

Belt and Road Initiative and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Geopolitical Challenges.

Pablo Ibañez¹²

Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an extremely new and fast-moving project which, as part of a strong effort toward consolidating Chinese power on the international stage, has faced a series of challenges, suspicions and criticisms (especially from Western analysts). What China is proposing is more than a revolutionary infrastructure project. It represents, without doubt, an ambitious geopolitical plan which challenges geopolitical analysis itself. This paper, therefore, presents a theoretical review of geopolitics in order to analyze one of the main projects of the BRI: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), identifying the challenges relative to comprehending not only the initiative but also Sino-Pakistani relations based on recent experience. While the use of classical theories, such as retrieving the concept of heartland, has proven inadequate, new propositions, such as the concept of *geo-economics*, provide analytical support that is better suited to this new geopolitical moment. Also of note is the volume of ongoing projects in distant economic areas and the lack of military objectives under the auspices of the corridor. There is a latent concern regarding security, but to date, no elements of militarization have been observed in the corridor. The Sino-Pakistani relations that were firmly grounded on border protection, territorial delimitation and the development of the arms industry, including nuclear weapons, on the conveyor belt of the corridor, are now focused more on the economy with a view to increase trade flow, thereby consolidating the energy sector while creating industrial zones and operations of the Gwadar port.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Geopolitics, Geoeconomics

Introduction

In 2013, the Chinese government announced the launch of a power strategy that was initially called the New Silk Route. In just under two years, this would become a meticulously planned global project with actions dispersed in several countries. Today, the Chinese government claims that it has hundreds of agreements signed in various economic and cultural sectors and with countries from practically every continent on the planet. For example, there are partnerships on environmental issues such as the Green Silk Road, made with Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands and Vanuatu. Furthermore, six economic corridors connect to relevant neighboring countries and through routes that may come to

¹ Pablo Ibañez is a Professor at the Department of Geography at Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro. He was a Visiting Scholar at Fudan Development Institute at Fudan University. Email: Ibanez.pablo@gmail.com

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substantially improve the flow of trade, culture and people, from continental China all the way to Europe and Africa.

From a strategic point of view, geopolitical tools and new forms of governance may help not only to understand, but also to prevent and help China face conflicts and fix different kinds of problems that will appear. In this regard, addressing the BRI represents a huge challenge. The new features presented by the initiative do not clearly outline areas of military intervention and are based on presuppositions, according to the official line, such as respect for differences, non-intervention in national matters and an emphasis on the policy of win-win cooperation.

Of all the projects involving the BRI, the CPEC is one of the most important and urgent, based on several reasons. Pakistan is one of the closest countries to China which means that they have an institutionalism framed by a great history of partnerships and experience exchanges. From a geographical point of view, Pakistan offers a strategic exit for China, above all by paving the way for less dependence on the Malacca Strait and representing a logistical option for Western China. Pakistan also handles relevant problems that China will likely face in other places, such as terrorism and cultural resistance. Finally, success in Pakistan could hand China a real trump card to present to other partners and to the world. That is why any effort to analyze the BRI and in particular the CPEC is welcome.

Focusing on these matters, the present article seeks to analyze the classical foundations of geopolitics as a field of study related to space and power and how, under the BRI proposals, the demand for Sino-Pakistani relations will be viewed from new geopolitical approaches unlike those presented by Western analysts who insist on retrieving classical theories to apply to such an innovative and complex proposal. One of the examples is the attempt to compare it to the post-Second World War Marshall Plan, illustrated and refuted by Shen and Chan (2018). No less complicated are the analyses of Sempa (see *The Diplomat*, 2015) and Fallon (2015) who seek to use the concept of *heartland*, originally proposed by Mackinder in the early 20th century, to analyze the BRI. Both cases are subject to criticism and indicate the need for new approaches based on facts, discourse and achievements under the auspices of the BRI.

From a methodological point of view, the article is based on the analysis of official documents, as well as a theoretical and empirical review based on the most recent literature about geopolitics, the BRI and CPEC. The paper is structured initially on a review of the main geopolitical thoughts to find a path that allows us to investigate the BRI and the CPEC at this moment in time. Subsequently, the China-Pakistan relationship shall be briefly discussed from an historical perspective, with a view to showing how the CPEC is another step in this history

and could constitute a major turning point in the countries' politics. Finally, the BRI and the CPEC will be analyzed, involving the identification of some relevant elements that are changing the way in which geopolitics is developed nowadays.

