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Uncertain Future and Limited Time (On long-term un/sustainability of the *New Silk Road*)

Summary

The realization of the biggest economy project, not only in 21st Century is facing many security challenges that presume numerous risks (security interests of the Major powers; economic potentials and normative surroundings of local markets functioning; cultural and/or identity differences; climatic change...) as well as immanent to them even more numerous and concrete threats (armed conflicts in European border areas – the Middle East and the Black Sea Region; uncontrolled migrations of African and Asian population to Europe accompanied by escalation of religious terrorism; political and military tensions related to the Korean peninsula, South China Sea, Central Asia and the Balkans; not regulated world financial market; anti-China media campaigns, etc.). Although the *New Silk Road* has no time frame or strategic political alliances in general, it is not nor it can be out of time or devoid of politics. Its lasting is and will be conditioned by the strength of Chinese economy and its internal (political and social) stability on one hand, and geopolitical interests of the Super Powers (USA, EU, Russia) and the modalities of their realization, on the other.

Keywords:

New Silk Road, Super Powers, China, Russia, EU, USA, risks, threats

At the time when we are entering the fifth year of a historic, so far unseen economic project of planetary dimensions under the laconic name “*Belt and Road*” (journalist call it the *New Silk Road*), the question of its sustainability, i.e. further duration, inevitably arises. The reasons for this concern are not

so much economic as they are political. And while various economic scholars and “experts” have been announcing the final crash of the “Chinese miracle” for years, with more or less dramatic consequences for the global economy, the main attention of all other social theorists/analysts is naturally focused on the *political effects* of the several decades long, undisputed rise of the Chinese state. The main question is: will China continue to function in the future, like all the major powers through history that have fought (and still are fighting) for their own regional and/or global hegemony – or maybe China’s economic development and its accompanying influence in world affairs will lead to a new kind of international relations that will revitalize, and perhaps even restore that old, seemingly hopelessly worn out political slogan of the non-aligned countries political bloc from the Cold War times: “peaceful active coexistence”? In other words, will China primarily strive to take care of its own interests and its own security or maybe, by its own example and leading a “win-win” policy, it will open some space for handling international affairs outside the classic pattern of (initial) intimidation, (following) blackmail and (final) warfare? Common sense and historical experience opt for the first variant, while analytical caution (or maybe it is just a utopian enthusiasm?) suggests the possibility of creating truly new – better prerequisites for the development of international policy. In the text below, we will point out the theoretical assumptions and practical potentials of both alternatives.

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There is no doubt that China’s investments will bring benefits to the vast majority, if not to all countries on the *New Silk Road*. Similarly, all the old major powers of Europe (above all Germany and France), the restored Russia, and even the only remaining “super power” – the United States also have (in) direct economic benefits from the Chinese economic upheaval. If that is true, then why is there the question of sustainability of the said “everybody satisfied” development of the events? If everyone profits, and nobody loses – why would it bother anybody? The answer is partly hidden in human nature, but much more in the nature of policy and character of international, i.e. intergovernmental relations.

1 HUMAN NATURE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, OR IS IT POSSIBLE FOR ECONOMIC INTEREST TO PREVAIL OVER POLITICAL POWER

Theoretically, human nature is the foundation on which all human institutions have been built through history, including the youngest – modern (national) state.¹ Irrespective of the immediate ideological treatment of human nature in religious writings, political philosophy, or modern political theories and/or ideologies², human nature contains and/or produces all the goals and all means that man uses in the struggle for power. This struggle is primarily a struggle against other people, hence – it has a political character. The second type of struggle – against nature, in spite of all early and late enlightening phrases and fantasies about “nature management”, has always been implicit and, in principle, the losing one and as such less interesting to theory.

Social power is acquired in relations between people and that is why the main motive and challenge of every human struggle is the influence on other people. Further on, this presupposes a certain degree of “visibility” in a community that moves between two extremes: be immersed in the crowd, invisible and without any power, or be the leader of others, the one with too much power. Political life of a community flows through various shades of social (non) visibility, and this state of affairs practically has not changed since the beginning of civilization, and it was certainly so at the time when homo sapiens began to conquer the world. Inasmuch “human nature” has always been a political product, a historically developed phenomenon that

¹ Bearing in mind substantially different forms of existence of political communities through history, we make a clear distinction here between *pre-modern* political communities and *modern* (national) states. Various pre-modern political communities (from Sumerian royal territories, Greek polises, Asirian, Egyptian, Persian or Roman empires to Islamic kalifates, Chinese, Mongolian, Ottoman or Holy Roman Empire) were created on the basis of personal or dynastic power and its divine legitimacy. As opposed to that, modern state presumes depersonalized power that, contrary to dynastic, makes a distinction between governance and possession and functions as *an abstract legal entity* embodied in centralized political power, which lasts in time continuum in a defined territory with a defined population. Following the modern spirit of time, we could say that the state is a kind of “megacorporation” with its internal division of authority by which the work permits to other smaller corporations are being issued – from armed forces and the police, church and school to public and private enterprises. More on this, see: V. N. Cvetković: „Država i društvo: kakvi (zaista) jesu i kakvi bi (mogli/treba-lo) da budu”, in: *Sociologija politike (Problemi, teroije, ideologije)*, Fakultet bezbednosti, Beograd, 2018.

² More on this, see: V. N. Cvetković: „Političke ideologije – sticanje i upravljanje moći”, *Ibid.*

determines the ways of struggle for power through which individuals acquire the experience of humanity. The more developed the community, the more the place in its hierarchy depends on the power of spirituality and the social origin of leadership, with selfishness and solidarity, personal and common, and singular and universal overlapping or excluding each other on the value scale. What prevails depends primarily on the structure of constituting power within the community, and then only from the economy and techniques of conquering nature.

Given that egoistic traits like selfishness, egotism, envy or jealousy are always present, if not evenly distributed within the entire human race, any denial or underestimation of their existence in the understanding of individual and collective actions leads to misunderstanding or wrong interpretation of reality, and consequently to loss of power. In principle, due to this fact it is not possible to expect that other people or communities will accept somebody else's well-being with approval or "unsoiled good faith" in the long run even if (or especially then!) they have a direct benefit from it. The greater the success of a community, and the "more visible" its creator (that is, the more powerful!), the stronger and more present the suspicion and doubtfulness that almost inevitably lead to envy. That is why, at the moments of joint success, there always appears a (person or organization) who first denies the existence of a general benefit, and shortly after "discloses" the "true" and, as a rule, "dishonest" intentions of the one who initiated and maintained the praised and respected process or order to that time. So it has always been and so it will probably always be in the relationship between individuals.

Political communities perceive, understand and accept (or not) the world: other people and other societies, similarly to the way an individual behaves, feels and understands other people, but in another/different dimension of sociality. They either help or destroy, co-operate or cheat on, follow or suspect each other, but never remain indifferent to others' success or progress. The history of civilization, until "yesterday", ie. to the triumph of modernity (18th century) was marked with the sign of political communities that competed with each other on the territory, wealth and fame that belonged to the dynasties and their supporters – warrior and religious elites. The dynasties and the accompanying aristocracy sat in the front row of the socially (politically and economically) strictly delimited communities and they benefited every gain and prestige that the community had. In return, depending on the strength and abilities of its leaders, the community had more or less firm internal integrity and religious or another identity that legitimized the power and, simultaneously, was an addi-

tional reason for conflicting with others, in principle similarly established communities (together with the struggle for territory and wealth).

