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# The "One Belt – One Road" Project as a Geostrategic Revolution and the "16 + 1 Format" – Problems and Perspectives

## *Abstract*

The creation of pillars of sustainable development in today turbulence becomes a key issue for all mankind. The project "One Belt – One Road" is such a pillar, which in the same time acquires the character of geostrategic revolution in different dimensions: • Transforming the balance at global level into multipolar world direction; • Turning the socio-economic dynamic of the countries involved in the project on the platform of win-win development; • Proposing an alternative to the dominant neoliberal model in its various aspects. The purposes of the present report are (1) examining the important aspects of "One Belt – One Road" project as a whole; (2) analyzing such component in the abovementioned project as the so called "16+1" Format; (3) discussing the problems and perspectives of the "One Belt – One Road" project and the "16+1" Format.

## *Key words*

"One Belt – One Road" Initiative, 16 + 1 Format, Geostrategic Revolution, multipolar world, win-win development, alternative to neoliberal model

## INTRODUCTION

The world today at the eve of the third decade of the XXI century is demonstrating an increasing type of unbalanced social, economic, political and technological movement, depending of non-linear, turbulent dynamics.

The future in long-term and even in medium perspective began to be unpredictable at global, regional, national and even local level.

The term “singularity” is a good description of this situation. The era of “singularity” means a period when the previous models and concepts cannot work any more, something fundamentally new is coming, but we do not know how it will function. A key reason for the “singularity era” is crisis of the industrial and technological way of production, i.e. that of Industrialism or “Industrial Civilization”. We are facing the end of the opportunities for extensive development because of the environmental constraints. The non-renewable resources limitations are imposing these constraints.

The technological base created so far and the energy potential of mankind formed on this basis step by step are putting end to the existing models of extensive growth. On the other hand, however, the techno-complex achieved so far, has created conditions for the construction of new technological platform, which are considerably more socially and environmentally acceptable.

In other words, technological conditions, already created, slowly lead the mankind to a new production-technological and socio-economic paradigm. However, the system crisis of neoliberal capitalism hampers the introduction of such new socio-technological model. As a key cause of last instance, precisely this systemic crisis is shaping the many unpredictable threats.

Under the conditions of increasing turbulence and chaos at global level, the issue of creating pillars of sustainable development becomes a key issue for all mankind. Amid the aforementioned chaos the project “One Belt – One Road” acquires the character of geostrategic revolution in different dimensions.

It is already known that the XIX century has been called “the century of geopolitics.” The XX century has been called “the century of geoeconomics.” Following this line, perhaps the XXI century may be called the “century of geoculture” or “geophilosophy”. In other words, XXI century is to create a so-called “geocentric sense of the existence of mankind.” This means that it must be the century of spirituality rather than centuries of over-consumption and over-hedonism for a small part of the human mankind and vice-versa poverty for the bigger part. From this perspective one can say that the project “One Belt – One Road” can and must play the role of geostrategic revolution. So it should be called “geostrategic project”.

The purposes of the present report are the following:

- To examine some important aspects of “One Belt – One Road” project as a whole;
- To analyze one, certainly not a minor, component in the abovementioned project – the so called “16 +1” Format;
- The problems and perspectives of the “One Belt – One Road” project itself as well as that of the “16 +1” Format.

This purpose is pursued through the following main tasks structured in the major sections of the report, namely:

1. The project “One Belt One Road” as a geostrategic revolution;
2. The “16 +1” Format as an important component in the geostrategic project “One Belt One Road”;
3. About the problems and perspectives of the “One Belt – One Road” project and the “16 +1” Format.

Basic methodological approaches used are as follows:

- System and structural approach, contemplating objects in question as “systems”, i.e. as a set of interrelated components creating a whole. The components of the system do have certain relations, i.e. they are structured;
- Historical approach – this phenomenon, natural or social, cannot be fully understood unless seen in terms of its development over time;
- Geopolitical and geo-economics platforms – these platforms examine the overall political and economic development of certain social phenomenon by taking into account geographical and natural factors that rule the functioning and interaction of this phenomenon.

## 1. THE PROJECT “ONE BELT ONE ROAD” AS A GEOSTRATEGIC REVOLUTION

The “One Belt One Road” project represents a demonstration of the increased geopolitical and geo-economic potential of PR of China and expression of new geostrategic thinking of the leadership of Celestial, supported by the instruments of “soft power”, i.e. economic impact and interaction.