Geopolitical Perspectives and the Expansion of Chinese Influence

Western geopolitics is a field of study that was born in the early 20th century. As part of what most intellectual authors called the institutionalization of geography, geopolitics took a place in the hall of politics when some authors started to have influence on relevant leaders (and politics) in countries such as Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

The first theoretical proposals that inspired geopoliticians around the world were based on Friedrich Ratzel's (1844-1904) ideas. His pioneering work on Political Geography postulated about the relationship between State and Space—to be more precise, land, state and population. According to Ratzel (1987), the material foundation of the state is the land. Looking into the recent history of the West, especially Europe, Ratzel argues that there is an enormous difference between a territorial policy and a more 'political policy'. Only the former may be considered as genuinely based on strong foundations. The State is an organism linked to a fraction of the surface of the land/earth. Therefore, its properties spawn from the people and the land. Among them, the author emphasises the following factors: extension; situation; borders; the type of and the shape of the land; the vegetation and irrigation; and, lastly, the relations that it maintains with the rest of the terrestrial surface, as well the seas of political interest.

Space starts to be regarded as "a political force, and not, as otherwise understood, merely a vehicle of political forces" (Ratzel 1898:450). This statement heralded a new historical moment in which space gained a central role in State decisions, increasingly oriented by and toward the consolidation of power based on a territorial base³.

The strategic role that geographic knowledge had been adopting in Western nations starts to lead interlocutors to increasingly think of space as a structural element of the expansion, demarcation and consolidation of nation States. It is no wonder that the discussions about the concepts of territory, as a spatial representation of the concept of power, gain new formats.

³ Agnew and Corbridge (1995:5) remember that "the primacy of 'the' territorial state is not a trans-historical given, but is specific to different historical epochs and different world regions. States differ historically and geographically in their external powers and in their ability to regulate their own territories. More generally, there have been historical periods, and there are world regions, in which the 'sovereignty' of any one state in relation to other states and non-state organizational actors is far from complete."

Obviously, all these elements go far beyond Ratzel's proposal. However, this author is one of the main exponents of theories about geography and politics which soon afterward would be denominated 'geopolitics'⁴.

Another author that gains enormous expression in geopolitical studies is Mackinder (1861-1947). Although his seminal text does not contain the thought of Ratzel⁵ as a basis, as is the case of Haushofer, this English author was able to clearly and directly express the need for England to look attentively to Eurasia if it were willing to maintain its hegemony in the global context (at that time, England was clearly threatened by the territorial and political expansion of the USA). No less important were his concerns regarding the maintenance of imperial power (including border issues); the connection of spaces provided by transport and communications; the formation of the global scale; the economic strengthening of national markets; the adaptation of civilizations to many different environments and the influence of those on the historical process in general (Ribeiro 2014).

In relation to the historical process, Mackinder produced a text which would become his main reference in geopolitical terms, "The Geographical Pivot of History", in which he launched the idea of the *heartland*. According to him, this concept would be considered the "greatest natural fortress on earth" (Mackinder 1904). Its area would correspond, in great part, to what would be Russia today. He mentioned its fringes, the inner crescent, and the pivot states—those states that would be able to dominate the *heartland*. In his words, the "oversetting of the balance of power in favor of the pivot state, resulting in this expansion over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia, would permit of the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would then be in sight" (Mackinder 1904:436).

Mackinder inaugurated a clearly global vision of world political system (Costa 2010). In his argument, the Englishman assumes the central role of land power. The special attention on Eurasia would be based on the fact that the biggest threats suffered by Europe had come from that region and the need to control it. Thus, Mackinder pointed to an area that would be the heart of the expansion of world power: the 'pivot area', equivalent to the territory of the USSR.

⁴ The word 'geopolitics' became effectively used through the work of the Rudolf Kjéllen (1864-1922).

⁵ Despite the fact that Mackinder did not quote Ratzel, we can find in his writings complaints about German geography, especially in terms of how knowledge about geography and cartography was important to the bureaucracy to conquer relevant goals against the French. Furthermore, he stresses that this discipline in German schools helped to create a sense of patriotism that formed a relevant background to German foreign policy (Mackinder, 1919:26-31).

Years later, with the end of First World War, Mackinder stressed with even more force the strategic importance of this region, bearing in mind a possible alliance between the Russians and Germans. In this regard, the author used the idea of democracy to sustain Western geopolitics against the advancement and the expansion of the German and Russian powers. Mackinder (1919) also started calling the ‘pivot area’ the heartland, including more areas of direct Soviet influence.

With the end of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, geopolitics went through a period of great analytical clarity. The biggest power centers of the world were well defined and sought at any given moment to expand their spaces of influence. The regional moments of insertion in the spheres of power were followed by actions and reactions of the two main global powers: the USSR and the USA, along with their allies. On the other hand, the decolonization process also revealed a moment of territorialization of power in the form of newborn States, even if each one had its own particular conflicts. Thus, Western theoreticians had a very clear horizon of analysis, as we can observe in the studies of Spykman (1942)⁶ or Brzezinski (1972), two authors deeply concerned with the necessary movements to maintain the spheres of Western influence, and who have been widely quoted in both academic and military areas.

