started discussing about a free trade agreement

¹⁴¹ See note 132.

¹⁴² Solli, P.E., Wilson Rowe, E. & Yennie Lindgren, W. (2013), "Coming into the cold: Asia's Arctic interests", *Polar Geography*, 36:4, 253-270, DOI: [10.1080/1088937X.2013.825345](https://doi.org/10.1080/1088937X.2013.825345).

(FTA) and signed it in 2013: to 2014, Iceland was one of few European states with a FTA with China. More importantly the Icelandic President, who saw favourably the engagement of Beijing in the Arctic, played a fundamental role in the approval of its Observer status in the Council. Iceland was attractive for China also because of the tourism industry, indeed the number of Chinese tourists visiting it in 2012 (14,036) rose by 60% in comparison to 2011, when in turn the number went up by 70% compared to the previous year¹⁴³. Long before 2018, China has had a further geostrategic stake in accessing the Arctic, namely scientific research; indeed, it has been very involved in the territory through a series of scientific research programs (Huang *et al.*, 2014). Several articles on climatologic, biologic, and oceanographic studies that appeared on Chinese journals between 1988 and 2008 confirmed the assertion by Chinese representatives that Beijing's interest for the Arctic was primarily due to scientific matters. The central government as well justified its increasing presence in the area with the need to conduct research on climate change, which was deemed responsible for extreme weather events in China, thus affecting its security and socio-economic development. China has always been very cautious about stating officially its objectives concerning economic interests in the Arctic (navigation and energy opportunities ranked third among Chinese stakes, «after location and scientific research»); before 2010, formal declarations on Arctic routes were lacking, whereas there were some on natural resources. Arctic shipping also appeared in 81 publications by Chinese academics in the period 2000-2013 (74 issued between 2008 and 2013), the most recent of which conveyed the idea that the shorter seaways of the region would result in increased traffic; however, they did not analyse the profitability and feasibility of such routes for shipping companies. The first real Arctic trip made by a Chinese vessel was that of the icebreaker "Xue Long" along the Northern Sea Route (NSR) in 2012, while in 2013 the *Yong Sheng* - a multipurpose ship owned by the Chinese shipping company COSCO - went from Dalian to Rotterdam via the NSR, proving the firm interest to develop Arctic navigation¹⁴⁴.

¹⁴³ Tonami, A. (2014), "The Arctic policy of China and Japan: multi-layered economic and strategic motivations", *The Polar Journal*, 4:1, 105-126, DOI: [10.1080/2154896X.2014.913931](https://doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2014.913931).

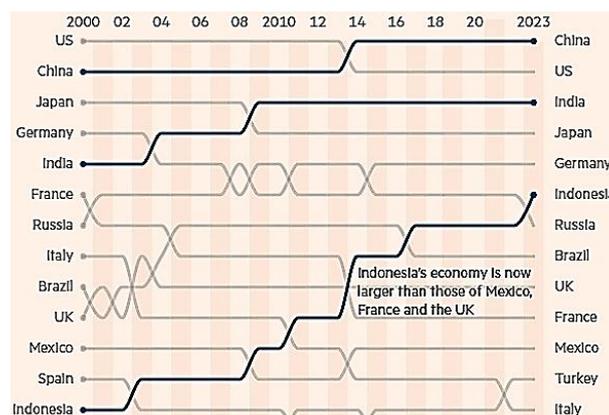
¹⁴⁴ Huang, L., Lasserre, F. & Alexeeva, O. (2015), "Is China's interest for the Arctic driven by Arctic shipping potential?", *Asian Geographer*, 32:1, pp. 59-71, DOI: [10.1080/10225706.2014.928785](https://doi.org/10.1080/10225706.2014.928785).

3.2 China, alias a new world power

All the topics of Chinese interest described in the previous paragraph, however diversified and apparently restricted to the Arctic region only, find their foundation in a much broader and important rationale, that is the prominent international role acquired by China in recent times. As it emerges as a world power, its concerns expand beyond national boundaries¹⁴⁵.

In a world in which Western cohesion and centrality are failing, the emergence of Asia - and of Chinese prevailing position - in the geopolitical context seems inevitable¹⁴⁶. Indeed, today humanity is confronting the beginning of the so-called “Asian Age”: hosting more than half of the global population, the continent has gained centrality in the world economy. According to the Financial Times, the Asian output - which represented a third of global GDP in 2000 - will exceed that of the rest of the world in 2020. This situation is mainly due to the economic growth of China and India in the last decades. More specifically, Chinese economy is now larger than the US one in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms (figure 6) and corresponds to 19% of global GDP this year, more than doubling the 7% registered in 2000¹⁴⁷.

Figure 6. Rank of global share of GDP (based on PPP, actual and forecast). Selected Asian economies.



Source: International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database. Financial Times, <https://www.ft.com/content/520cb6f6-2958-11e9-a5ab-ff8ef2b976c7>.

¹⁴⁵ See note 132.

¹⁴⁶ Musu, I. (2018), *Eredi di Mao. Economia, società, politica nella Cina di Xi Jinping*, Donzelli editore, Roma.

¹⁴⁷ Reed, J., Romei, V. (2018), *The Asian century is set to begin*, Financial Times, 26th March 2019: <https://www.ft.com/content/520cb6f6-2958-11e9-a5ab-ff8ef2b976c7>.

Asia is still poorer than other continents, yet the disparity is decreasing. For instance, Chinese output per capita at PPP accounts for a third of the US one and around 44% of the EU one. Nevertheless, China's per capita income gap with the US and Europe has diminished considerably since the beginning of the new millennium. In short, the Asian economic jump of the last few years was made possible thanks to a «winning mix of integration with the global economy via trade and foreign direct investment, high savings rates, large investments in human and physical capital, and sound macroeconomic policies»¹⁴⁸.

A closer look at China's status reveals that - with a fifth of the world population - the revival of this ancient empire has upset the global equilibria. Since Deng Xiaoping's reform in the late seventies¹⁴⁹, the country has started a process of modernization of its economy, opening up to international markets, and scientific and technological progress; nonetheless, this happened with insufficient raw materials and energy resources for such a development path. In any case, China managed to become the first nation in the world in terms of income¹⁵⁰, while maintaining the typical structure of its decision-making power. Despite the problems already caused for its cost competitiveness, lately it has also successfully entered the sector of new technologies. The fast and all-round Chinese breakthrough was initially based on low wages, then on a huge productivity increase, although often associated with the infringement of patent and intellectual property rights. However, nowadays China cannot be considered a state with low labour costs and, as a consequence, many labour-intensive companies are moving towards the poorest African and Asian areas. Tensions with the US and other advanced countries arose mainly because of Beijing's entrance into the technological, mechanical, chemical and electronic fields; the plan to achieve leadership in supercomputers, artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology and communication systems

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ In 1978, the Chinese leader aimed at China's international economic opening through a series of reforms.

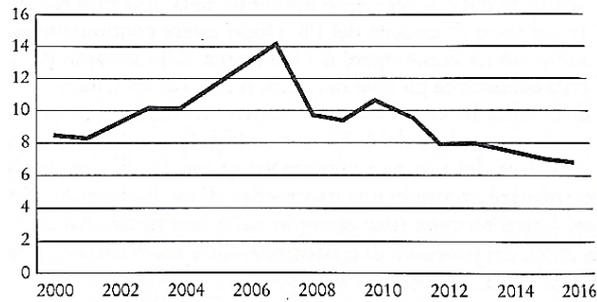
¹⁵⁰ Musu (2018) reminds that China's GDP has by now overcome the US one at PPP. According to the International Monetary Fund report of April 2018, Chinese output accounted for 18.2% of the global GDP in PPP terms, higher than the US GDP, accounting for 15.3%: consequently, China has already become the first economy in the world. Although it cannot be defined as a rich country, its economy and society are transforming in a deep and rapid way, like never before. Chinese international role is increasingly strong today, not only from an economic but also from a political point of view due to the presidency of Xi Jinping, leader of great influence and power since 2012. See note 146, p. 3.

has generated concern as well. Clearly American supremacy is still very strong in new technologies and in the military sector, but the building of the first Chinese base in Djibouti is a fact of global relevance and, as such, it deserves attention (see subparagraph 2.1.2). The political challenge with China is also important, since in the past the latter used to be defined as a representative of developing states, whereas today it is portrayed as a reference point for a growing number of countries and also of world politics. The BRI follows the same direction, indeed the idea of linking China and Europe with new infrastructure has evolved into a cooperation project involving as many nations as possible; in addition, the creation of the AIIB (see paragraph 2.1) has accompanied this proposal in order to emphasize its global reach¹⁵¹.