The struggles between political communities have always been motivated by resource control and wealth building (which is always successfully legitimized as “the need for security”), as well as by the aspiration for fame testifying to the power of the community, its ancestors and leaders. For these reasons, dynastic wars, as a rule, were given “super-historical” character and were perceived as an expression of “eternally the same,” i.e. immutable human nature, as an inevitable moment of human life, as undeniable as day and night or sun and stars. Modernity has produced new principles of organization and in particular evaluation of the internal political order (division of power, political representation, etc., that is, legal equality, individual freedoms, etc.), but the old rules or principles of inter-dynastic relations that assumed the struggle for acquiring and extending political power remain the same. The aforementioned “naturalness” of war and warfare also exists in modern times but has lost its former dynastic character. That is why the monarchs and their courtiers gradually become tourist attractions, while “their” former communities became national states, but remain the same old predators, only with much greater strength and ambitions.

Irrespectively of the internal political structure, i.e. the way of legitimizing or self-understanding of the authorities that call on their ethnic, historical, religious or “purely political” (civic) origins, in the matters of their *foreign policy*, modern (national) states function in the same way as all (large and small) pre-modern political communities always have. They struggle to expand/enlarge their own and to reduce/destroy the political power of others. In other words, today, as always, the *security* of the political community *comes first*. To ensure one’s own security means to avoid, subjugate, neutralize or liquidate rivals – these have been and still are the main foreign policy objectives of each “state” throughout history. The usual, if not the only means for such an achievement is *pressure, blackmail, and war*.³ As a rule, every “foreign political success” of the major powers, but also of all other “ordinary” states, is achieved on this basis. What we all like to see and experience as the leading goal of modern politics and political action of the states: the alliance in achieving global peace, active cooperation on common goals of general prosperity, effective fight against poverty, unique global environmental policy, etc. are usually only byway phrases or suitable ideological masks for a realistic policy of power and the domination of the big over the small, i.e. rich over poor political communities. This seemingly oversimplified, and moreover, Manichaeic image of the world,

³ See: John J. Mearsheimer: *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Norton, New York 2014.

unfortunately, is not a gnostic exaggeration, even less an ideological “leftism”, but only a realistic outline of modern politics and relations between states. And while the relations *within* political communities are historically subject to frequent changes and radical novelties in view of their mutual relations, *essentially* things have not significantly shifted compared to the first civilizational steps in times of the Mesopotamia, despite the enthusiasm and effort of liberal ideologists from various European and American legal and philosophical departments of the second half of the twentieth century.

Let us conclude that political communities through history, including the modern (national) state, function on the basis of two types of *political logic*: internal and external. *The first* carries within it ideological contents that determine the way of justification and preservation of power/order and seeks to regulate the issues of justice and fairness on which the internal stability of the state depends. *The second* political logic is determined by the context in which states operate and it has an almost “timeless” meaning: the fight for security by all means. In an ever-unstable, unpredictable and “anarchic” international order, composed of always the same – suspicious and potentially aggressive political communities, it is necessary to think and work with always the same priority: to secure survival and preserve security. As the state is bigger and richer, its will for power is “more natural” and more effective, and the fear for security is greater. Throughout history, all the “major powers” have never changed that priority, regardless of internal social transformation and change in the principles and models of governance and establishing the legitimacy of power. Increasing their own material wealth and coercing others into behaving in the desired way, these are universal landmarks for all political communities without exception through history. Knowing that and accepting it as a reality, what are we then to expect in a new, current division of power in the world, especially in relation to the Belt and Road, the largest economic project ever undertaken by a modern state?

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From the initial stories of trust and good intentions brought by the *New Silk Road*, (September 2013), to the realization of many concrete projects (March 2018), dozens of countries from three continents that meet the needs of over four billion people have entered the game! Now no one talks about China’s good (but not feasible) idea, i.e. economic utopia – but about

real economic results. With all the economic advantage, they carry in themselves an unavoidable political dimension or consequence.

Like the traditional philosophy of Taoism, the *New Silk Road* does not have its own “ultimate goal” – the essence is in development and the accompanying metamorphoses of economies, not the assumed goal that finally embodies an inner purpose or “substance” of things per se. Chinese intent is simple and clearly pragmatic: to allow for its own development in synergy with other countries. Any cooperation that would imply anything more than the economic exchange of goods, services and people is not something that China expects. This official, many times repeated political position, implies that China has no interest in participating in any regional geopolitical contest, but only to achieve economic and trade cooperation with other countries with similar attitudes or interests.⁴ Too good to be true? The problem is that it is simply not possible to avoid suspicion of every kind regarding the “real” Chinese intentions. Not only because of the aforementioned immanent limitations of human nature and every state policy, but also because of the simple fact that economic and trade issues are related to political interests and aspirations to power by nature of things. The bigger the business, the greater its political consequences. Consequently, whether you like it or not: you cannot be the largest economy in the world and at the same time a neutral political subject.

The constant emphasis by the leaders of the Chinese government and Chinese business people that all they want is a common progress in production and trade, and that any geopolitical contest (enforcement) is totally out of the picture – all along with a regular inflow of real investments – has made the “Confucian model” of international cooperation acceptable to virtually all countries of the world. Attracting partners by investing and persuading, and not by coercion and blackmail, is undoubtedly a rare experience for all countries that are familiar with the way in which major powers operate. Until now, they (major powers) have always imposed their own way of doing business on others and have had no fear to use open force in the end. The People’s Republic of China, as a new modern major power, emphasizes the peaceful and partnership-like character of its investments and underlines the friendly, non-obligatory nature of its views. This is what is acceptable to underdeveloped and small countries, yet again suspicious to the big ones. The

⁴ See: Li Zuokui, “16+1 Cooperation” in the Context of “the Belt and Road Initiative”, in: *The One Belt, One Road – The Balkan Perspective (Political and Security Aspects)*, Faculty of Security, University of Belgrade, 2017. Inasmuch the cooperation in the security sphere in the sense of making alliances or coalitions is treated as too sensitive and therefore superfluous issue to China, especially when the Balkans and Europe are in question.

Chinese response to the given skepticism is that “Only those who have a habit of threatening others see others as a threat” (Xi Jinping).