Perhaps Zbigniew Brzezinski was the best example to illustrate how this classical basis of geopolitics remained important during the period of the Cold War, even if he had often not mentioned it directly. By means of maps, the author demonstrated how the conflict was based on the dispute for the control of Eurasia. The conflict reproduced the struggle between the land power (Mackinder theory) and sea power (Alfred Mahan theory⁷), and dialectics between the expansion of Russian power and American contention. Brzezinski used a geographic framework, based on strategic fronts, to sustain the basis of the conflict and its trend towards the Soviet defeat, also associated to its high military expenditures⁸.

In the same period, it is important to point out that the crises of the 1970s and the remedies employed, above all by the USA, drew the economy into the geopolitical discussion even more

⁶ This author died before the Cold War, but his thoughts exerted influence on many scholars and policy makers.

⁷ On the author and his contribution, Ó Tuathail (1998:4) argues “The American naval historian Alfred Mahan (1840–1914), for example, wrote about the importance of the physical geography—territorial mass and physical features in relation to the sea—in the development of seapower by expanding states in his classic study *The Influence of Seapower Upon History*, which was first published in 1890 (Mahan, 1957). The road to national greatness, not surprisingly for the professional naval officer Mahan, was through naval expansionism”.

⁸ Mello (1999) recalls that this thesis predates the seminal work of Paul Kennedy (1989) who argued about the weight of military expenses in the fall of powers over the course of history.

clearly, a fact which would continue to hold true for several decades. Farias (2015)⁹ argues that the financial expansion, by means of deregulation of national markets, gave the USA an unprecedented concentration of monetary, financial, political and military power.

The end of the Cold War and the dawn of globalization brought a number of uncertainties in which the American hegemony and capitalism seemed to represent one of just a few sources of security for the understanding of inter-state relations. Theories such as the end of history of the States and of geography itself circulated with notoriety¹⁰, but lost momentum in a matter of years¹¹.

However, in the 1990s, this thought was replaced by the economic agenda and above all the neoliberal one. Insertion into globalization while complying with the rules of good economic and institutional functioning seemed to be enough to guarantee economic growth and social welfare¹². This was the expression of the Western theoretical mainstream. It is no wonder that a number of authors began a critical crusade against these recipes, both in developed and emerging countries¹³.

Under the point of the influence zones and conflicts, international institutions (above all, NATO and the UN), strengthened by the fall of the Soviet regime, had their hands full with the eruption of regional conflicts such as the Balkan wars and serious conflicts in Africa. These new developments suffered more radical alterations in the 2000s¹⁴.

The international geopolitical chessboard, at this time with the economic strand included in its analysis, faces different strategies, players and new forms of conflict. In this aspect, the phenomenon of terrorism seems to be one of the most evident. For the USA, classical military

⁹ Based on the theoretical ideas derived from authors such as Fernand Braudel, Giovanni Arrighi, Samuel Wallerstein and Jose Luis Fiori, Farias (2015) resumes the classic geopolitical discussion in terms of the formation of the American hegemony of the 1970s on based on a strategy that allied economic and geopolitical elements.

¹⁰ See Fukuyama (1992) for the end of history; Ohmae (1995) for the end of the states; and O'Brien (1992) for the end of geography.

¹¹ Robert Kaplan (2012:16) argues that "it was just a matter of shaping the world more in our own image, sometimes through the deployment of American troops; deployments that in the 1990s would exact relatively little penalty. This, the first intellectual cycle of the Post Cold War, was an era of illusions. It was a time when the words 'realist' and 'pragmatist' were considered pejoratives, signifying an aversion to humanitarian intervention in places where the national interest, as conventionally and narrowly defined, seemed elusive."

¹² Ha Joon Chang (2002) argues that the neoliberal recipe that took hold of the Western world during the 1990s was based on policies that even the developed countries had not followed during their paths of development. As an example, the author used the issue of intellectual property, labor laws, democracy (universal suffrage only came to the so-called democratic countries around the 1970s), an independent central bank and financial deregulation.

¹³ See Santos (2017), Rodrick (2006) and Stiglitz (2002)

¹⁴ As Stuenkel (2015:xii) argues: "The dominant position established powers have held in global affairs during the 1990s is slowly eroding. The group of countries with the power to make a difference internationally, for better or worse, is changing. As new powers—principally China and India—rise to the fore, the world's decision-making elite is becoming less Western, has fewer common interests, and is more ideologically diverse. This creates a necessity to understand emerging powers' views."

geopolitical tools have been used specially in the Middle East as in the case of Afghanistan or even in the Iraq invasion¹⁵.

Russia, in turn, commenced several reactions to offensives in its traditional areas of influence, as observed in Kosovo (1999), South Ossetia (2008) and more recently, the Ukraine and Syria (2014). Regarding these cases, Sergunin (2016:13) stresses that “it became commonplace for Western scholars and politicians to ascertain that Russia's post-Cold war foreign policy behavior is often unpredictable, irrational, anti-Western, aggressive / expansionist and even irredentist.” But the fact is that, after the 2000s, the Kremlin resumed some aggressive geopolitics and changed the reconciliatory mood with the West. It comes as no surprise that Russia today is subject to several economic sanctions and has been trying to focus on different strategies, such as the formation and development of the BRICS.