A more accurate analysis of the economic reasons behind the Chinese rise in the international arena is provided by Ignazio Musu, professor emeritus of political economy at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. In his latest book (*Mao's heirs. Economy, society, politics in Xi Jinping's China* in English), he describes President Xi's era and explains how China's economy is changing: taking into account the purchasing power parity, it is the first in the world, but it is not yet "advanced". In spite of this, it is reaching such goal and it is going through some instability issues typical of a system out of the underdevelopment phase. In fact, many macroeconomic signals have brought Chinese economy closer to a mature condition. First, the change in the dynamics of the GDP growth rate, which went continuously up to 14% before the global crisis in 2008 and then it started to decrease, stabilising at 6-7% per year (figure 7); in the long term, the average GDP growth rate should level off at even lower values, as it happens in developed countries.

¹⁵¹ Prodi, R. (2018), Preface to Musu, I., *Eredi di Mao. Economia, società, politica nella Cina di Xi Jinping*, Donzelli editore, Roma, pp. VII-XVI.

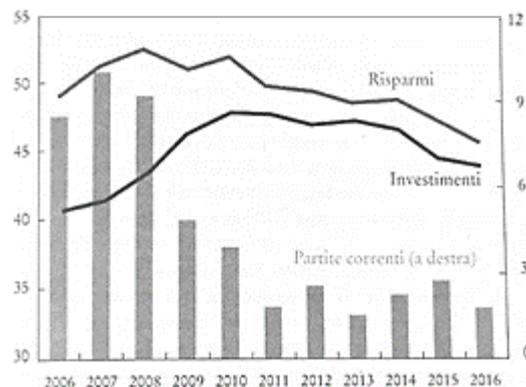
Figure 7. GDP growth rate in China.



Source: Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development 2017. Musu, *Eredi di Mao*, p. 60.

Second, savings and investment shares over GDP became different (figure 8). While exceeding 50% of the national output before the aforementioned crisis, the savings share has later diminished¹⁵². The portion of investments had gone beyond 43% of the GDP before 2008-2009 and it reached 48% in 2010-2011, following the economic revamp measures based on public investments to face the crisis; also this part is shrinking, even if it remains too high compared to the 20% of advanced economies. Another sign of China's settlement is that the balance of payments surplus, i.e. the gap between exports and imports of goods and services, has constantly reduced after achieving 10% in 2007.

Figure 8. Investments, savings and current account balance in China as percentage of GDP (upper line: savings; bottom line: investments).

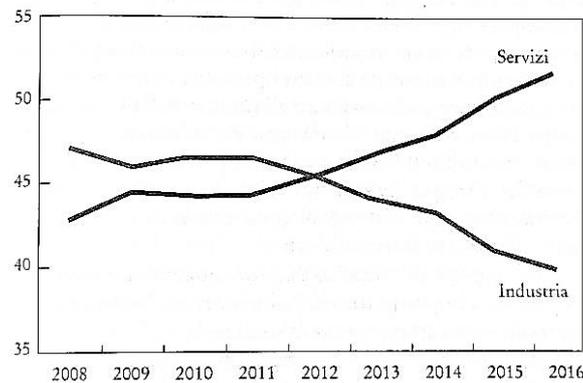


Source: International Monetary Fund 2017. Musu, *Eredi di Mao*, p. 61.

¹⁵² Instead, the portion addressed to consumption - which was unusually modest - touched 40% of GDP. It is quite a low value, in comparison with that of advanced economies in which consumption accounts for about 70% of national income; but this means that there is still space for an increase in such a share because of the enlargement of the middle class expected in the coming years. See note 146, p. 60.

A third aspect that characterizes mature economic models, as well as China, is the transition from an agricultural economy to an industrial one and, finally, to a service one. The passage to the latter can be seen from the growing weight of services on GDP, as compared with that of industry (figure 9).

Figure 9. Sectoral structure of GDP (upper line: services; bottom line: industry).



Source: International Monetary Fund 2017. Musu, *Eredi di Mao*, p. 63.

In the end, not only has Xi Jinping accepted the decrease of his country growth rate, but he has also enclosed a more reasonable growth target under the concept of “moderately prosperous society”¹⁵³.

Besides macroeconomic transformations, there have been important changes in the Chinese productive system as well. In the past decades, China’s industry was characterized by the abundance of low-cost labour, resulting in the delocalization of manufacturing processes by developed states, and passive imitation of their production techniques. The manufacturing phases of many foreign companies are still located in China but, on the one hand, their goods are consumed more and more within the country; on the other, the “birth” of Chinese entrepreneurship achieved a high quality technological production that allowed its entrance in the international market. In this regard, the most successful field has been electronics: in 2000, 5% of world exports of computers and mobile phones came from China, whereas today the share is 40%. Though many of these exports are due to the localization of assembly operations in China by foreign firms, the impact of local electronics companies went up considerably,

¹⁵³ See note 146, pp. 59-64.

as testified by the cases of PC manufacturer Lenovo and telecommunication services providers Huawei and Xiaomi. Hence, it is clear that Chinese firms are fighting to access the most advanced stage in the technological value chain - including design and sale of final goods, and development of new software - which is still dominated by giants such as Apple, Samsung, Intel and Microsoft. In the challenge for superiority in digital technologies and AI between China and the US, the latter is currently prevailing in terms of research results and value on the market. However, strong signals show that Chinese progress in the AI sphere is threatening the US; therefore, President Xi's statement according to which his nation will become a "cyber-superpower" with a leading role in AI by 2030 is more convincing. In its path of technological improvement, China is supported by over four and a half million graduates in scientific subjects (many of whom have studied in the US) and the availability of a huge amount of data. To summarize, the industrial system as described above has been revitalized by an active government and highly motivated businesspersons. As a matter of fact, being the private sector responsible for the largest part of GDP and employing most of the working people, it can be stated that Chinese entrepreneurs have determined the country transformation into a world economic power. Nonetheless, it is worth underlining that Xi Jinping does not want the private sector to prevail or that China becomes a capitalist economy in which the relationship between state and market leads to the predominance of the latter¹⁵⁴.

Another element of Chinese economic presence internationally is represented by growing investments abroad, which exceeded the foreign ones in China in 2015. At the beginning, Chinese investments abroad were done by state-owned companies and concerned above all energy and natural resources, in particular in developing contexts. Promoted in the eighties and nineties, these investments belonged to China's strategy to play a leading role in developing countries at the economic, ideological and political level; instead, since 2000 a more strictly economic perspective has been emphasized. Interestingly, there was a significant rise in Chinese investments abroad by private firms directed at developed nations and advanced sectors. In addition, the internationalization of the local currency, the renminbi (RMB), is a major tool to improve China's status in the global scene. Indeed, holding a currency recognized as a reserve

¹⁵⁴ See note 146, pp. 64-89.

would increase the country presence in international markets and the related economic and political role; thus, China would actively participate in the shift to a more balanced monetary and fiscal system worldwide. In 2015, the RMB became the fifth most used currency in the world for payments and at least 50 countries decided to include it among their reserve currencies, even if transactions in this currency are limited. The acknowledgment of the RMB as global reserve currency will rise as its internationalization grows, i.e. its use in business and financial transactions on world markets¹⁵⁵.