Historically, China is one of the most ancient civilizations in the world with sustainable statist traditions. In its geopolitical nature, although the country has significant access to the World Ocean, it certainly demonstrated itself as a part of the forces of the “Land Civilization”, the so-called “Telurocracy”.



The dominance of the forces of the sea – Anglo-Saxon imperial system is based on maritime encirclement of Eurasia. It is realized through naval power in the “peripheral highway of the sea”<sup>1</sup>

According to classic geopolitical vision of the world, there is a key conflict between maritime forces on the one hand and the continental powers on the other. We have to say that to this day the maritime states in various formats dominate historical time and space. The continental forces were obliged to defend themselves, i.e. they were in a defensive position.

The dominance and offensive, aggressive strategy of the sea, i.e. the coastal states, are demonstrated by the concept of world center, i.e. those spaces in the frame of which is concentrated the significant part of the economic, political, technological and cultural life of the humanity:

- In ancient and medieval times, the role of central area played the Mediterranean Sea, where the dominant naval force was at first Roman Empire and then Venice. The last successful manipulated countries and territories, material wealth and financial flows as well as ventures like “Crusade”. Venice as a major dominating player is a clear expression of the superiority of sea over land. We have not to forget that the UK is Venetian project, as well as the East India Company – a unique structure that has its own army and navy, secret service and diplomacy. It provides the success of the British expansion in India, marking the start of the Great British colonial empire. This company “de facto” was a union of two previous Venetian companies. Manager of the East India Company was Thomas Smith – a graduate of Padua University, one of the centers of Venetian influence;

<sup>1</sup> <http://policytensor.com/category/geopolitics/>

- In “modern times” the new central area becomes the Atlantic Ocean and dominant maritime naval forces – initially Britain and after World War II – the United States;
- Until recently, there were predictions that in the XXI Century the Pacific Ocean would become the central area of the world. According to these predictions coastal countries, like US and Japan, have to be the dominant forces of the new century.

The “One Belt One Road” Project changes the geopolitical and geo-economic balance towards Eurasia. The realization of this project means that not the Pacific Ocean but Euroasia is becoming the central area of the world. In other words thanks to the abovementioned project there will be a system of mutually beneficial relations, active socio-economic, technical and cultural life, where the dominant forces will be that of the land – China, Russia, Iran ...

Therefore is possible to name the “One Belt One Road” Project as a geostrategic revolution because it’s potential in case of realization to change the balance at global level from the till today unipolar world, dominated by one country – USA into multipolar world, based on the interactions between several powers.



The implementation of “One Belt One Road” Project represents a fundamental geopolitical and geo-economic change, a giant global transformation that is possible to call geostrategic revolution

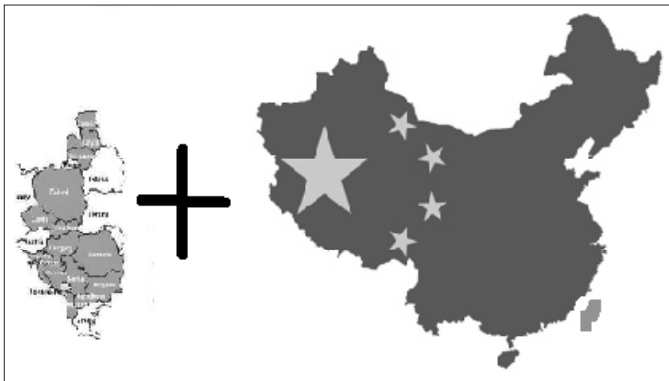
## 2.THE “16 +1” FORMAT AS AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT IN THE GEOSTRATEGIC PROJECT “ONE BELT ONE ROAD”

In 2011, China proposed to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) regional cooperation through the “16 + 1 formula.” This initiative made by the People’s Republic of China aimed at intensifying and expanding cooperation with 11 EU Member States and 5 Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia – in the area of investment, transport, finance, science, education, and culture. In the framework of the initiative, China has defined three potential priority areas for economic cooperation: infrastructure, high technologies, and green technologies. According to Chinese analysts, there are two main reason for this decision of Beijing:

- The increasing importance of the countries in the region within the European Union;
- The partial removal of the ideological differences that have hampered cooperation in previous years. On the other hand the Eurozone crisis may be seen as a reason for the CEE countries to show increased interest in development of cooperation with China.