And, finally, China. During this recent period, China has come to represent the greatest question mark from a geopolitical point of view. The enlargement of its sphere of economic influence based on a swift industrialization process and economic growth¹⁶ now includes an unprecedented international strategy, the BRI, which, although well delimited, is still very recent and unpredictable. This might be the most complex point for analysis and, thus, it is paramount to follow up on the execution of this policy and its geopolitical developments (range, logistics, flows, commercial trades, cultural exchanges, cooperation mechanisms and technological development). That is why the theory developed by Blackwill and Harris (2016) seems to be more appropriate to deal with contemporary China's geopolitics. They argued that, in recent years, China has used its economic power to achieve geopolitical goals.

What has been exposed up to this point illustrates that the topic of contemporary geopolitics has been undergoing several transformations which introduce new elements that have tended to escape the attention of international scholars. Russia and its re-established neighboring areas of influence near China, achieved through a global power initiative, are good examples of these transformations. However, there is one certainty: the new leadership role of China with the BRI and the clear need that geopolitics must focus on this initiative, trying not only to bring old methodologies and forms of analysis to the forefront but also to promote a

¹⁵ The resumption of the use of geopolitics to analyze the invasion of Iraq is very common, after all, it bears from the knowledge of the terrain, of difficult access to the centrality of that country and its oil reserves. For a deeper analysis, see Robert Kaplan (2012).

¹⁶ Obviously, China has been concerned with more classical military issues and geopolitical strategies, the South China Sea and the investments in innovation in defense are clear examples. An important work about these themes can be found in Cheung (2014). Another author that emphasizes the importance of the marine power to China is Kaplan (2012). We can also mention the importance of the relationship between China and the US to the balance of power in Eurasia, especially as regards the imminent conflicts in the region as mentioned by Brzezinski (2001).

renewed view of this fresh and challenging initiative. Given the spatial dimension taken by the BRI nowadays, a drill down understanding of the CPEC would seem appropriate to shed light on the structural elements of this power strategy.

A brief history of China-Pakistan relations will be now be presented to support the analysis of the BRI and CPEC. The focus is on demonstrating how these new actions by the Asian giant can be distinguished from the traditional relations developed by these countries over the past fifty years. Although Pakistan features as China's third largest military diplomatic partner¹⁷, the CPEC has yet to officially include any strictly military relationship between the countries.

China and Pakistan Relations: Historical Geopolitical Elements and the CPEC

It is almost impossible talk about Chinese geopolitics without mentioning Pakistan. In China's recent history, Pakistan has assumed a significant position in different strategic issues. In 1975, Barnds (1975:474) wrote that South Asia "is more important to China than it is to either the United States or the Soviet Union"¹⁸. He was right. The Chinese made substantial efforts across this time period in order to build this relationship, while undergoing numerous historical moments both on a domestic and international level¹⁹. As mentioned by Small (2015), "across the last few decades they have survived China's transition from Maoism to market economy, the rise of Islamic militancy in the region, and the shifting cross-currents of the two countries' relationships with India and the United States."

The geopolitical chessboard that was the background for this relationship begins with the Cold War and goes back to the Independence of Pakistan. Barnds (1975) recalls some of the main moments that helped construct Sino-Pakistani relations. Already by 1950, Pakistan supported Peking's right to the mainland Chinese seat in the United Nations. In 1956, there were several visits conducted between the two countries. It was becoming clearer and clearer that, in spite of the political and cultural differences, the two countries did not share conflicts that would prevent a successful partnership. In fact, China regarded Pakistan as a very important ally in order to strengthen its positions, above all regarding the problems faced by the border disputes with India and influence in the region. In 1959, there was a round of negotiations about

¹⁷ According to the article published by the website *The China Power Project*, 'How is China bolstering its military diplomatic relations?', based on data from the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, National Defense University. The top two positions are the USA and Russia, respectively.

¹⁸ In fact, the author argued that the threat against China is not related to its urban area, but to the borders, especially with India, the problems in the Sinkiang area and Tibet. On the other hand, the regions "are clearly of greater importance than its stake in the Middle East, Africa or Latin America."

¹⁹ Barnds (1975:478) recalls that, "China's maintenance of co-operative relations with Pakistan during the Great Cultural Revolution was virtually unique."

border demarcation which directly irritated India. According to Barnds, “Pakistan was large enough to be important, but not large enough - or strong enough - to be viewed as a potential rival such as India or Japan.”