Furthermore, President Xi has committed himself to reinforcing Chinese position at the international level not only from an economic point of view. In this sense, his efforts have materialized in two main projects, i.e. the AIIB and the well-known BRI (see 2.1). Inspired by the ancient Silk Road, a communication network that linked Asia and Europe from 200 BC to the fifteenth century, the BRI proves the uniqueness and the wider scope of the president's geopolitical plan. Westerns observers, especially European politicians, often consider the initiative as an occasion to enhance relations between Beijing and Europe; but it is also of Chinese interest to extend the influence in developing and Asian countries, in order to strengthen economic and political ties with other nations as well. For instance, China's investments in Central Asia revolve around energy. Moreover, the intervention in this region supports domestic economic growth in Western China: one example is the building of the high-speed railway and the motorway across the Xinjiang province towards Kazakhstan. Besides, infrastructural investments also in the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" will bring opportunities to transfer Chinese capital and technology, and consequently increase the leadership in a larger number of emerging states¹⁵⁶.

As far as relations with other countries are concerned, many scholars wonder if Xi Jinping's China is trying to impose its own model on the world or come out as a global power to promote cooperation and balance in the world. According to the president's public statements, a vision of China contributing to a future of peace and collaboration emerges; if it is true that Xi's growing international commitment can be interpreted as

¹⁵⁵ See note 146, pp. 137-144.

¹⁵⁶ See note 146, pp. 131-137.

a hegemonic proposal to restore Chinese central position, this does not exclude a positive and helpful attitude among populations. On the one hand, the idea of a collaborative solution to global problems was introduced by Xi during two meaningful occasions: his speeches at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 17th January 2017 and at the United Nations in Geneva the following day. He highlighted the necessity to create a universal governance with the aim of achieving common prosperity through “win-win” cooperation. Hence, it can be deduced that - in Xi Jinping’s opinion - China should take a leading role in such governance. On the other, some people (especially in the US, Japan and Australia) argue that the Xi’s plan hides a different attempt, accusing China of raising its military expense, as well as its presence in the South and East China Sea¹⁵⁷.

In conclusion, Musu suggests that any drastic judgement and excessively optimistic or pessimistic forecast on present-day China should be avoided because it is a very complex entity. Chinese reality is unquestionable: after leaving the condition of a developing country, it proceeds at a fast pace to become an advanced economy. Nevertheless, it is not necessarily true that such situation will continue without any issues. Actually, the relationship state-market is unclear, as Xi favoured the latter while not giving up public dominance over the economy. In addition to the matters of social security and healthcare, there are unsolved disparities between rural and urban zones and environmental problems. The Chinese President is making efforts to obtain greater homogeneity in the cities and in the countryside, and reduce the gap between (more developed) eastern coastal areas and western ones through investments in infrastructure and urbanization; actions to improve the environment are also taken, even though they are often not in line with the infrastructure expansion. In any case, the most innovative element of Xi Jinping’s China is its international position. Indeed the president does not restrict the role of the country only to that of economic power, but he conveys a vision of China as a promoter of collaboration in the world: the colossal plan of the BRI - including the newly introduced “Polar Silk Road” - is presented exactly in this perspective¹⁵⁸.

¹⁵⁷ See note 146, pp. 146-151.

¹⁵⁸ See note 146, pp. 187-191.

CHAPTER IV

EVIDENCE OF CHINESE INTERESTS IN THE ARCTIC

The previous chapters have portrayed a situation in which global warming is turning a frozen territory into an ice-free sea at an exceptional speed. While modifying and endangering the Arctic environment, the melting of the polar cap has opened up new opportunities formerly locked because of thick ice. This spotlighted the theme of Arctic governance and drew attention - among others - from China. Beijing's commitment in the region stems from its geographic location that offers economic potential and a base for carrying out scientific research: essentially, «the Arctic provides China a shorter and reliable shipping route, access to natural resources and insight on climate change»¹⁵⁹.

4.1 Shipping

Generally speaking, Arctic shipping is made up of two categories: trans-Arctic navigation and regional (or intra-Arctic) navigation. The former involves navigating along the Northern Sea Route (NSR), the Northwest Passage (NWP), and across the North Pole, while the latter comprises actions such as supply of local populations, mining, resource development, tourism and marine studies¹⁶⁰. In recent times, local maritime traffic is increasing, especially as far as fishing, oil and gas, and touristic boats are concerned¹⁶¹. In any case, all activities related to shipping in the Arctic Ocean have remarkable consequences on its fragile ecosystem and security.

4.1.1 Arctic routes

Since the "China's Arctic Policy" conveys the vision of building a "Polar Silk Road" across the Arctic in order to expand the BRI (Lim, 2018), it is useful to explore which are the

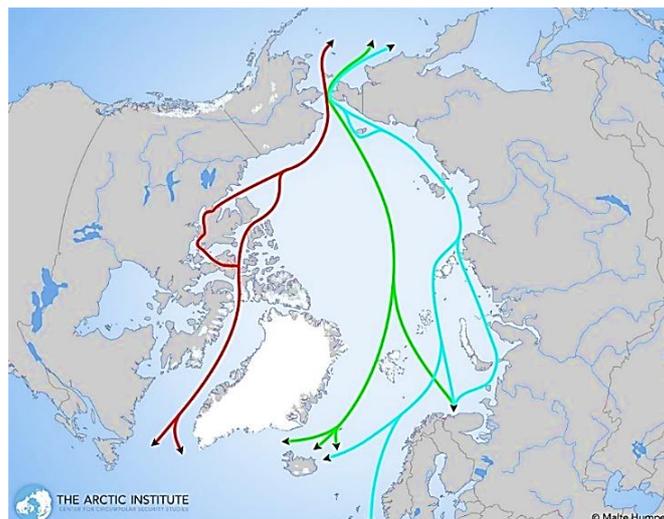
¹⁵⁹ See note 132.

¹⁶⁰ Brosnan, I. G., Leschine, T. M. & Miles, E. L. (2011), "Cooperation or Conflict in a Changing Arctic?", *Ocean Development & International Law*, 42:1-2, 173-210, DOI: [10.1080/00908320.2011.543032](https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2011.543032).

¹⁶¹ Eriksen Søreide, I. (2019), "L'Artico è pacifico e deve restarlo", *Limes - Rivista italiana di geopolitica*, vol.1/2019, pp. 215-220.

possible routes to navigate in the region. The main sea lanes available in the Arctic Ocean are three: the Northwest Passage (NWP), along Northern Alaska and the Canadian Archipelago, characterized by complicated straits, multilayer ice and underwater frozen formations which make shipping hard; the Northeast Passage (NEP), through the northern Russian and Norwegian coasts, also referred to as the Northern Sea Route (NSR); and the Transpolar Sea Route (TSR), which crosses the Pole and meets dense sea ice¹⁶² (figure 10). The latter is about 2,100 nautical miles (nm) long; it is the most direct way to transit the Arctic Ocean and the shortest path among those mentioned above. However, it is difficult to assess its commercial feasibility because thick sea ice still prevents navigation during almost all the shipping season in the Arctic¹⁶³.

Figure 10. Arctic routes: NWP (red), NEP (light blue), TSR (green).



Source: Arctic Institute, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/future-arctic-shipping/?cn-reloaded=1>.

¹⁶² Buixadé Farré, A., Stephenson, S. R., Chen, L., Czub, M., Dai, Y., Demchev, D., Efimov, Y., Graczyk, P., Grythe, H., Keil, K., Kivekäs, N., Kumar, N., Liu, N., Matelenok, I., Myksvoll, M., O'Leary, D., Olsen, J., Pavithran.A.P., S., Petersen, E., Raspotnik, A., Ryzhov, I., Solski, J., Suo, L., Troein, C., Valeeva, V., van Rijckevorsel, J. & Wighting, J. (2014), "Commercial Arctic shipping through the Northeast Passage: routes, resources, governance, technology, and infrastructure", *Polar Geography*, 37:4, 298-324, DOI: [10.1080/1088937X.2014.965769](https://doi.org/10.1080/1088937X.2014.965769).

¹⁶³ Humpert, M., Raspotnik, A. (2012), "The Future of Arctic Shipping Along the Transpolar Sea Route", in Heininen, L., H. Exner-Pirot, & J. Plouffe (eds.), *Arctic Yearbook 2012*, Northern Research Forum, Akureyri, pp. 281-307: <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2012>.

Instead, it is possible to observe more closely China's involvement in the other two routes of interest, i.e. the NWP and the NSR.