Irrespective of this, resistance to or suspicion of the *New Silk Road* is not and does not automatically have to be an outcome of the old colonial suspicion of the major powers or their acquired habit of being arrogant in the way they act and perceive others. It goes without saying that certain “tactical obstruction” that relates to the protection of national economies of some large but also small countries, is amply present and acute. In the same way, insisting on specific environmental and competition rules in the EU, increased trade tariffs in the US, etc. despite various hints and dramatic warnings, do not have to be an introduction to a “total economic war”. Rather, they fall within the usual means of economic and political struggle in the world market.⁵ Regardless of the current “cold and warm” phases in international relations, the question remains, how long can China count on its Confucian “win-win” variant of foreign policy to really last? No one can resist the concrete material benefits, and then again, between economic gain and their own security (which is always perceived as being threatened by external factors), every country, and especially when it is a major power, will always bow to the security aspect of its development. It is therefore reasonable to expect that in the immediate future China will be forced to

⁵ Of course, one cannot be sure that there will never be any bigger trade wars between major powers. In a sense, the wars are always underway. For example, economic and since not long ago also diplomatic sanctions being persistently implemented on Russia for four years in a row (since the annexation of the Crimea in 2014) and to which there is no end in the foreseeable future, undoubtedly are a part of “waging trade wars” and, as such, they are an element of political “restraining” Russia. The same goes for the on going tension between the USA and China on the issue of free trading and protection of domestic economy. American president Donald Trump laconically declared recently that “trade wars are good and easy to win” and took some protectionist measures right after: he raised the import taxes on Chinese steel and aluminum (March 2018). Apparently, he does not think that trade wars may be an overture to other, classical (armed) conflicts. As a possible counteraction, for the time being, China portends “legal measures to the purpose of protecting its own interests”, which implies a whole lot of various interpretations: from introducing taxes to agricultural products to restricting the import of jet airplanes and other sophisticated products from the USA. The problem is that the spirale of trade retaliation may be almost an endless one, resting at the end in “the final countdown”. Too many times, history has taken this direction exactly, therefore, any politics of imposing sanctions, raising protective taxes and other forms of “trade”, “diplomatic” or any other form of “warfare” is brimming with risk that easily turns into a blatant security threat. When a crisis steps over a certain – indistinctive and allusive in the beginning, but very soon clear and unambiguous threshold – it cannot be “successfully managed” any longer and then it transcends into a real war – an armed conflict between states. The negation of this regularity is the reflection of either political naivety (bordering stupidity) or shrewdness (bordering crime).

gradually change and adjust its economic “win-win” foreign policy with the real international political environment, and that, in time, it will increasingly focus on its own security. Inasmuch the perspective of the *New Silk Road* will be substantially weakened.

Due to the political and economic resistance of the USA and EU (it is still relatively mild) as well as the security challenges that are existing in its immediate neighborhood, (Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Korean Peninsula, Japan, India, Butane, Vietnam, etc.), but also inside it (Tibetan Plateau and the Western China for instance) China is already compelled to reinforce its security (and not only economy) potential.⁶ Inasmuch, despite all good intentions, best wishes and common benefit for numerous countries on its route, the *Belt and Road* megaproject, will encounter problems in future, the size and number of which we can but anticipate at present. As always, reality will bring unexpected threats, *ad hoc* alliances and, why not, even some positive solutions.

But, let’s get back to our main question: how long the major powers, and before all the largest one – the US, can stay patient and agree to more or less passively monitor the rise of China? Can the well-known and recognized economic interdependence of the two largest economies in the world be a sufficient reason to help the still technologically and militarily far greater power (US) to resist the temptation of using non-economic means of coercion against its “partner” (China) and thus maintain its leading position in the world order by force? Also, can Chinese progress count on a permanent alliance with the second largest military force in the world (Russia), and in particular – how long will the European Union (whatever it may look like in the immediate future) continue to tolerate Chinese influence in its own sphere of geopolitical and/or economic interest with passive inertness?

⁶ This refers not only to the internal strengthening of Chinese armed forces but also their presence in other parts of the world. For instance, China already has a military base in Africa (Jibuti) and the opening of another one in Pakistan (Port of Gwadar or Jiwani Airport) is forthcoming. These bases are close to the Red Sea and Suez Canal, i.e. to the Hormuz Straits. Looking from the perspective of a military analyst, by controlling the rented seaport of Hambatot in Sri Lanka, China would soon be able to control the sea routes in the Arab Sea. Further, the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea each with a deployed Chinese army unit has been a sufficient enough indicator to the USA to label China (along with Russia) the main security threat to its world leadership. Besides, the US doubts official Chinese reports on its military budget as they are void of research and development costs, as well as arms procurement, design and engineering costs, etc. Be as it may, there is no doubt that Chinese security potential equals its economic power and it is one of those rare facts that speak for themselves.

There are no clear answers to all these questions for a simple reason, forgotten or suppressed, that not even individual human actions, and especially the actions of political communities (nowadays national states), are always rationally grounded or motivated, and as such they are always essentially and decisively – unpredictable. It is an ontological-political fact whose irrational dimension often outweighs the rational one. In the same way, what seems to be an irrational act from today's position may have been the only rational solution at a given moment in the past. Anyone who judges the future must also keep that in mind. Hence, all possible methodological mantras such as “trend analysis” and “risk assessment”, as well as metaphysical speculations about “fateful predisposition” and “history tasks” are, if not wrong, definitely incomplete or limited concepts because they ignore the complexity of human nature and contextual complexity of history. It will always be resistant to methodological formalization or ideological adaptation. Conceptual molds and scientific phrases such as “rational choices”, “recognized interests”, “common visions” on one hand or “war of the worlds”, “eternal conflicts” or “historical mission” on the other, are only ordinary rhetorical stereotypes suitable for daily politics and journalism, and by no means for a prudent view of the real potentials of the present. We have already noted that the amount of subtlety in approaching the understanding of the future notwithstanding, the reality will always surprise us. The trick is: not to be completely surprised.

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Unlike an individual who can (though, by definition, they would have to) function beyond their own (selfish) interests, a political community – state cannot afford to do so. This does not mean that its engagement on the outside (towards other states) has to be aggressive and violent by definition. The real question is if the said “fatality” in conducting the state policy may be avoided and in what way, especially when a major power is in question – a state whose mere existence implies the power that requires its confirmation, that is, the consent (usually in the form of obedience) by others? In order to at least provide an answer to this question, we should first mention some of the relevant general guidelines for understanding the relationships between the major powers through modern history, in order to realize the security threats, and number and size of the risks that the *New Silk Road* in Europe is facing, especially in the Balkans – a key intermediary area on the East-West route.

2. MAJOR POWERS AND THEIR (DIS)ORDER

One way to make, or better – to pinpoint a (possible) historical cut in the creation of modern politics is to view the genesis of the major powers historically and parallel to the creation of global economy and the so-called world politics. Such “broad moves” or “historical syntheses” have already been made from various perspectives and have yielded great results.⁷ Here we will only outline some of the crucial moments. In fact, the key moment in the creation of the global world is the “discovery” of the New World and a better “mutual acquaintance” of the Far East and the West (15th – 16th century). This is the point in history from which the time of the creation of truly “great (world) powers” has been being kept.⁸ In the beginning (16th – 17th century) all major powers are of Western European origin: first Spain and Portugal, along with them the Netherlands, then England and France along with Russia (18th–19th century), while the last in this European series was Germany (20th century). During the 20th century, the primacy is taken over by non-European powers: the United States and Japan (for a time), or not-only-European Russia (in the ideological, transnational and communist form: the USSR). Finally, in the 21st century, the liberal leader and undisputed modern superpower, the USA, is joined by a transformed pre-modern power from the East – once an old empire and now a communist republic China, as well as by a newly shaped modern power in the synthesized transnational form of an alliance of liberal states under the name: the European Union. By its potentials, but not by economic power, the revitalized and no more communist Russia stands shoulder to shoulder with the aforementioned three.