The signing of the Sino-Pakistani airline agreement in 1963 demonstrated the Chinese geopolitical strategy to maintain a relevant space of influence between Asia and the Middle East. From then on, there was an increasing exchange of lower-level officials, trade missions, cultural groups and other organizations²⁰. The following year, the two countries signed their first trade agreement. Besides the agreement, there was also support for the Pakistani position in the region of Kashmir, which was given by Chou Enlai during an official visit.

The increasingly evident strengthening of this relationship would become even tighter in the 1970s, especially due to the role that Pakistan played in the rapprochement between China and the US. At this point, a key player in this process, Henry Kissinger (2011), reported the choice of that country to mediate the rapprochement: “the White House chose a nonaligned friend of China (Pakistan), a member of the Warsaw Pact known for its quest for independence from Moscow (Romania), and member of NATO distinguished by its commitment to strategic independence.”

From the 1970s onwards, the military issue gained a new facet: nuclear armament. An intense partnership was established between the two countries to make Pakistan a nuclear power. The regional context wound up further boosting this development, including the fact that India had performed its first nuclear test in the 1970s. A power balance problem would ensue in the region if Pakistan did not move in the same direction.

The accelerated process of building nuclear weapons, as well as other arms, ended up providing the greatest boost in a period when Chinese geopolitics was extremely attentive to Pakistan and Pakistan itself depended on the strategic cooperation it had established with the neighboring country.

A deeper investigation into the numerous political details of China-Pakistan relations up the present time is not appropriate here. However, it is fundamental to mention the issue of the rise of terrorism and radicalism of sectors linked to Islamism. Forces connected to Islamic radicalism began to bear relevance and carried out actions such as the case of Red Mosque. Hussain (2017:147) recalls that “religious extremism and terrorism pose a serious threat to the

²⁰ According to Barnds (1975), Sino-Pakistani cultural organizations were active in Pakistan. Trade expanded from \$13.5 million in 1961 to \$68.3 million in 1967, but still accounted for only four percent of Pakistan's total trade. China agreed in June 1966 to supply machinery to a heavy industrial complex, and a maritime agreement was signed in October 1966.

very existence of Pakistan as society and the state.” For China, this concern surpasses Pakistani domestic matters; after all, a central part of its security strategy is the containment of radical movements in the Western part of the country, especially in areas close to its borders.

Up to this point, we have mentioned only the essential aspects of China-Pakistan relations. A complex web of events, which range from the conflicts between China and the USSR to more specific details regarding arms production and commercialization, have been responsible for a solid relationship that has stretched over more than 50 years. Classical geopolitical interest in the Chinese influence zone, border conflicts, nuclear weapons, regional power balance and even technology exchange is also evident and is subject to different possible interpretations. The Cold War itself, during which time period this aforementioned relationship evolved, is a historical moment where geopolitics were clearly laid out, either in the dispute for influence zones, the decolonization processes or the non-aligned movement. However, the present context is a little more delicate. This is the point that will now be analyzed based on the assumption that this relationship today finds itself at an inflection point for Chinese geopolitics and required a renewed theoretical framework to prevent the field from being trapped in traditional Western thought. In order to do so, I will begin by looking into the Belt and Road Initiative and then focusing on the specific points regarding the role of Pakistan in this new phase of Chinese power expansion.

Belt and Road Initiative and CPEC: The Role of Pakistan

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the result of the union of two proposals launched in the latter half of 2013: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The initiative has now reached practically immeasurable dimensions, extending to many areas around the world, such as the Arctic Sea. Within six years of its announcement, the proposal has become a reality and today, according to the initiative’s official website²¹, there are more than 80 associated companies and several ongoing projects, including a recently-launched ST&I cooperation project with Pakistan²², as well as the construction of cultural centers in participant countries that include strategic hotspots such as Turkey (at the doorstep of Europe), and Egypt (located in North Africa and with access to the Mediterranean Sea²³). According to the official document launched by Xinhua at the end of 2019, entitled ‘The Belt and Road

²¹A full list can be found in: https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/info/iList.jsp?cat_id=10080&cur_page=1

²² See: China, Pakistan vow to strengthen cooperation on science, technology <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/rdxw/19048.htm>

²³ See: More Chinese cultural centers along Silk Road by 2020. http://english.gov.cn/news/international_exchanges/2015/02/17/content_281475057139023.htm

Initiative. Progress, contributions and prospects’, the “Chinese government had signed 173 cooperation agreements with 125 countries and 29 international organisations by the end of March 2019. The Belt and Road has expanded from Asia and Europe to include more new participants in Africa, Latin America and the South Pacific”.

From a general overview, the initiative seeks to promote greater integration, via cooperation and infrastructure projects between the West and the East, albeit with foundations that extend beyond strictly economic relations²⁴. For example, the geopolitical foundation of the initiative already extends beyond initial estimates. It no longer relates only to classic geopolitical tools such as position, resources, population and so on, but is also linked to a new moment in globalization as well as the use of economic tools to achieve geopolitical objectives. At least two official documents help illustrate the position of the Chinese government²⁵; some of the points that they raise are highlighted here. Firstly, despite the unquestionable Chinese leadership of the initiative, the stance assumed in these documents demonstrates the horizontal relations underlying the project²⁶. These postulates indicate that the project would not rely on the classic means adopted by the main powers to this day, especially the US²⁷. There is an evident effort to approach issues that go beyond cooperation and, in this same document, we see the construction of a strategy based on five elements: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds.