On 6th September 2017, the Chinese icebreaker *Xue Long* successfully completed its first voyage through the NWP, after obtaining permission to transit by Canada on the basis that it was carrying out scientific research. Actually, according to Professor Rob Huebert of University of Calgary, the journey definitely marked Beijing's intention to deepen the knowledge of this shipping route with the aim of exploiting it for trade purposes¹⁶⁴. The South China Morning Post as well reported that the research vessel trip along the NWP «could pave the way for commercial development in the resource-rich northernmost region of the world». After a voyage covering more than 20,000 miles and 83 days in total, Shanghai welcomed back the icebreaker, which was the first Chinese ship to have gone across the three main sea lanes in the Arctic: indeed it navigated the TSR a week before shipping through the NWP, whereas it sailed along the NSR in 2012¹⁶⁵. In addition, the vice-captain of the “Xue Long” Mr. Shen Quan confirmed that the journey through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago was also made to investigate the commercial potential of the far north waters. Then he underlined that the use of the NWP might not only save 20% of the distance by avoiding the Panama Canal, but also enhance the development of northern Canada. A scientist aboard the vessel declared that «academic findings in the Canadian Arctic was not very huge», proving elementary information on water quality, temperature and consistency; nevertheless, data gathered along the passage will allow a better understanding of the region and the evaluation of commercial use in the years to come. Yet the NWP is characterized by harsher environmental conditions and poorer infrastructure than the NSR, which remains the most appealing option. In fact, in 2013 the Chinese state-owned shipping company COSCO made its first voyage across the Arctic and currently sends ships along the NSR to avoid the longer and more dangerous southern routes and benefit from fuel and

¹⁶⁴ Huebert, R. (2017), “Editorial: Xue Long and the Northwest Passage”, *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 13, Issue 3: <http://www.navalreview.ca/wp-content/uploads/public/vol13num3/vol13num3ed.pdf>.

¹⁶⁵ Zhou, L. (2017), *Slowly but surely, China is carving a foothold through the Arctic*, South China Morning Post, 15th October 2017: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2115409/chinese-ships-arctic-voyage-marks-progress-ice-silk>.

security costs savings¹⁶⁶. Over five years, it has been the leading firm in trans-Arctic shipments with a total of twenty-two trips, eight of which made in 2018¹⁶⁷. In this regard, Lim (2018) claims that Beijing pushes the opening of the NSR to international trade because it is the shortest, safest and most reliable sea lane connecting eastern Asia to Europe, which is essential to import energy resources and export Chinese goods. Estimates show that transit via the NSR would cut journeys between China's and northern European ports as well as eastern American ones by 40% in comparison with the traditional passage through the Suez Canal or Panama Canal. Moreover, given the current trade war between the US and China, the latter could bypass areas under the American Navy control by navigating along the NSR and across the Arctic.

According to Buixadé Farré *et al.*, «the NSR is formally defined in Russian law as extending from the Novaya Zhelaniya straits (at the Novaya Zemlya archipelago, connecting the Barents Sea to the West and the Kara Sea to the East), to Cape Dezhnev by the Bering Strait». It differs from the NEP in that the latter includes the Barents Sea and allows access to the Murmansk port, the biggest owned by Russia in the Arctic. Since the NSR covers the largest part of the NEP, the two terms are often used alternatively. Among the routes available in the Arctic, the NEP provides the greatest economic potential both for moving freight between non-Arctic ports (“transit shipping”) and for carrying out activities within the region (“destinational shipping”), such as scientific research, fishing, tourism and resource exploitation. The latter is the field that could immediately expand navigation as a means to ship resources to Europe or to Asia. Concerning shipping, a typical voyage from Shanghai to Rotterdam through the Suez Canal (10,557 nm) is shortened by 24% via the NEP (8,046 nm) in partial or total absence of sea ice; therefore, the challenge among the routes for Eurasian trade involves mainly the one via Suez and the NEP. Nonetheless, a number of elements counterbalances the advantage in terms of length reduction, for instance: severe weather conditions, need for specific vessels and equipment, risks due to isolation, difficult communications and

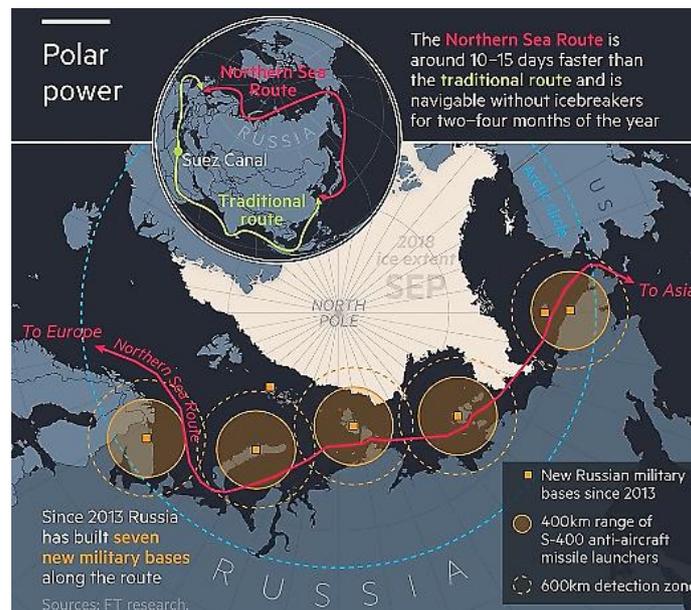
¹⁶⁶ Vanderklippe, N. (2017), *As ice levels recede, China eyes shipping opportunities in Canada's Northwest Passage*, The Globe and Mail, 14th November 2017: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/as-ice-levels-recede-china-eyes-shipping-opportunities-in-canadas-northwest-passage/article36971509/>.

¹⁶⁷ Staalesen, A. (2019), *COSCO: several trans-Arctic shipments coming up this year*, The Barents Observer, 14th May 2019: <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2019/05/cosco-several-trans-arctic-shipments-coming-year>.

inadequate search and rescue (SAR) facilities, shallow waters restricting the size of ships, and uncertainty about arrival time because of the presence of sea ice blocks. Hence, the NEP - and consequently also the NSR - should be considered as a seasonal *complement* rather than an alternative to the Suez Canal.

A major issue to consider when mentioning the NSR is Russia’s proactive attitude towards the Arctic, in which a fifth of its land lies. As a matter of fact, with climate change that is thawing the polar cap and opening new shipping lanes, the NSR has turned into an ideal ground for competition and, as reported by the Financial Times, Moscow is allocating a tenth of its investments to the northernmost region of the world. The lucrative potential of the aforesaid route in Eurasian trade flows, the immense natural resources that underlie it and its increasing militarisation have attracted the attention of other global powers (figure 11).

Figure 11. The Russian Northern Sea Route.



Source: FT research, US National Snow and Ice Data Centre. Il Post, <https://www.ilpost.it/2019/05/05/russia-artide/>.

Focusing on maritime traffic, scientists predict that navigation during ice-free periods from China to Europe along the NSR would be not only 40% faster than the way through Suez, but also 52% less polluting saving thousands of dollars on fuel and reducing carbon

dioxide emissions. Currently the Arctic is free from ice only three months per year, but such number is expected to raise in the future, enhancing navigation across the region: since 1979, every ten years the sea ice has diminished by 12.8% on average and in September 2018 the ice cap was 42% smaller than in 1980. Vessels coming from twenty different states shipped 20 million tons of freight via the NSR in 2018, doubling the amount of the previous year. Furthermore, the Russians forecast that these data will quadruple and grow even more by 2025 if they are provided with new icebreakers¹⁶⁸ (port infrastructure at the ends of the sea lane is also needed, thus they encourage international partnership to realize the related projects). In order to achieve this goal, Beijing's greater interest in the region and its improving relationship with Moscow will be crucial¹⁶⁹. As seen in chapters II and III, the premises for a stronger collaboration under the framework of a "Polar Silk Road" are included in the Chinese white paper on Arctic policy.

The idea of connecting the NRS with the BRI is certainly not new for both Beijing and Moscow, who on various occasions announced their intention to work together on this, but cooperation may not be as straightforward as it seems. In summary, the outcome of the NSR utilization by China will largely depend on its relations with Russia¹⁷⁰, which will be further analysed in the concluding part of this work.