In a significant period of time for the PRC the relations with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not seen as key priorities in foreign policy. After the collapse of the USSR and Comecon the former socialist countries shifted towards integration with Western institutions. Accordingly, they ignore the links with China.

*The “16+1” Format*



In 2011, China renewed its cooperation with this group of countries as a whole. Following the initiative of China, the Economic Forum in Budapest, Hungary, was organized that year. A year later, in 2012, the formula "16 + 1" was officially promoted in Warsaw, Poland, where the first meeting at the Heads of Government level was held for the first time. Subsequent rounds of high-level talks between the prime ministers took place in Bucharest, Romania (2013), Belgrade, Serbia (2014) and Suzhou, China (2015).

In 2016, Latvia organized the key event in cooperation between Central and Eastern European countries and China ("16+1") – the Meeting of Heads of Government ("Summit").

We have to note that outside of these Summits there were numerous events of secondary importance. For example, they are organized various initiatives, including economic, investment and cooperation forums. Such conferences, seminars, etc. were covering topics such as tourism, education, agriculture, energy, issues of infrastructure development.

The world is witnessing a clear progress in the institutionalization of the format "16 + 1". There is a permanent Secretariat in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China in 2012 in connection with the format "16 + 1". In 2014, a Permanent Secretariat for investment encouragement was formed in Warsaw. Also, there are several associations and professional organizations coordinated by individual countries (for example the agricultural cooperation is coordinated by Bulgaria and the railways – by Serbia).

Although at the very beginning the format "16+1" has not been considered an important initiative from geopolitical and even from economic point of view at the background of several key events and processes it began to acquire the features of geo-strategic scheme. The key events and processes are the following:

- The first milestone is undoubtedly the project "One Belt, One Road" raised by the head of the PRC Xi Jinping, which in itself represents initiative with global significance. Such project increases the importance of CEE;
- Another key process is for certain the "European crisis" in its various manifestations – as "echoes" from the "Global crisis", which started in 2008, the debt problems in the Eurozone, including the "case of Greece," as well as the "hot points", concerning Ukraine, the sanctions against Russia, the so-called "Refugee crisis" and others.

All this leads to a situation, when the CEE countries started to look for another source of economic stability, outside the EU, the US or the Russia Federation. This active cooperation with PRC, especially the interactions concerned with the "One Belt – One Road" project started to be seen from

the CEE countries as important instrument, which certainly gives new meaning to this group of countries considered until now as periphery of EU or as a buffer zone between the EU and the Russian Federation. In the light of the abovementioned project the CEE countries, as well as the format “16+1” started to create opportunities for these countries to play more significant role in several areas, as well as to introduce a new meaning in the international cooperation at global level:

- In the area of EU-PRC relationship, because in case of realization of “One Belt – One Road” project CEE countries will be a connection link, not periphery;
- In the international cooperation, where “One Belt – One Road” project is becoming now the greatest initiative in the world, the CEE countries are becoming an important component in a geostrategic project with global perspectives;

### 3. ABOUT THE PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE “ONE BELT – ONE ROAD” PROJECT AND THE “16 +1” FORMAT

When we are speaking about the format “16 +1” especially referring to interactions with the “One Belt – One Road” project, we must not ignore that there are not only perspectives but problems also. For example, it is worth to review several opinions expressed by leading think-tank centers or mass communications sources in the region.

Some authors are commenting that “Half a decade after it was launched, the network of cooperation between China and 16 Central and Eastern European countries has brought uneven economical and political fruits so far.”<sup>2</sup>

This article quotes opinions, like that of Petr Kratochvil, the director of Prague’s Institute of International Relations, who said that “it’s not really a multilateral format, it’s more a group of countries that China took to have bilateral ties with. It’s mainly Poland and Hungary in terms of investment, and Romania and Serbia for building projects.”<sup>3</sup>

In the same article another specialist – Anastas Vangeli, from the Polish Academy of Sciences said that “Southern and Eastern Europe are a testing ground for the Belt and Road, it is more an “experiment” than a “Chinese

<sup>2</sup> Eric Maurice. China’s 16+1 foray into Central and Eastern Europe. In <https://euobserver.com/eu-china/138347>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



plan”, and that Beijing tries “to see whether this type of diplomacy can help them boost economic relations.”<sup>4</sup>