Another significant point to mention is the institutional framework that the BRI is creating. According to the official website, the project is linked chiefly to the State Council and then to the National Development and Reform Council, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Communication. Furthermore, the number of institutions that are studying and participating is growing as fast as the initiative is. These include banks, universities, companies,

²⁴ The importance of conceiving the contemporary world beyond purely economic relations has been widely discussed. The study conducted by Blackwill and Harris (2016: 20) has been cited, not least in relation to its reflections on China as central to this tasks. These authors built the concept of *geo-economics*, defined as: “The use of economic instruments to promote and defend national interests, and to produce beneficial geopolitical results; and the effects of other nations’ economic actions on a country’s geopolitical goals.” For the authors, one of the central issues is the use of this concept to analyze Chinese geopolitics which has been ample that the classic basis for this discipline, using economic strategies as a form geopolitical positioning.

²⁵ See: “Vision and Actions On Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt And 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.” Issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, with State Council authorization, March 2015 at: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/qwfb/1084.htm>. And, “Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice and China’s Contribution”, Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, May 2017, at: <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wcm.files/upload/CMSydylyw/201705/201705110537027.pdf>

²⁶ According to the document of 2015: “The Belt and Road Initiative is a way for win-win cooperation that promotes common development and prosperity and a road towards peace and friendship by enhancing mutual understanding and trust, and strengthening all-round exchanges.”

²⁷ Such as military intervention, construction of military bases or defense agreements.

forums, associations and think tanks²⁸, to name but a few. Particular attention must be paid to the Belt and Road Forum which occurred in May 2017, and was attended by thirty chiefs of States and the head of the United Nations, World Bank Group and International Monetary Fund. That list of attendees alone reveals the importance of the event. Secondly, the BRI Forum published another document²⁹ that clarified some important aspects which will contribute to our analysis as follows:

- A concern with emphasizing the respect for international institutions, such as the United Nations, is mentioned in the document, as well to issues such as the sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries;
- Cooperation is a keyword. It is frequently referred to, but often in terms of North-South, South-South, and triangular cooperation. It is interesting to note how the role of the developing countries is highlighted not only in relation to the initiative itself, but also in terms of a new world order.
- Finally, questions are presented regarding economic growth “based on level-playing field, on market rules and on universally recognized international norms.” To do so, the document lays out the “promotion of industrial cooperation, scientific and technological innovation, and regional economic cooperation and integration so as to increase, *inter alia*, the integration and participation of micro, small and medium enterprises in global value chains.”

Up to this point, we can observe some extremely significant elements which place geopolitics at the center of attention. A strategy of this magnitude comes from the second largest economy in the world which has not assertively addressed any issues regarding conflicts, military affairs, Army, Navy, Air Force, occupation, borders or influence areas³⁰. On the contrary, the proposal has been gaining supporters who share a history of conflicts, but also have an interest in the initiative. On the other hand, it seems obvious that there is a growing

²⁸ For example, Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, New Development Bank, ASEAN, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, China Academy of Social Science, SASAC, Fudan Institute of Belt and Road & Global Governance, Belt and Road Think Thank Cooperation Alliance, Silk and Road Think and Thank Association Conference, cultural centers (now under the BRI), among others.

²⁹See: “Joint Communique of the Leaders Roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation”: http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zt_ydyl_english/

³⁰ These are often associated to geopolitics, as if this field were strictly linked to war of conflicts of different orders. Even the most attentive observers usually make this direct connection. Overholt (2008:56), when asserting that “Asia’s half-century-long trend toward focusing on extraordinary economic development rather than geopolitical and ideological conflict as the path to wealth and power”, falls into this trap.

concern with the BRI, above all among countries geographically close to the initiative, but more allied to the western powers, such as New Zealand and Australia³¹.

From a geographical point of view, the BRI has been proposing some different strategies. The document from 2015 outlines “six corridors”: the New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor, the China-Mongolia Russia Economic Corridor, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor; the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor; the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor. Also included are the “six means of communication”, which include rail, highways, seagoing transport, aviation, pipelines, and aerospace integrated information networks, which comprise the main targets of infrastructure connectivity. Otherwise, the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road seeks two major routes: one from coastal ports of China which crosses the South China Sea, which passes through the Malacca Strait and then reaches the Indian Ocean, extending to Europe; and the other which starts from the coastal ports of China, crossing the South China Sea, and extending to the South Pacific. Of all these initiatives, the CPEC is one of the most important and urgent.