The renewed local and global interest in the NSR has brought advantages but also problems in the coastal area. Indeed its development could end up degrading the fragile Arctic environment due to more frequent spillage of petroleum products, worsening the living conditions of the natives, raising security problems and accelerating climate change¹⁷¹, as explained below.

¹⁶⁸ To date, Russia owns the only fleet of nuclear icebreakers in the world: three out of four of them will be replaced in the next ten years, costing between \$500m and \$1.5bn each. According to President Putin, the Russian Arctic fleet will comprise 13 icebreakers - of which nine nuclear powered - by 2035 (Astrasheuskaya, 2019).

¹⁶⁹ Astrasheuskaya, N., Foy, H. (2019), *Polar powers: Russia's bid for supremacy in the Arctic Ocean*, Financial Times, 28th April 2019: <https://www.ft.com/content/2fa82760-5c4a-11e9-939a-341f5ada9d40?emailId=5cc6d2a699727e0004cc8f6d&segmentId=13b7e341-ed02-2b53-e8c0-d9cb59be8b3b>.

¹⁷⁰ See note 114.

¹⁷¹ Dushkova, D., Krasovskaya, T., Evseev, A. (2017), "Environmental & Human Impact of the Northern Sea Route & Industrial Development in Russia's Arctic Zone", in Heininen, L., H. Exner-Pirot, & J. Plouffe (eds.),

4.1.2 Environmental concerns

The thickness and width of ice are crucial for shipping. The extent rises and decreases periodically, leaving part of the eastern Arctic open for navigation in summer; ice that persisted more than one summer is usually more dense and tougher and consequently represents a threat to vessels. In general, since 2000 there has been an accelerated reduction of the sea ice thickness and size. On average, the minimum extent of ice in summer was 6.71 million km² between 1979 and 2000, while it dropped to 4.17 million km² in 2007 and to a record low of 3.41 million km² in 2012 (Buixadé Farré *et al.*, 2014).

If navigation in the Arctic continues to develop, its effect on the surrounding environment cannot be neglected. As a matter of fact, shipping represents a real threat to nature because of transportation of invasive species in ballast tanks, accidental oil spills, discharge of sewage, garbage and dangerous cargo, and strikes to animals. These factors would not be worrisome in case of a reduced presence of vessels in the Arctic Ocean, but the probable rise in navigation causes serious concern about environmental protection¹⁷². In particular, the ecosystem and biodiversity of coastal zones along the NSR are endangered by new risks brought by growing maritime traffic. Dushkova *et al.* (2017) argue that increasing human activities together with pollution and other natural disruptions can lead to negative consequences, having also a social impact. Shipping intensification through the NSR will raise the likelihood of accidents and related damages to the environment; nonetheless, investing in actions and infrastructure for safety and emergency response may diminish these risks. In this regard, the 2012 “Federal Law on the NSR” and the 2013 “Ministry of Transport’s Rules of Navigation through the NSR” established transit terms and new insurance conditions - which assign responsibility for environmental harm to ship owners - and quite high taxes for logistic and assistance matters. Additionally, in 2014 the IMO introduced the “Polar Code of Safety for Ships Operating in Polar Waters” that came into force in 2017. The marine ecosystem of the NSR might be more vulnerable to accidental as well as operational pollutions because of greater traffic: unfortunately, water contamination from usual

Arctic Yearbook 2017, Northern Research Forum, Akureyri, pp. 275-289: <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2017>.

¹⁷² See note 160.

activities like cooking and showering is considered a minor danger, so national law does not address it. However, the assessment of the impact of international shipping along this sea lane may take ages due to expensive surveys, extremely cold climate, time restrictions and poor infrastructure in isolated zones. Hence, only long-term investigations will estimate the effects of developing navigation through the NSR on Arctic environment and indigenous peoples¹⁷³.

In such a complex framework, Chinese presence and support in the Arctic are vital to address the environmental issue and, according to the 2018 white paper, the country is there on purpose (or better, also for this reason). Indeed, as reiterated throughout the policy, the country «respects the environmental protection laws and regulations of the Arctic States and calls for stronger environmental management and cooperation», above all in the marine environment, which it considers a “key area” in the protection of the region¹⁷⁴. Maritime traffic from Asia to European ports will depend on the evolution of the environment, infrastructure and security in a territory still difficult to deal with. Thus, China’s responsibility as an important trading nation emerges clearly (Eriksen Søreide, 2019).

In addition to the important considerations made so far on circumpolar shipping, it is worth taking into account also the following aspect, i.e. that ice melting is a long process whose ending date is difficult to predict today. Be it by 2045 (or by 2030 or 2100, as reported in 3.1), the Arctic Ocean will be free of ice for at least part of the year, but this scenario is not immediate nor can it be taken for granted¹⁷⁵. For this reason, the next section is dedicated to the development of Arctic natural resources, a sector in which the Chinese presence is even more concrete, especially concerning energy.

¹⁷³ See note 171.

¹⁷⁴ See note 119.

¹⁷⁵ See note 121.

4.2 Resource development

The Arctic strategies of coastal states attach great importance to resource development, as the region is abundant with natural marine riches including oil, gas and fish¹⁷⁶. The “China’s Arctic Policy” claims that nations from outside the Arctic enjoy the right, among others, to «resource exploration and exploitation» there, in accordance with international law and agreements such as the UNCLOS and the Spitsbergen Treaty. Nonetheless, the majority of continental and insular areas and their assets is under the sovereignty of Arctic countries, therefore Beijing promotes cooperation with them to benefit from living and non-living resources¹⁷⁷.

4.2.1 Energy and infrastructure

At present, China is the country that consumes energy and imports crude oil the most in the world (8.4 million barrels per day). Despite this, insufficient domestic oil and gas endanger its energy security and force a heavy reliance on imports of energy resources: in fact, Chinese oil imports are expected to raise up to 13 million barrels per day (Mbpd) by 2040, accounting for about 30% of total oil traded globally. Hence, Beijing has implemented a series of actions to improve the energy sector by 2030, in particular the utilization of renewable sources and natural gas instead of coal for electricity production. Since it is estimated that natural gas imported by China will touch 280 billion cube metres (bcm) a year by 2040, and given the strong Chinese dependence on maritime corridors as the main supply routes, Beijing has focused on alternative energy passages to avoid the dangerous Malacca’s Strait and new partnerships with resource suppliers. In this sense, the sea lane through the Arctic would serve as a substitute route for oil and gas imports, allowing a shorter transit time compared to the one across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean and bypassing crowded chokepoints¹⁷⁸. Besides becoming increasingly important for navigation, the Arctic has a great abundance of

¹⁷⁶ See note 160, p. 193.

¹⁷⁷ See note 119.

¹⁷⁸ Indeo, F. (2018), “China’s New Energy Sourcing: Disrupting and Competing or Improving Global Energy Security?” in Amighini, A. (ed.), *China: Champion of (which) Globalization?*, ISPI, Ledizioni, Milano, pp. 121-140: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/china-champion-which-globalisation-20718>.

natural resources: its untapped reserves would play a vital role in satisfying the Chinese energy demand (Lim, 2018).

China's cooperation on energy with an Arctic country, namely Russia, deserves special attention because it combines foreign affairs and strategic interests and could favour both nations. Indeed, the enormous Russian availability of gas and oil can meet the Chinese energy needs: being among the largest producers and exporters of these resources, Russia has been China's first source of oil since 2016 and, concerning natural gas, it will provide a fourth of Chinese total imports by 2040. It follows that Beijing's investments in the Russian Arctic aim at ensuring greater imports along a new sea road that avoids the Strait of Malacca¹⁷⁹. At the same time, Moscow was pushed to seek collaboration in the East due to political and economic tensions over its energy plans.