⁷ See the classic works: Eric Hobsbawm: *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day, The Age of Empire: 1875–1914*; Paul Kennedy: *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers – Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*; Fernand Braudel: *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XVe–XVIIIe siècle*; Immanuel Wallerstein: *The Modern World-System, I–IV*.

⁸ We do not regard as “world powers” those major pre-modern military and cultural powers that invaded parts of various continents, such as Assyrian, Persian, Roman, Mongol or Ottoman Empire, because they could not have had economic, military and political potential that the modern “major powers” presume. Although all powerful political communities of pre-modern times had the need for domination of “world” proportion from the very beginning, their perception of the world and technical and organizational abilities did not allow for the possibility of ruling beyond the range of land conquests.

When the power or force of influence of these modern major powers is differentiated into world regions, i.e. continents, then the historical (in)stability of each of them can be noticed.⁹ Portugal and Spain were the first to gain but also the first to lose the status of a modern major power. England, that is the United Kingdom held this position the longest (17th – 19th century), but the United States that fully dominated America (19th – 20th century) became the first true “regional” (meaning: continental) hegemon. Such an achievement has not yet been rivaled by any of the modern major powers although Russia, in the form of the USSR, dominated most of Eurasia almost half of the 20th century and indirectly Eastern Europe (1945–1989). Unlike the United States, other major powers of the modern era, alternately or simultaneously, directly or indirectly, ruled over large parts of the world, that is, over territories on different continents, but they could never achieve absolute dominance over a whole continent. In contrast, the United States managed to sovereignly rule over both American continents (throughout the 20th century), but also in Western “Cold War” Europe (during the second half of the same century). Of course, the United States still holds the same position in America today, but its strength has considerably weakened due to a number of factors that cannot be considered in detail here.

Similarly, of all the major powers of Europe, from the Renaissance to our day, only Russia has survived and remained, and over time even gained strength despite all the dramatic events within its borders that led it to the edge of existence (the October Revolution, 1919, The Second World War, 1941, the dissolution of the USSR, 1991). All other major powers of Europe gradually lost their imperial might, which has survived to this day only in fragments. Nevertheless, the former major powers of Europe partially retain their power thanks to an exclusive political experiment called the European Union.

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The European Union came to existence partly as the outstretched hand of the USA on the Old Continent, and partly as an expression of the rational unification of the particular interests of West European countries that had been destroying each other in the past centuries to the point of extinction. It is important here to notice that the EU member states owe their unity and common progress to the external power (USA), which assumed responsibility for their security. The said protection from a possible attack from the outside was often misused for maintaining order on the inside, which

⁹ See Table 1 (major powers of the modern era) at the end.

in political practice meant the suppression of national interests for the benefit of another (USA), this usually camouflaged by the actions of a supra-national military-political alliance (NATO).¹⁰ Of course, the main political and security challenge that the EU is facing is not only its relationship to its mentor on the one hand, and the issues of joint institutions, on the other; above all, it is the status and/or power of the united Germany, the economically most powerful country in Europe.¹¹

The other – eastern part of Europe was subjected to the ideological grip of the USSR for decades. The final decay of this country marks the end of an ideology, but not the end of the existence of a major power. Despite all common sense expectations at that time (1991) that Russia is no more (secession of vast areas of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, the war in Chechnya and unrests in the Caucasus, regional self-sufficiency of the provinces in the newly formed Russian Federation, etc.), after a decade of economic and every other sort of regression, **Russia** is once again a major power, especially in military terms.¹² On the other hand, the European Union, which emerged as the real ideological, economic and political winner of the Cold War, is today in a major crisis the (favorable) end of which is yet to be seen.¹³ In the meantime, a major global economic distress (the 2008 economic crisis that practically is still in progress), as well as the accompanying political earthquake in the form of Brexit (Britain's withdrawal from EU membership) happen, all of it causing the European Union to setting itself

¹⁰ On the ideological causes and consequences of such state of affairs see our essay on “real liberalism” which discusses American i.e. neoliberal “humanitarian interventionism” on the example of air strikes and military occupation of a portion of Serbian territory during the war campaign against the former SFRY in spring, 1999. V. N. Cvetković: “Real-liberalizam (ili nove globalne i lokalne tiranide)”, *Sociološki pregled*, Beograd, 1–2/1999.

¹¹ Although they often act as if reality does not exist, Great Britain and France are not major powers any more, while Germany, after all the horrible things it did to its geopolitical surroundings, for the first time is on the path to gain the status of a major power by peaceful means – within the frame of a super national European political and economic alliance (the EU). In other words, military wise (and very likely in any other aspect) Germany stands the chance of maintaining its world influence only in an alliance with its former enemies. Such a position is being tried to be acquired through the still foggy and inefficient project of “European Armed Forces” whilst, at the same time, the NATO membership prevents any kind of autonomous security policy of Germany and any other European Union member state due to the undisputed US leadership.

¹² Owing to the military intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia restored its status of a major power in the modern sense of the term – it successfully military intervened outside the proximate zone of its own territory. In a major powers' imaginary glossary of indicators, the said “remote defense” phrase is compatible with another peacetime indicator of power – long distance trading.

¹³ More on this in the following part of the paper.

on new foundations – this time, it seems, partly independent of the sovereign will of its main mentor and patron on the other side of the Atlantic.

If we look at the other side of the historical globe, we will see that all the great empires of antiquity and the Middle Ages in the East: from the Ottoman Empire to the Chinese Empire, with the partial exception of Japan, they simply did not survive in modern times. The economic, political and cultural power of the West that culminated in the 19th century literally wiped out the pre-modern political communities of the East. It is only modern China that thanks to its own historical strength and multi-millennium cultural continuity manages to rise and, in time, position as a major power after all the horrors of colonial and civil wars and occupations. In the mid-20th century, it finally establishes the sovereignty over its vast territory and even larger population so as to become the world's largest rising power in the 21st century, the second by economic indicators, and with the tendency to become the leading force in all other spheres.

Although, during the Modern period, China had undergone continuous cutting off parts of its territory, having been exposed to colonial assaults both from the West (European powers and the United States) and the East (Japan), **China** has revitalized in a way incomparable with either any other modern “developing country” or any of the old world powers. In addition, contemporary China is the first Chinese political community after the Ming dynasty (from mid 14th to mid 17th century) ruled by the Chinese, and not by “foreign devils” – the occupiers (Mongols, Mandurts, Japanese, etc.) or economic-military colonizers in the form of modern major powers (Great Britain, France, etc.). National identity and nationalism in China, just like in the West, is not a recent – new-age political phenomenon, but regarding its historical inauguration and institutional power, it is. It emerged after the “centuries of humiliation” by other modern powers and gained a much stronger meaning and more expressed forms than the former medieval reactions to the destruction of local dynasties by foreign barbarians could have been. That is why national pride and tragic historical experience from the 19th and 20th centuries are the bearing pillars, i.e. today's benchmarks of Chinese security policy. Economic and military development are the means by which this policy is realized.