As we noted, up until this point the relationship between China and Pakistan has been highly nuanced. The CPEC is a new element which has been constructed under an approach focused on infrastructure, STI and cooperation. It constitutes a completely new moment. It is important to mention some relevant topics related to the CPEC that could provide arguments to use when tackling contemporary geopolitics.

The dimensions of the CPEC are immense. As Ejaz Hussain (2017:156) stresses, the “idea of a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was floated during the President Musharraf regime (1999-2007).” But it was on July 5th 2013 that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the CPEC was signed. The MoU is a multi-dimensional plan that initially proposed to spend 46 billion dollars in projects. The transport route of the CPEC has been planned to connect Kashgar (China) to Gwadar Port (Pakistan) via 3 alignments: Western, Central and Eastern³². The Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Mr. Weidong, expects the CPEC to create more than 10,000 jobs for local people directly and generate opportunities for more than 15,000 Pakistani students in China. Finally, in terms of investments, there is the noteworthy

³¹Some authors, as in the case of Reilly (2013), even before the consolidation of the initiative, were already concerned with rising Chinese influence by non-conventional means in the region. Now, new complaints by New Zealanders are being observed.

³² All information and data present in this item came from: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor [CPEC]. For strategic partnership to economic ties. *The Diplomatic Insight*. vol. 9, Issue 12, 2016.

participation of development banks such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and New Development Bank.

It is crucial to highlight some issues present in the CPEC Long Term Plan (LTP). Firstly, the LTP was prepared by the China Development Bank under the National Development Reform Council, two of the most important institutions in modern-day China. This is a significant issue. Secondly, it is paramount to stress some of the foundations of the plan. The key areas and major projects are: spatial structure and functional zones, construction of an integrated transport system, IT connectivity, energy cooperation, industries and parks, agricultural development and poverty alleviation³³, cooperation in livelihood areas, people to people communications and financial cooperation.

According to the initiative's official website³⁴, there are seventy-three projects in ten areas under the institutional framework of the economic corridor: twenty-two in the energy sector; eight in infrastructure; nine in the Port of Gwadar; two cited as Other Projects, namely the Cross Border Optical Fiber Cable and Pilot Project of Digital Terrestrial Multimedia Broadcast; four in Rail-Based Mass Transit Projects; six in New Provincial Projects; nine in Special Economic Zones (SEZs); four in Social Sector Development Projects; six in Western Route Projects; and three in Related Projects Under Public Sector Development Program (PSDP). Only the last two are part of the Public Sector Development Program (PSDP), Pakistan's most important fiscal policy tool and the main national financial source for development projects (Wolf, 2020). All the rest are financed by the Chinese government.

The underlying circumstances to this development are, therefore, intriguing. The lack of military issues is a standout feature, whether it be due to the fact that some problems are seemingly ignored that effectively exist on the path or by reinforcing elements that promote superior economic effects rather than focusing on military cooperation and integration. For Hussain (2019), the main security-related issues³⁵ should be tackled by Pakistan itself in order to neutralize problems that threaten its sovereignty and to ensure greater political stability to stimulate socio-economic development. In other words, security, although a focus of the CPEC as it could pose serious problems to the implementation of the corridor, would appear to be an issue that must be considered in light of internal Pakistani matters. The Long Term Plan itself

³³ In a recent study launched by the World Bank (2019), there are positive forecasts in relation to poverty alleviation in areas related to the BRI. Pakistan is one of the countries in which this statistic appears particularly positive.

³⁴ See www.cpec.gov.pk

³⁵ Wolf (2020) argues that the "overall lack of security in Pakistan determines one of the greatest challenges for the country's development and economic cooperation with other countries, especially regarding the attraction of foreign investment."

states that “Pakistan deploys security personnel from Army and other security forces to ensure the safety of projects' construction, operation and maintenance, employees and camps under the CPEC.”

Final Remarks

This article seeks to present a discussion based on the new moment of expansion of Chinese world power and its relationship with Pakistan. The BRI and CPEC have been executed in a short period of time but the consequences are already well underway. I have been arguing that, with this initiative, new geopolitical tools have been developed and used and it is time to rethink geopolitics without certain prejudices. The historical perspective showed how Chinese geopolitics changed its course, especially with the BRI that has proposed new forms of relationships and exchanges, especially in relation to Pakistan.

The BRI shows some classical geopolitical elements, as can be seen in the strategy of the “six corridors” and the maritime route which now includes the Arctic Sea. Moreover, the CPEC has an important geographical background that could be analyzed from the geopolitical point of view³⁶. It is no wonder that important Western analysts have relied on the classical propositions of Halford Mackinder or Alfred Mahan to refer to the BRI. One of the main active geopoliticians today, Francis Sempa (see *The Diplomat*, 2015), already in the title of his article mentions one of the pillars of the Mackinder's theory: *Is China Bidding for the Heartland?* The author goes further and maintains that, according to his analysis, Chinese strategy is based on a dual path—both land and sea power. In his words, “China, however, does not necessarily have to choose between a maritime and continental strategy. Indeed, all signs point to China pursuing a foreign policy that looks to achieve both maritime and continental interests.” All the rationale is built on the dominance of what Mackinder called the *inner crescent*, which represents the fringe access to the *heartland* and the expansion and access to maritime power.