In 2013, the *China National Petroleum Corporation* (CNPC) acquired 20% of the "Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG)" project, thus beginning the Sino-Russian partnership to develop hydrocarbons in the Arctic. The Yamal Peninsula is located in northern Russia, above the Arctic Circle; its LNG plant - which is now «the world's most northerly project of its kind» - will extract, liquefy, and transport natural gas from the South-Tambey field, where 1.3 trillion cubic metres of this substance lie. The estimated cost to construct Yamal LNG is US\$27 billion and its realization is organized in three phases to be completed in 2017, 2018 and 2019¹⁸⁰. On 8th December 2017 the Russian President Vladimir Putin attended the opening ceremony of the plant (whose capacity is 16.5 million tons per year) and launched the first gas cargo into the icebreaking tanker "Christophe de Margerie" in the port of Sabetta¹⁸¹. Yamal LNG also implies the building of new infrastructure, such as the Sabetta seaport, an airport, roads, residential buildings, and facilities for water treatment and waste management. The project is a joint venture involving *Novatek*, *Total*, *CNPC* and the *Silk Road Fund*: the first is a Russian oil and gas enterprise holding 50.1% of the shares, while the second is a French

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ Ufimtseva, A., Prior, T. (2017), "Developing Hydrocarbon Resources in Arctic Russia: The Role of Sino-Russian Collaboration", in Heininen, L., H. Exner-Pirot, & J. Plouffe (eds.), *Arctic Yearbook 2017*, Northern Research Forum, Akureyri, pp. 368-376: <https://arcticyearbook.com/arctic-yearbook/2017>.

¹⁸¹ Murdoch-Gibson, S. (2018), *China's 'Belt and Road' Strides into the Arctic, Few Notice*, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 23th January 2018: <https://www.asiapacific.ca/blog/chinas-belt-and-road-strides-arctic-few-notice>.

multinational energy company that bought 20% of Yamal LNG in 2010; finally, the Chinese Silk Road Fund acquired 9.9% of the shares in 2016. The latter invested a total of US\$5.8 billion in the project, whereas CNPC, Novatek and Total provided US\$5 billion, US\$3.9 billion, and US\$3.7 billion respectively. Moreover, it is important to mention the participation of Chinese state-owned banks in the project. Yamal LNG signed a deal with the Chinese Export-Import bank and the China Development Bank under which the former obtained two 15-year loans amounting to US\$10.4 billion and US\$1.4 billion. In this way, Yamal's officials accessed the necessary capital after the exclusion of Russian energy corporations from international financial markets due to Moscow's responsibility in the Ukraine crisis. Conversely, the funding by Chinese financial institutions promoted LNG shipments from Russia to China. Additionally, it was the first time that Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) participated in an Arctic LNG plant, in charge of supplying 80% of the equipment and constructing tankers as well¹⁸². In the end, China's investment guaranteed dependable LNG imports as part of a national plan to diversify energy sources: the contract signed by CNPC with Novatek ensured the supply of 3 million tons of natural gas per year for two decades, corresponding to almost 20% of the total volume of the first three production plants in Yamal¹⁸³. To sum up, Beijing clearly emerges as the main external shareholder in the Russian Arctic LNG business, with exports depending on infrastructure along the NSR¹⁸⁴.

The positive reciprocal relations between China and Russia reinforce their economic interdependence in Arctic resource development. The Chinese market potential, financing, and knowledge in infrastructure building and manufacturing engineering attract the Arctic country; likewise, such interconnection is the basis of China's commitment to cooperate in the region. In this regard, Deng (2018) asserts that Beijing's interest in the exploration and exploitation of Arctic riches heavily relies on marine accessibility and safe, cost and time effective sea routes connecting the production

¹⁸² See note 180.

¹⁸³ Deng, B. (2018), "Shipping Matters: The Role of Arctic Shipping in Shaping China's Engagement in Arctic Resource Development", in Heininen, L., H. Exner-Pirot, & J. Plouffe (eds.), *Arctic Yearbook 2018, Special Section: China & the Arctic*, Northern Research Forum, Akureyri, pp. 59-70: <https://arcticyearbook.com/images/yearbook/2018/China-and-the-Arctic/AY2018-Special-Section-Complete.pdf>.

¹⁸⁴ See note 169.

facilities in the far north to foreign markets. As a consequence, Chinese undertaking to developing Arctic resources is closely related to the improvement of transportation in that area. Among the three main seaways, the Russian NSR has thinner ice and better port infrastructure and icebreaking services: China's use of such sea lane has grown significantly since 2013, when the "Yong Sheng" operated by COSCO went on its first commercial trip across the Arctic. In 2016, the company started the "Yong Sheng Plus" Program that implied sending five ships along the route - two of which carrying LNG processing modules for the Yamal project - in just one season. The standardization of Arctic transit by Chinese vessels demonstrates the NSR economic feasibility and safe navigability, both of which encourage Beijing's engagement in energy and mining. As a matter of fact, the Sino-Russian collaboration on the Yamal LNG project proves the complementarity between the passage via the Arctic routes and resource development in the region: Arctic shipping not only helps oil and gas exports to China, but also transfers the Chinese know-how in permafrost engineering to the global energy market. The Chinese shipbuilding industry is involved as well; actually, the "Guangzhou Shipyard International Company" is in charge of building semi-submersible to bring «module structures, ocean platforms and floating decks» to Yamal and ice-strengthened carriers to distribute LNG throughout the year.

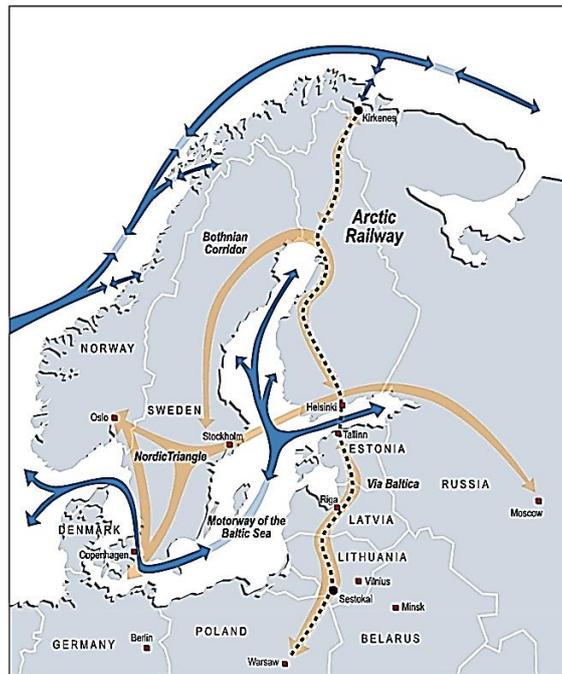
In summary, Beijing's contribution to developing Arctic reserves indicates its intention to transform a cooperative attitude into real actions. However, Yamal LNG is an experimental activity suggesting a possible pattern. It shows that China's presence in the region aims at both securing energy supply and promoting its wide-ranging commitment to the polar region economic growth. This combines resource development, infrastructure building, logistics management and innovation transfer so that all parties attain win-win situations¹⁸⁵.

Indeed, China has engaged in other major infrastructural works as well. For example, negotiations are underway with Finland - whose export to China went from seventh to first place in three years - to build a 500 km long railway linking Rovaniemi in Lapland to Kirkenes, Norwegian port at the Russian border and European polar terminal of Asian

¹⁸⁵ See note 183.

container ships (figure 12). Afterwards, goods are expected to reach central Europe by rail through the Baltic tunnel, a major plan being approved in Brussels¹⁸⁶. The estimated cost for the Arctic Railway plan is €3 bn whereas that for the tunnel is around €15 bn, with Beijing as possible investor. Transit by the NSR combined with the use of railways will result in the shortest path to ship freight from Asia to Europe and would boost Sino-European collaboration and exchanges¹⁸⁷. In addition, Mian (2018) reports that the Chinese government is about to begin the construction of cabling infrastructure in the Arctic: 10,500 km of optical fibre for the East-West digital submarine connection will accelerate international transactions and infrastructural investments in the region. This project is in line with forecasts that the Arctic will be the area with the fastest digital connection in the world by 2023.

Figure 12. Map of Arctic Railway.



Source: Arctic Corridor, <https://arcticcorridor.fi/wp-content/uploads/etusivu-2.jpg>.

¹⁸⁶ Mian, M. (2018), *Artico: Il Grande Gioco del secolo*, ISPI, 10th September 2018: https://essay.ispionline.it/?page_id=401.