It has long been noted that China is the only pre-modern empire and “economy-world” that has survived to this day.¹⁴ However, unlike the community of pre-modern times, organized in a strictly centralized and mor-

¹⁴ Compare V. N. Cvetković: “Chinese Power and Geo-politics of the Balkans (“One Belt, One Road” – a realistic forecast), in: *The One Belt, One Road – The Balkan Perspective (Political and Security Aspects)*, Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade, 2017.

alizing way, which was taken over by the early communist authorities, today's China, still with old (communist) ideological identity papers, no longer has problems with private property, getting rich, and with capitalist market in particular. Central government today only "appoints" or marks areas in which economic competition is instigated and encouraged, while the concern for equality and raising citizens' standards remains the main ideological direction for the whole society. In so far as control over public opinion and tendency towards a unified orientation of the system of values is maintained. On the other hand, the modern Chinese state encourages the development of entrepreneurship and does not find that it undermines the foundations of the government. In other words, the political elite which, in different forms, had been dealing with literally all aspects of public life: from public works to (especially) morals of its subjects through the long history of China, today no longer hinders the economic elite and its, by nature, egoistic action.¹⁵

The similar applies to Russia, another remaining empire from the time of modern empires. Just like China, Russia experienced a series of dramatic ideological and social transformations during modernity (from feudal and semi-industrialized empire, through communist dictatorship to ultra-liberal economy with authoritarian political leadership). Today, Russia is a major power again on whose might most of "world affairs" depend – including, of course, the New Silk Road. Although they have somewhat controversial history of mutual relations, Russia and China are strategic partners in most

¹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 27–33. We cannot discuss here what the consequences of all that are on the issue of internal relations in China especially in regards with maintaining the order of authority and establishing bigger social and individual freedoms because it is beyond our immediate interest. Controversies that are universal on that and other issues (such as the growth of social inequalities, pollution, ageing population and rising foreign trade imbalance) are big and they are permanent security challenges to modern China. These issues are being debated not only in China, but also outside of it, especially in the USA, and the EU. See Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (2009); Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (2015).

More on (future) Chinese role in the world with two different points of view, or the backbone of possible Chinese proceedings: "peaceful attracting" or "aggressive imposing", see Martin Jacques: *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (2009) i Michael Pillsbury: *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (2015).

international organizations¹⁶ and, practically, have no border disputes.¹⁷ However, they do have a strong mutual interest – restraining the United States, the No.1 world power.

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Unlike Russia and China with deep pre-modern roots and covering the largest part of Euro-Asian territory for many centuries, **the USA** is a modern major power arisen “from nowhere,” with the refugee population that came to the new continent having fled from religious wars and poverty in Europe or in search for a new life free of the shackles of aristocratic order and feudal legacy. Forged in the battle of British colonies for independence, the United States is the only major power that has the exact date of its creation (July 4, 1776), a transparent genesis of its strengthening (decades of economic progress and intense expansion, i.e. the military conquest of almost entire North American continent during the 19th century) and clear political program documents for legitimizing the internal order (the first real modern Constitution of 1787 and the Constitutional Amendments of 1791). On these foundations the world’s greatest power of all time was created. At the end of the 19th century (the end of “liberation of Cuba” in 1898), the United States becomes the first and for the time being the only major power in history that controls an entire continent – from Alaska in the North

¹⁶ For example, in the period 1996–2015, Russia and China invested the so-called double veto in the UN Security Council on 6 occasions, voted in favor of resolutions that failed to get the necessary majority to be adopted 2 times, and 32 times expressed disagreement with the general opinion together and voted withheld. (In the same period the USA vetoed the decisions of the Security Council 4 times). Independently or with an interim member of the Security Council, Russia abstained 19 times, and China 12 times. Of the 63 votings at which they abstained, the two countries proceeded jointly 32 times. Five times one of them abstained when the other invested veto or they did not decide for a double veto. In the previous period (1996–2005), Russia vetoed only once, China did it twice, and the United States vetoed 10 times. See: Dušan Proroković: „Regionalna bezbednost i teorija realizma (Studija slučaja Arktik)“, *doktorska disertacija*, Fakultet bezbednosti, Beograd 2017.

¹⁷ The fact that Sino-Russian borderline (more than 4,000km long) is almost the same as the one agreed on after the visit of Russian diplomatic mission to China is a historical curiosity. The head of the mission was Sava Vladislavljevic, a Serbian merchant, diplomat and subsequent Russian count who edited the Treaty of Kyakhta (1727). Vladislavić took part in the Battle on the Poltava River (1709). He was the founder of Russian intelligence service (sic!), the man who set the foundations of Russian politics towards, at that time, still unknown China. For more on this, see: Sava Vladislavić: “Tajna informacija o snazi i stanju kineske države”, *Moskva, 1731.*, RTS, Beograd, 2011. i Jovan Dučić: *Grof Sava Vladislavić (Srbin – diplomata na dvoru Petra Velikog i Katarine I)*, Mandala, Beograd, 2015.

to Big Island of Tierra del Fuego in the South. During all of its ideological metamorphoses, i.e. the way of justifying the authority (from the constitution of the “the land of the free” to “the state of the exceptional” that leads the “free world” (because it has a special responsibility for “the universal values of freedom”), the United States continuously implement the policy of “America’s backyard” (Monroe Doctrine).

Owing to the traditional rivalry of the European powers on the one hand, and its own political and economic organization on the other, the United States has been a sovereign ruler in America since the second half of the 19th century. After World War Two, this country establishes its power on other continents, especially in Western Europe and the Far East. The position of “world leadership” has been maintained to date due to an effective combination of “hard” and “soft” power, i.e. the mutual support of the military industry and civil economy (especially to technological progress) with cultural hegemony (especially the film and/or media industry). Military bases all over the world, along with economic progress and a powerful ideological narrative of freedom (which, thanks to Hollywood and the media industry is at the heart of the “American way”), enabled the United States to win the Cold War with the Soviets, which soon created an illusion of irresistibility and untouchability. However, the dream of its own excellence did not last long – only a few decades. In so far as the US more resembles a disappointed boxing champion who does not understand why they still do not like him and do not celebrate him – and “it is known” that he is “the best” and that there has never been “more honest” than him. In spite of that often sincere ideological “innocence”, unlike its two major world competitors, the United States continues either to have or to lead (whatever it is called), a clear and firmly established military-political alliance – NATO, which by its potentials exceeds manyfold all other military and other alliances in the world. Therefore, the old champion can still expect applause, be it false or not. On the other hand, as well known, NATO is facing major not only military and/or security challenges, but precisely political in nature: starting from purpose or meaning, i.e. goals of the organization, through the way it is functioning and being financed, to the actual operations of armed forces on the battleground, just like the EU.

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Taking all in consideration, the focal point of the current geopolitics is that the modern policy and economy in global terms depend on the mutual relations between a super-power (US) and two major powers on the rise (Russia and China), as well as a series of intermediary roles dedicated to local regional powers in the Middle or Far East, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, etc.