Agatha Kratz, from the European Council on Foreign Relations, a London-based think-tank, thinks that: “The first idea was to treat CEE as Asia and Africa.” “That was a big shock, they explained that loans for projects that China would make were not going to happen.” For Kratz, “the success of the 16+1 initiative is to be found on the political, more than in the economic side.”<sup>5</sup>

The note that there are limits in the CEE countries to cooperate with PRC, is expressed also in an article written by Richard Q. Turcsányi, Deputy Director at Institute of Asian Studies/CENAA, Slovakia. He stated that “list of economic achievements – the main motivation for participating in the 16+1 platform, at least on the side of CEE – has not been so impressive.”<sup>6</sup> The same author concluded: “At the beginning of the 16+1 platform there were 16 CEE countries that had unrealistic expectations for cooperation with China – and most probably they have figured it out by now. Today, the tables might have turned, with China now holding unrealistic expectations of what it can achieve in the CEE countries and how the 16+1 platform can be used.”<sup>7</sup>

It is possible to present other opinions, like that of Kerry Brown, who says “...China’s enthusiasm over the last few years for setting up its own international network of multilateral groupings has become well known... The 16-plus-one is just “the most westerly” of these groupings. The EU received it with suspicion when the idea first emerged, in the time Chinese President Xi Jinping became Party secretary in 2012.”<sup>8</sup>

After that, Brown made some geopolitical speculations such as: “The Belt and Road Initiative, creating a comfortable, non-contentious zone of Chinese interest right in Russia’s backyard, looks increasingly like a Chinese diplomatic masterstroke. Across a massive swath of Central Asia, Chinese investment is increasing, and political links with Beijing, rather than Moscow, are warming up. The 16-plus-one offers a very similar scenario. Many of the members are former satellites of the former Soviet Union; they fall into Russia’s natural zone of interest and influence. Yet, China for the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi. The Limits of China’s Cooperation With Central and Eastern Europe. In <https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/the-limits-of-chinas-cooperation-with-central-and-eastern-europe/>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kerry Brown China’s Geopolitical Aims: The Curious Case of the 16-Plus-1. In <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/chinas-geopolitical-aims-the-curious-case-of-the-16-plus-1/>

first time ever is building a benign bamboo curtain around Russia where, decades ago, there was an iron curtain facing the Soviet Union. In addition, concerning Central Asia, all that Russia can do is to smile politely and bear this new phenomenon.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, K. Brown concludes: "Optimism is thick in the air; the 16-plus-one summits are popular events. The issue, however, as elsewhere, is that while the expectations toward China are diverse, disappointment often takes an eerily similar form. For China will be very important to ensure that it fulfills some of the hopes expressed."<sup>10</sup>

Such views are clear evidence that the opportunities offered by the "16 + 1" format harnessed in the „One Belt – One Road" project, despite the prospects they offer through the formula for mutually beneficial development, are encountered not just with the normal for such a gigantic project financial, economic and technical problems. There are definitely political and ideological obstacles to them.

There are circles in the "16 + 1" countries, and above all support for these circles outside, by certain forces in the West, which, as shown by the above-mentioned opinions, have clear orientation. They strive towards creating a negative public opinion on both – the mutually beneficial cooperation with the PRC in "16+ 1" format and on the realization of the "One Belt – One Road" project. Such trends probably can have a serious negative impact on both the "16 + 1" format and the realization of "One Belt – One Road" project.

## INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

All that mentioned above should be taken into account when it comes to the need for a successful development of mutually beneficial cooperation. This means making the necessary efforts for that the broad society's circles of the CEE countries to familiarize themselves with the "16 + 1" format and with the "One Belt – One Road" project.

This means not only to develop financial-economic and technical cooperation but also to pay attention to the wide cultural-information, scientific and other cooperation. To create opportunities for the so-called "People's diplomacy", including regional cooperation between towns and villages. It is necessary to pay attention not only to the realization of such cooperation on the official line but also on the so-called NGOs. Where possible, the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

latter to develop not only on bilaterally but also on a multilateral basis, because this is the case in the “16 + 1” format.

In this sense, a comprehensive strategy for broad public participation is needed as one of the guarantees for the success of mutual beneficial cooperation and, above all, the mutual beneficial development in the “16 + 1” format and the “One Belt – One Road” project.

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