¹⁸⁷ See note 132, pp. 429-430.

4.2.2 Fishing

The Arctic is also rich in commercial fish stocks that, as other resources in the area, are mainly managed by the US, Canada, Norway, Russia, and Denmark under the UNCLOS. Commercial fisheries, comprising coastal aquaculture, and fishing activities differ from region to region, hence it is complicated to distinguish and quantitatively estimate Arctic and non-Arctic resources. Although forecasts on the effects of climate change on fish stocks are not certain, scientists seem to agree that several species will tend to move north, to the advantage of circumpolar states (Brosnan *et al.*, 2011). In fact, many varieties of fish including black cod and pollock are migrating towards the Arctic Ocean looking for colder conditions (but apparently less favourable to nourishment and reproduction). Nonetheless, the raise in marine biomass due to global warming may turn the Bering Sea and the Beaufort Sea into waters very rich in fish and, consequently, subject to a high risk of international disputes. For this reason, China signed the so-called “5+5 agreement” between the Arctic and Asian countries for a moratorium on fishing in polar international waters, while trying to understand the dynamics of an evolving ecosystem¹⁸⁸. On 3rd October 2018, Canada, Denmark (representing Greenland), Norway, Russia, the US, the European Union, Iceland, the People’s Republic of China, Japan, South Korea, endorsed a deal to forbid «commercial fishing in the high seas portion of the Central Arctic Ocean», until experts approve its sustainability and examine medium-long term changes in the size and distribution of fish stocks. The memorable agreement marked a starting point to establish organizations or deals for managing regional fisheries in the Arctic, so that fishing will be done in a sustainable way in the future; moreover, it complies with the idea that scientific research and precautionary measures are needed before undertaking commercial fisheries in polar international waters¹⁸⁹. This concept applies to any nation or entity that has a stake in carrying out strategic activities in fragile territories. Minuto (2019) confirms that fishing is a delicate topic in Arctic diplomacy, indeed unregulated exploitation of fisheries and the entrance of the “hungry” Asian powers led to the signing of the aforementioned agreement. As a

¹⁸⁸ See note 186.

¹⁸⁹ European Commission (2018), *EU and Arctic partners enter historic agreement to prevent unregulated fishing in high seas*, 3rd October 2018: https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/eu-and-arctic-partners-enter-historic-agreement-prevent-unregulated-fishing-high-seas_en.

non-coastal state, China has no direct influence on the fishing industry, but can gain it indirectly in order to guide the future development of new rules. More importantly, Beijing can have a say in Arctic matters through scientific research and technology¹⁹⁰.

4.3 Scientific research

The Arctic “game” is also - and above all - played in the field of scientific research. China started explorations in the Arctic and the Antarctic in the 1980s and national polar research programs are coordinated by the Polar Research Institute of China (PRIC), headquartered in Shanghai¹⁹¹. Set up in 1989, it grants the availability of facilities such as the icebreaker “Xue Long” and scientific stations at the Poles, and it focuses on several studies including «polar glaciology, polar oceanographic science, polar upper atmospheric physics, polar biological science and polar information platform». Furthermore, the PRIC is responsible for cooperation and academic exchanges internationally¹⁹². The first Chinese scientific research base in the Arctic Ocean opened on Svalbard in 2004. On that occasion, the then president of China Hu Jintao declared that conducting research activities there would have benefited present and future generations, contributed to peace and development for the whole of humanity, and provided opportunities to share scientific data with other states¹⁹³.

In 2013 China gained the observer status to the Arctic Council, a forum dedicated to sustainability and environmental protection issues in the Arctic. Additionally, conscious that the thawing of the Arctic and global warming cause extreme weather phenomena, Beijing has invested more and more in polar scientific research¹⁹⁴. As a matter of fact,

¹⁹⁰ Minuto, M. M. (2019), “L’Italia ha un interesse nell’Artico, ecco come difenderlo”, *Limes - Rivista italiana di geopolitica*, vol.1/2019, pp. 205-211.

¹⁹¹ The Arctic Institute, *China*: <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/countries/china/>.

«The PRIC is attached to the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration, a subdivision of the State Oceanic Administration, which is an administrative agency reporting to the Ministry of Land and Resources». See Niiler (2018).

¹⁹² University of the Arctic (UArctic), *Polar Research Institute of China*: <https://www.uarctic.org/member-profiles/non-arctic/8627/polar-research-institute-of-china>.

¹⁹³ China.org.cn (2004), *Yellow River Station Opens in Arctic*, 29th July 2004: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2004/Jul/102431.htm>.

¹⁹⁴ Mian (2018) reminds that also Italy managed to become a permanent observer to the Arctic Council in 2013 thanks to a dossier witnessing the Italian polar tradition, with its explorers, scientists, and a cutting-edge oil industry. Hence, the fundamental role of scientific research in international governance. See note 186.

over the last few years experts from the “Chinese Geological Survey” have analysed Greenlandic mineral sites and in 2017 Chinese representatives disclosed projects «for a joint China-Greenland polar research base, as well as a satellite ground station for climate change research». Meanwhile, Beijing is involved in five development plans concerning mining and infrastructure in Greenland. Iceland as well hosts a Chinese space weather laboratory since 2018, product of partnership with local authorities¹⁹⁵.

In September of the same year, China announced its first domestically built icebreaker “Xue Long 2”, which is expected to enter into service in 2019 following some trial trips. The polar vessel will be provided with innovative devices to make oceanographic survey and monitoring, allowing scientists to investigate the ice layers, weather conditions, biological and seabed resources¹⁹⁶. Managed by the civilian PRIC, the original and the new icebreaking research ship together constitute the current Chinese fleet, which equals the American one in terms of capacity. The *Xue Long 2* can shatter ice up to 1.5 metres thick at 2-3 knots of speed: it was designed to do this in both directions of navigation, making it more flexible in varying sea ice conditions. Smaller than the Ukraine-built *Xue Long*, the modern icebreaker is 122.5 m long and 22.3 m wide, and it displaces 13,990 tons; moreover, it is able to accompany a crew of 90 people on a sixty-day journey with a range of 20,000 nm, thus improving Chinese scientific exploration capabilities. All these actions comply with China’s increasing commitment to the far north and its related Arctic policy, which stresses the strategic value of adding a “Polar Silk Road” to the broader project of the BRI¹⁹⁷.

Finally, the most recent case of Sino-Russian collaboration is noteworthy as well. On 10th April 2019 an agreement to found the «Chinese-Russian Arctic Research Center» was signed by delegates of the Qingdao National Laboratory for Marine Science and Technology and the Institute of Oceanology of the Russian Academy of Sciences respectively. The aim of the joint scientific station is to conduct mineral and biological

¹⁹⁵ Niiler, E. (2019), *China’s Scientists Are the New Kids on the Arctic Block*, Wired, 7th May 2019: <https://www.wired.com/story/chinas-scientists-are-the-new-kids-on-the-arctic-block/>.

¹⁹⁶ Gady, F-S. (2018), *China Launches First Domestically Built Polar Icebreaker*, The Diplomat, 11th September 2018: <https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/china-launches-first-domestically-built-polar-icebreaker/>.

¹⁹⁷ Humpert, M. (2018), *China Launches First Domestically Built Polar Icebreaker*, High North News, 11th September 2018: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-launches-domestically-built-xue-long-2-icebreaker>.

studies in the polar region and protect its special ecosystem, especially in relation to the impact of the Arctic on climate change (a particularly urgent issue for China, as it affects its natural environment, forestry, and fishing). According to official statements, other tasks of the centre will be to predict sea ice conditions along the NSR and to make suggestions for a sustainable economic development in the Arctic. Interestingly, the two countries are already partners for industrial development, for instance in 2016 they established the «Russian-Chinese Polar Engineering and Research Center» to work on long-lasting icebreakers and ice-resistant plants. The latest agreement between Beijing and Moscow for a shared scientific research base is another tangible proof of China's engagement to tackle climate change and strong interest in the Arctic, in line with the related white paper. However, on the one hand this Sino-Russian partnership reveals the Chinese awareness that they cannot examine the region alone, so they seek collaboration with coastal nations, primarily Russia. On the other, Moscow favours (a certain kind of) cooperation with China because it provides the capital and technology needed for Russian resource development, and advocates its ambitious plans: as a result, Beijing is now more and more dependent on Russia to realize them¹⁹⁸.