When it comes to the area of Europe, the main events continue to depend more on the US than on the EU. Recently, the EU has been trying to function autonomously in relation to Washington, but this does not mean that it can lead a significantly different policy. The main common denominator of the EU and US foreign policy is the attitude towards Russia. In this regard, the EU always goes a step further: if the relations between Washington and Moscow are good at a given moment, Brussels will be even better for Russia (more cordial, more open) and vice versa. This was the case in the past decades and so it is today when tensions and mistrust are maximally increased, even to the extent of military conflict through mediators (the Middle East), but also at the borders between Russia and the EU (Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltic), including economic sanctions and political (diplomatic) distance. By all means, the real or feigned “fear of Russia”, with or without a real reason, remains the only effective integrative factor in NATO and in (it seems again) divided Europe; and it is almost certain that the EU restructuring will be continued along these lines in the future.

Today, when Great Britain officially stays aside from “Eurointegration,” the hard core of the future “maximum possible speed” and the highest level of integration of national states in the form of imagined United States of Europe or, to be more realistic, firmly integrated political communities with a common currency, the central bank and perhaps some form of a single foreign policy (the core is Germany and France, probably the Netherlands with Belgium as the EU administrative center), will endeavor to keep under control the spatially large and politically “slower” countries with fragile economies and “conservative” views on their own sovereignty (Italy and Spain), along with smaller and richer countries (such as Denmark, Sweden, or perhaps Czech Republic). Thus, Europe 1 and Europe 2 are likely to be formed, while the rest of the membership of the European Union (from the Baltics to the Balkans) will remain in the “third circle” of poor snails (Europe 3), which will not impede the “speed” of the leading countries and their main axis Paris-Berlin. However, the reaction of Washington as the main sponsor of European security and, at the same time, the

main creator of its foreign policy to this image of “Europe at more than just one speed” (or level, if not grade/age), remains unclear.

After the dramatic turnovers in European affairs (the collapse of the much-promising Lisbon Treaty and the subsequent UK’s exit from the EU, the debt crisis in Greece, the lagging behind in Italy and Spain and other countries including France, strengthening of nationalist parties in almost all European national parliaments...) The United States is in position of choosing between two equally unfavorable variants for its European stand and policy: (a) giving support to further i.e. greater integration within the EU, which, however, cannot guarantee further loyalty to the interests of the United States, especially since there is no more from the United Kingdom – the most reliable transatlantic ally, or (b) maintaining the European status quo that in the short run secures the main role of the United States in European affairs, but in the long run makes uncertain the effective leadership of the United States in the key strategic issues of the EU’s economy and foreign policy, including its security policy.

In the shadow of this dilemma that, by all means, will take some time because there simply is no “good solution”, the further successful development of the *New Silk Road* and Chinese positioning on the European market unfold. Slightly paradoxical although strategically understandable: the strongest resistance to the Chinese advancement in Europe even at this stage is displayed by the biggest Chinese partner in this part of the world – Germany. At the same time, Germany is one of the main economic partners of the other major power, which is in the game – Russia. For this reason, like usually in the modern history of Europe, Germany bears decisive responsibility for the development of this part of the world. Hanging in the balance between two, in fact three walls of fire (the USA – Russia – China) Germany must conduct a hypersensitive policy that, judging by historical experience, is not exactly in line with its *Weltanschauung*. The geopolitical position of the central power in Europe has twice enticed modern Germany to start the biggest wars the world has ever known. Luckily enough, this should not be the case now. At the moment, but also from the strategic point of view, according to their own assessment, the biggest German problems are identical to other European security challenges: *migrations in the world, international terrorism, armed conflicts on the outer European borders, the pressure of authoritarian regimes* and, last but not least, *the development of international financial markets*.¹⁸ The problem is that each of the aforemen-

¹⁸ From the speech of Wolfgang Schoebe, the outgoing Bundestag President in the French Parliament when adopting a joint resolution on the occasion of marking the 55th anniversary of signing the Elysee Friendship Agreement between France and Germany (January 22, 2018).

tioned issues surpasses the institutional and every other power of Germany, but also that of the EU. Inasmuch the focus of every foreign policy analysis of European future is inevitably directed towards Washington and, indirectly, Moscow and since recently, towards Beijing, too. Everything else that is not related to these three world centers of power is either a minor event or a momentary misunderstanding of local range and limited duration.

Viewing less from the angle of real (geo) politics, and more with a theoretical pathos, what is most alarming in everything mentioned is not the ever present *uncertainty* but before all the *speed* at which the contemporary politics is conducted and the allentangling cultural life of modern states and peoples. At that, we do not think that it is necessary to lament over destiny with the help of the old modernistic phrase on “history acceleration”. The thing is a more serious one both by its quantity (speed) but also by quality (substance of change).

As opposed to pre modern history which was expressed in milleniums and centuries, modern history has narrowed time into decades, all to experience its *hyper-acceleration* today: processes that once lasted for decades are now compressed into years, and years almost into months,¹⁹ China and Russia are the best examples for that.

At the crossing from the 19th to the 20th century, China, then and now the country with the largest population on the planet was demolished and devastated, exposed to the most severe colonial oppression. The former, many centuries old, pre-modern power suffered a colonial status, at the same time experiencing a classical occupation of large (and the richest) parts of its territory.

Such state of affairs lasted until the mid 20th century and the creation of People's Republic of China (in 1949) when foreign usurpers were finally driven out of the country and a domestic – Chinese government was established. However, the first and hardest four decades of the Republic went by predominantly in painful political and devastating economic wandering and in searching its place under the global sun. The subsequent prudent internal economic and peacemaking foreign policy had made it possible for

¹⁹ By all odds, today “long-term” (meaning “uncertainty” and “farther future”) is everything that goes beyond 5 years! Thus, in a way, old communist “five-year term cycle” from the times of planned economy and early (wartime) communism revitalize and gets rehabilitated. A great deal could be said about this from the point of political impressionism or futuristic essay literature. On the other hand, what does “long-term” mean in human affairs (relations)? Emanuel Kant wrote that in human hands every thing and the noblest idea quickly becomes dust and ash. Finally, “we are all dead in the long run,” says the famous saying, but this certainly cannot be a justification for selfishness in personal, or mere pragmatism in interstate relations, just like it cannot be the excuse for the fatalistic “sitting with hands crossed on the chest”.

China to make a dramatic upswing of the state starting from the mid eighties of the last century. This upswing has not stopped to this day (e.g. Chinese economy in 2015 was twenty-five fold bigger than the one in 1990)

Unlike China, the largest state in the world (Russia) welcomed the beginning of the 21st century on its knees, even on the brink of total collapse. Nevertheless, only five to six years later, after a successful political and economic reorganization, Russia showed the first signs of recovery, which was immediately made public primarily by the rhetorical recollection of its (then only formal) status of a major power (Speech by President Putin in Munich, 2007), then by demonstrative “war games” (military intervention in Osetia, 2008) and, finally, by radical political and military activities (the accession of Crimea, 2014; the war in Syria, 2015–2017). Owing to internal economic reforms set outside the previous neoliberal canon of the Chicago School of Economics (known by the motto of its vice-president Milton Friedman: “Privatize, privatize, privatize”), with a strong leadership that linked economic recovery with security needs, within less than a decade, Russia reached the point of development no one had hoped for before.²⁰ The economic standard of everyday life and even the national self-confidence that had been presented to earlier generations in the categories of a distant “bright future”, which most of the contemporaries of post-Soviet neoliberal Russia could not even dream of, became the subject if not immediate, at least the most accessible experience for most citizens .

Of course, the hyper-acceleration of history does not mean that everything is going in the desired direction. As they emerged “overnight”, the positive relationships/processes can either disappear or be reversed at the same speed. This particularly pertains to the period of time in which the issues of civil rights and freedoms gain momentum and when poverty or (re)distribution of goods in the community is no longer a major political issue. In any case, the experience of the 21st century testifies to the fact that

²⁰ It is symptomatic that Russia owes its recovery to a more efficient organization of the state (decriminalization of authorities and strengthening the central administrative apparatus, transparent tax system, revitalization of security forces, etc.), rather than the changed structure of the economy that remains decisively oriented to exporting raw materials, primarily oil and gas. It is paradoxical that only the current Western sanctions, which are intended to jeopardize the “structure of authoritarian power”, have made the Russian economy begin with genuine restructuring and placing itself on a sound basis of productivity and innovation. The West has erroneously concluded that the largest country and the second military force in the world can be isolated in the way it was being done with marginal or “disorderly” states in different parts of the world, ranging from the Balkans (Serbia), through the Middle East (Iran) to the Far East (North Korea). It remains to be seen how the process of external (Western) restriction of Russian both internal and external political responses will continue.

any economic and (geo)political forecast is impossible or at least problematic if it considers more than 5 or 6 coming years. Consideration of a decade ahead is nothing less than an intellectual venture that relies more on philosophical intuition, than on sociological or economic indicators, geopolitical theories and/or other concepts of understanding modern reality. Moreover, as long as the hyper-acceleration of history grows, every “scientific” prognosis of development that speaks of epochs and uses centuries as the gauge, should be *a priori* marked as ideology and/or propaganda.

Bearing all this in mind, how should a “mid-term” geopolitical status of China look like, the status of a major power that still does not want to be that (officially), even though it has almost everything that is at Russia’s disposal at the moment (military wise), just as it has almost everything that the USA has (in economic terms). In other words, what are the chances that the the *New Silk Road* be sustainable in the long run, which in the light of the experience of the 21st century would mean that as an international economic “win-win” project it endures another one to two decades?

As things are now, the main risks that the *New Silk Road* faces depend on moving – touching, colliding and overlapping of the three tectonic geopolitical plates: the US (+ EU and/or NATO); Russia (and its still loose Eurasian Alliance of Independent States); and finally China with its economic partners on The New Silk Road. All other local regional players – such as Japan and South Korea, India and Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, Israel and Egypt, down to those who are small but are situated in some significant geopolitical hubs or have significant human or natural resources – such as Serbia or Norway for example, more or less will play the role of mediators or be subject to influence of some of the major powers that draft the crucial flows of the modern world.

3 RISKS AND THREATS: PREDICTIBLE ONES AND OTHERS

Out of the anticipated, moreover, already existing challenges and risks, which the *New Silk Way* is facing, the geopolitical interests of the major powers, as well as the ambitions of the mediating local “players” are the first to be considered. The stability of these interests affects the predictability of risks, too. In simple terms, the constant interest of every major power is maximizing its prosperity, which means increasing its own power and preserving its own security. The decisive factor here is the use of appropriate means for the realization of given objectives (interests). Rhetoric

and ideology are important but still secondary levers – the critical thing to know is when, how and why to use force, especially that of military provencances.²¹ War is the ultimate means of protection to which great powers resort only exceptionally – when they cannot avoid collision with another similar power. The existence of a nuclear weaponry has reduced the conflicts between the major powers to a minimum.²² For them, it is a matter of political wisdom to know when (not) to use force in meeting with small, non-nuclear powers. World peace is dependent on this restraint. It is a general framework and the starting point of every geopolitical analysis, including those relating to the *Belt and Road*.

We cannot talk here about how the major powers will behave or what all the risks in the Asian section of the *New Silk Road* are especially in the region of the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Sea,²³

²¹ For example, for the United States, as well as for all other major powers throughout history, there never was a question of whether they should act for the purpose of their own or perhaps some imaginary “world security”. Since it had become a global major power (20th century), the US engaged in several different military conflicts (wars). The largest among them (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) could have been easily avoided and thus the US could have avoided showing its own vulnerability. Likewise, the current involvement of the United States with a crawling trade war with China shows to everyone that the time of American economic superiority has passed. Namely, every major power on the rise has worked, *inter alia*, on “removing borders” between states, i.e. on the cancellation of (the other) state’s custom taxes that impeded “freedom of trade”, *ipso facto* the freedom of the leading power to expand the market and provide for new resources without the use of war. The very moment the leading world power decided to renounce its own ideological mantras on the “free world market”, everyone was let know that the national interest of the main, but steadily declining, economic power came before the previous covenants on the “new world order”, “moral responsibility to universal human rights”, “world leadership” and other stereotypes of (neo) liberalism. By all means, the reason for this is not the result of any “US decision” to relinquish the role of “the chief architect of the liberal world order and its basic sponsor and winner,” as R. Haas thinks (see: Richard Haas: *A World in Disarray*, Penguin Press 2017), but it is a loss of power and will to retain the role of an undisputed leader after 70 years. What is most troubling for the rest of the world is the possibility of intensifying trade wars between major powers, which almost inevitably, sooner or later, gets its unequivocal authentic (armed) war character. Of course, in this particular case, this does not mean that it will inevitably lead to a direct military conflict between the United States and China: it is more likely that the fight for the positioning on the world commodity and raw material market will take place on indirect, battlefields (e.g. Korea or Iran), including marine spaces (e.g. the Pacific). Compare: Graham Allison: *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?* Boston – New York, 2017.

²² It does not imply that a nuclear war is simply impossible. About that, compare the classical work of Raymond Aron: *Mir i rat medju nacijama, Sr. Karlovci – Novi Sad* 2001. Marc Trachtenberg: *History and Strategy*, Princeton 1991.

²³ See footnote No. 9

but we can discuss the designated ultimate goal of this road – Europe. As already noted, the main risks to the *New Silk Road* are related to the *geopolitical interests* of the EU and its members together with the United States and NATO on the one hand, and Russia and several smaller states from the Balkans and from the “16+1” route, on the other. While the main EU members – Germany and France try to develop and enhance their bilateral co-operation with China, the EU as a political entity nurtures intelligible skepticism against the *New Silk Road* and its operational economic and political format “16+1”. In that sense, the EU constantly insists on regulatory mechanisms that are effective within the European market, and which can curb the Chinese economic expansion. Needless to say, such efforts have *silent* (sometimes open) support from Washington. At the same time, the United States and the EU jointly and officially act quite offensively against the propagation of Russia’s political influence in the world, especially in Europe.²⁴ In this game of defensive economic measures and offensive ideological and even military policies against the other two major powers, the EU and the United States (with NATO as a compulsory military-political format) wish to control, i.e. restrain the rise of China and Russia. This is a basic, predictable – long-term risk that will certainly not change significantly in the coming years.