¹⁹⁸ Devyatkin, P. (2019), *Russian and Chinese Scientists to Establish Arctic Research Center*, High North News, 15th April 2019: <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russian-and-chinese-scientists-establish-arctic-research-center>.

Conclusion

The downside of a changing Arctic is the disruption of international geopolitical equilibria. Indeed, this area is increasingly becoming a world stake and the vision conveyed by China in the related policy is consistent with this fact: despite being a non-Arctic state in geographical terms, with the publication of the 2018 white paper the country clarified that its ambitions in the region should be taken seriously¹⁹⁹. Actually, the Pole is part of the strategic equations of major powers for many reasons. First, Eurasia and North America face each other in the Arctic Ocean, where the interests of the US, China and Russia converge. Second, gaining a position there means guaranteeing (or threatening) the coastal nations safety, developing (or accessing) new and shorter sea lanes, supplying (or obtaining) energy and mining resources, and accumulating scientific knowledge. In this regard, a great novelty of the last decade is the entrance of Asian countries in the Arctic Circle through science, pushed by investment opportunities, energy and fish supply, and the use of shipping routes. Exploratory missions, research stations, cooperation between scientific institutes, and polar programs are the means to legitimize their claim to influence, as well as to investigate serious environmental concerns. Nevertheless, science is a vector for validating state sovereignty in fragile zones such as the Arctic or maintaining rights for resource exploitation and governance in the future. Third, the issues described so far are accelerated by climate change (the ice is not only less extended but also half the thickness compared to sixty years ago). Therefore, the main actors are equipping themselves to establish or strengthen their presence in the Arctic and strive for the right to be there, resulting in the competitive triangle Washington-Beijing-Moscow. The US are barely inclined to this territory and aim essentially at preventing the emergence of any regional body able to challenge them. Meanwhile, China tries to be recognized as a leader outside its traditional sphere of influence, proposing itself as the only entity with the liquidity needed for Arctic development. Instead, Russia aspires to regain the role of world power starting from the Arctic, connecting its lands, isles and frozen waters through new infrastructure and

¹⁹⁹ Østhagen, A. (2019), "Di chi è l'Artico? Atlante geopolitico del Grande Nord", *Limes - Rivista italiana di geopolitica*, vol. 1/2019, pp. 61-70.

implementing energy projects²⁰⁰. This is the apparent paradox according to which in the far north the intensity of American, Russian and Chinese interests is opposite to the value of nations on a global scale: the more one counts in the world, the less it focuses on this area and vice versa²⁰¹.

The final chapter of this work has presented three Arctic sectors that have been affected and in some way modified by global warming, opening up new scenarios for China's participation in Arctic affairs. Evidence of Chinese interests in the region has been provided accordingly, making a "common thread" emerge: the clear Sino-Russian complementarity in shipping, resource development and scientific research. Hence, foreign policy linkages between Beijing and Moscow will shape the integration of the former in the Arctic. Today Russia is looking at China more favourably than in the past for two main reasons. As noted by Deng (2018), on the one hand the strong decline in the relations with the US and NATO following the 2014 Ukrainian crisis is threatening Arctic stability, particularly in the energy and mining industry. On the other, American and European sanctions against Moscow damaged the Russian Arctic development because the West forbade the provision of cutting-edge technological inputs for oil drilling and extraction. In addition, foreign investments and funding of oil and gas operations were restricted and Western energy corporations withdrew from offshore construction activities. Under these circumstances, Russia was forced to find contributors unrelated to the US or allies, so different stakeholders were given space to supply the necessary equipment and financial instruments to advance regional development. In this way, the negative externalities generated by international tensions on the Arctic have led to a greater Chinese commitment in the area²⁰².

In order to outline the evolution of the Arctic panorama, it is worth focusing exactly on Russia. As a matter of fact, it is a cornerstone for the present and future administration of the territory thanks to «its Arctic history, knowledge, traditions and scientific

²⁰⁰ Petroni, F. (2019), "Centralità e fragilità strategica dell'Artico", *Limes - Rivista italiana di geopolitica*, vol. 1/2019, pp. 29-40.

²⁰¹ Caracciolo, L. (2019), "Miraggi polari", editorial, *Limes - Rivista italiana di geopolitica*, vol. 1/2019, pp. 7-25.

²⁰² See note 183, p. 61.

proWess»²⁰³. Enhancing the 24,140 km of Arctic space controlled by Moscow also means dominating global hierarchies, or at least preventing others from crushing the Russian Federation. In the current geopolitical context, the alignment with Beijing would contrast the sharp hostility of the US. More specifically, Russia's intention is to offer itself as a pioneer for the Polar Silk Road and attract Chinese capital useful for the exploitation of northern gas fields, as it already happens in the case of Yamal LNG. The strategic rationale of the Arctic lies in the following: here is where the relations between the US (and allies) and Russia, China or both will be assessed; unless Washington decides to line up with Moscow to defeat Beijing. A Russian-American agreement would completely reverse the northern order - obstructing Xi Jinping's Arctic sea routes - as well as the universal one²⁰⁴. Indeed, notwithstanding the new "cold war" (deprived of its typical ideological basis, more pragmatic) that materialized after the Crimea crisis, President Trump believes that Moscow can be a crucial partner in international security management. The ultimate purpose of such cooperative attitude could be to establish a "peaceful coexistence" with Russia in order to limit armaments and avoid regional conflicts, while interrupting the alliance with China to prevent the latter from achieving its mid-century goal²⁰⁵. Contrarily to this geostrategic prospect, international observers believe that Moscow and Beijing are now tied by an economic-political link that is difficult to dissolve as they collaborate in many sectors²⁰⁶.

Summarizing what has been proposed so far, it is possible to outline a multipolar background whose reference point is slowly moving from the US to China, with Russia holding the balance of power, especially if it will opt for cooperating with the West. However, it seems that Beijing will prevail in almost all fields in the long run. The most significant proof is the BRI, the huge growth project mainly towards Central Asia and Europe that would cost more than a trillion dollars and involve 65 nations, 4.5 billion

²⁰³ Soriani, S., Lansetti, S. (2018), "Towards a "militarization rush" in the Arctic region? Evidences, recent trends and critical issues in the case of the Russian Arctic", *Rivista Geografica Italiana*, 125, pp. 403-419.

²⁰⁴ See note 201.

²⁰⁵ Migliavacca, P. (2018), "Mosca al bivio fra Washington o Pechino" in Deaglio, M. (ed.), *Il mondo cambia pelle? XXIII Rapporto sull'economia globale e l'Italia*, Centro di Ricerca e Documentazione Luigi Einaudi, Guerini e Associati, Milano, pp. 119-123.

²⁰⁶ Migliavacca, P. (2018), "Che cosa Trump può offrire (e chiedere) al Cremlino?" in Deaglio, M. (ed.), *Il mondo cambia pelle? XXIII Rapporto sull'economia globale e l'Italia*, Centro di Ricerca e Documentazione Luigi Einaudi, Guerini e Associati, Milano, pp. 123-127.

people, three quarters of total energy reserves and one third of the world surface and GDP. In the end, the goal of economic expansion - mostly through infrastructural investments - will inevitably have important geopolitical repercussions²⁰⁷.

Back to the central topic of this thesis, it can be concluded that the outcome of the Chinese presence in the Arctic relies on the political leanings of the third world power, namely Russia. The more Sino-Russian relations improve, the more positive the implications will be for both countries. At present, the situation is uncertain: will Moscow side with the US and Europe, or will it embrace a progressively tighter Eurasian collaboration? Evidently, the latter hypothesis would provide China with a more reliable access to the Arctic and its valuable resources.

²⁰⁷ Migliavacca, P. (2018), "Forza e debolezza della Cina" in Deaglio, M. (ed.), *Il mondo cambia pelle? XXIII Rapporto sull'economia globale e l'Italia*, Centro di Ricerca e Documentazione Luigi Einaudi, Guerini e Associati, Milano, pp. 127-131.

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