Immediate *security threats* that will also last for a long time appeared in the given context, too. Namely, if the main risks of the realization of the *New Silk Road* are related to the geopolitical interests and mutual distrust between the major powers, the direct threats that they are confirmed with or testified to are primarily military conflicts on the European borders: the Middle East on the one end and Ukraine and the Black Sea on the other. Between them is the Balkans and its notorious political instability. And while the control of the Middle East and its natural resources is an issue in itself, the “collateral damage” of this issue and a security threat of the first order to Europe is uncontrolled refugee migrations. Together with them, there is another threat that in the past years had the status of an internal issue: religious (as a rule Islamic) terrorism. There is no doubt that the listed main threats to European security are, at the same time, the threats to the realisation of the *Belt and Road* project. But, the extent to which they are explicit notwithstanding, it is likely that higher risks are related to the economic dimension of the problem, especially to the “16+1” Initiative, which is a “mechanism” by which the *New Silk Road* is functioning in Europe.

²⁴ Russia’s attitude towards Chinese strengthening in Europe also has its ambivalent side, one of its features being a tacit consent as it weakens the EU’s pressure on Russia. The main Russian interest is related to energy policy and the Russian attitude towards Chinese investments in Europe should be considered primarily from that angle.

In this case, a different kind of predictable risk is in question, which does not have the visibility the geopolitics has, but it does have direct material effects on everyday life. As we have already mentioned, these “purely economic” risks are expected and therefore can be timely predicted and resolved as such. They refer to the way of financing national and transnational projects on the New Silk Road, the purchase of shares of European companies by Chinese (both state and private) companies and, in particular, the economic and environmental regulations of the EU, which are enhanced depending on the external pressure coming from the US and interested competing local national economies. Direct threats here appear in the form of economic norms (EU regulations on competition, investments, ecology, etc.), but also the functioning of the global financial market (stock exchanges, currencies, etc.) that has long since become a kind of metaphysical world *per se*.

Of course, the economy is always closely related to politics, and this is especially confirmed on the example of the “16+1” Initiative. From the moment the EU began to lose control, the whole thing has been put under scrutiny to the extent that even “neocolonial methods” (!?) are being mentioned in public that China is allegedly using in the realisation of the *Belt and Road* project. Therefore, it is more than certain that new obstacles on the *New Silk Road* will increasingly appear and that they will be bigger and bigger. On this trail, a special type of risks that belongs to the unpredictable kind of cultural risks is to be expected. They refer to local public opinion and ideological, religious and other types of prejudices through which “the others”, here the Chinese, are perceived.

Fear of the other (unknown), especially if it is related to having a job or not and personal perspectives, can easily be misused with the help of ideological or racial stereotypes that are being spread by way of appropriate media campaigns. There is no doubt that at some point, if the Chinese expansion in Europe continues at the present pace, there will be an increase in anti-Chinese sentiment, i.e. prejudice, which would further mean an open political campaign against the “Asian mode of production”. In that case, the cultural risk would get its more concrete political forms that would be a direct security threat. It is not possible now to speak of their concrete content and scope, although it is quite certain that those who want to project Chinese progress in the future should think about it in due course .

Also, one should not overlook the trans-political risk in the form of modern technological development, especially the one that is related to the development of artificial intelligence, which has long since been not only a matter of futuristic novels and science fiction movies. From hypersonic missiles, quantum satellites, and human genes researching, to military and civilian use of artificial intelligence, the immediate future brings more cut-

ting edge technology and scientific breakthroughs than all earlier epochs of human life on Earth had together. How intelligent robots and drones, chipped people, and artificial neural networks will upgrade and intensify global communications over the next few decades – almost no one can give a valid, i.e. accurate judgment. As much as a political action is always uncertain, equally so and much more uncertain is the future use of technology, its possible autonomous life and, analogously, its social consequences.

Eventually, last but not least important is the **ecological** dimension of the *New Silk Road* realization. Among other things, it puts into perspective the opening of a new global route between China and Europe. It is still not developed, but quite possible sea route across the Arctic. Namely, if the predictions of ecologists about global warming prove to be right, in a few decades it would be possible to establish a direct sea connection between China and Western Europe, which would literally halve the length of the route compared to the existing sea part of the *New Silk Road*.²⁵ In this way, the cost of shipping would be considerably reduced, the speed of the goods flow would increase and the price of the final product on the global and especially European market would be lower. No doubt that in this case the attention of all major powers would be concentrated on the Arctic, which could then overcast the current status of the Middle East. This might be a piece of good news for Syria or Iraq (which does not mean that any other existing issue in the Middle East would be automatically resolved) but, in turn, the (justifiable) fear of the possible indirect military conflict of major powers would definitely get bigger. The opening of the Arctic as a sea route would directly entangle Russia and the USA and, naturally, China would be involved indirectly, but also the states that have played only sporadic roles in the conflicts of major powers until now, such as Norway, Finland, Denmark, Island and Canada.²⁶

Whatever the case, all mentioned risks and threats are integrated in a single security complex of the *New Silk Road* that must be regarded as a whole, in order to be resolved part by part. By linking separate pearls, a solid string of pearls is made that gives value and sense to each of its separate parts. If the pearls remained detached, the value would be missing and there would be no sense. That is why the Chinese “win–win” version of foreign policy has a potential that surpasses mere utopian hopes. Whether this potential will be put to use or not depends not only on the designers, passengers and other service users on the *Belt and Road* route, but also on their opponents. With this we go back to the beginning of this text.

²⁵ See Table 1 (Northern Sea Route) at the end of the text.

²⁶ More on that, see D. Proroković, *ibid.*

Table 1
Major Powers of the Modern Era

	16th CENT.	17th CENT.	18th CENT.	19th CENT.	20th CENT.	21st CENT.
EUROPE	Holly Roman Empire (House of Habsburg) England France Ottoman Empire	France Spain England Holland Austria Ottoman Empire Sweden Russia	France Great Britain Austria Russia Prussia Ottoman Empire	Great Britain France Austria Russia Prussia Ottoman Empire	USA (USSR) Great Britain France Germany	USA (NATO) EU (Germany and France) Great Britain Russia
MEDITERRANEAN & MIDDLE EAST	Ottoman Empire Spain Venice	Spain Venice Great Britain Ottoman Empire	Great Britain France Ottoman Empire Spain	Great Britain France Ottoman Empire Russia	Great Britain France USA Russia (USSR) <i>Iran, Egypt, Turkey</i>	USA (NATO) <i>Israel, Iran, S. Arabia, Egypt</i> Russia EU and G. Britain
AZIA & FAR EAST	China India	China Great Britain Portugal Holland	Great Britain France Holland China	Japan Great Britain France Russia USA	Japan Great Britain France USA Russia (USSR)	China Russia USA <i>India, Pakistan, Turkey, Japan, N. and S. Korea</i>
AMERICA	Spain Portugal Holland	Spain England Portugal Holland	Spain Great Britain France USA	USA	USA	USA

Picture 1
Northern Sea Route