Another author that relies on the propositions of Mackinder is Theresa Fallon. Her analysis is based on the way in which policymakers design the initiative. According to Fallon

³⁶ Given the broader dimension of the analysis of the geopolitical spectrum of the relations between China and Pakistan, we did not work on the geographic dimension of the CPEC which covers important regions and intends to consolidate areas of economic dynamism. The CPEC has a spatial layout of “One Belt, Three Passages, Two Axes and Five Functional Zones”. The “Two Axes” (official document, see footnote number 30) refer to two East-West development axes in the China Pakistan Economic Corridor that are vertical to the main traffic arteries, i.e. Lahore-Islamabad-Peshawar and Karachi-Gwadar development axes. The economic development levels and geographical location conditions of the areas where the ‘Two Axes’ are located differ greatly. They are key areas for the strengthening of regional linkage and promotion of coordinated development of regions in the Corridor construction. ‘Five Functional Zones.’ The Corridor is divided into five functional zones according to the regional development level, industrial structure, resource and environmental bearing capacity, and growth potential. These zones cover major node cities, traffic passages and industrial cluster areas.

(2015), quoting professor Dr. Wang Yiwei, “a professor at Renmin University, quoted Halford Mackinder, the father of modern geopolitics, and called for a revival of Eurasia as a “world island” (Mackinder’s term), thanks to China’s “One Belt One Road,” which would sideline the United States.” Again, this is a further reference that quotes Mackinder’s theory.

In both cases, there is a clear mention of the territorial dimensions of the BRI, which is a fundamental part of any geopolitical analysis. However, the complexity of the initiative demands the construction of clearly defined strategies capable of making operational any proposal linked to it. But it is important to highlight some questions to help us look deeper into this new geopolitical moment. What is the correlation of a theoretical approach that outlines strategies based on military background with others that propose a cooperation based on economic tools? How is China bidding for the heartland without any military action? Is it possible to build a geopolitical strategy based only on economic tools? Moreover, what kind of real structure and tools would the Chinese government have to have in order to be able to influence so many different parts of the world?

All these questions about the initiative are new, as is China’s role in the international arena, and we are using conventional Western thought to try to decipher and forecast the BRI. As suggested in the first section, Blackwill and Harris (2016) seem to be the authors who have come closest to crafting a new approach. They have been investigating how some countries have been using economic tools to produce geopolitical results, what they call *geoeconomics*. Their theory considers geopolitics as a ‘hard power’, which is related to “a method of foreign policy analysis that seeks to understand, explain and predict international political behavior primarily in terms of geographical variables”. In my view, geopolitics involves more than international issues, as I mentioned above, and besides such a narrow definition, these authors are calling attention to China’s strategies, precisely in terms of economic tools. The problem is that there are but a few comments about the BRI in the book. To be more specific, they still call the initiative the New Silk Road, so they have not considered the Belt and Road Forum, one of the most important events for the consolidation of the BRI.

The point is that geopolitics must be considered as a national strategy of wealth and power accumulation; it should be a project of a State that intends to extend its power of international influence in conjunction with its national capital, and hence not limiting itself to the acquisition of physical territories, but also to ‘economic territories’ (Fiori, 2007; 2008; 2015)³⁷. That proposal seems to fit in with the BRI. Furthermore, a geopolitical analysis must

³⁷See Farias (2016). The author carried out a deeper analysis in the Fiori’s theory.

also consider the role of Science, Technology and Innovation as key. Becker (2015) argues that STI involves geopolitics as it is based on information and knowledge about the geographical space and, thus, it creates the capacity to develop techniques and technologies to be applied in strategies and policies in order to assure the appropriation, use and control of the geographical space. To consolidate the BRI, different technological skills are necessary. There are many types of geographical areas, including different cultures, kinds of resources, and materials; in other words, there are a field of obstacles which require innovation to be overcome. China seems to be following that path with the implementation of the BRI. The above-mentioned agreement between China and Pakistan is an important example and should be analyzed as soon as both governments allow the access to the files³⁸. Also to be considered in this respect is the creation of the industrial zones, already under construction, as presented by the LTP which are aligned to this technological perspective.

China has been demonstrating a clear search for balance between their domestic concerns and a more active and central role on the international stage. That is not to say that there are no military motivations or traditional issues of geopolitics and so forth. However, this paper has attempted to approach this development with a different focus, instead looking at the construction of an institutionalized framework, the major projects and how the China-Pakistan relationship in particular highlights both of these priorities. The initiative is massively driven by tools derived from Chinese economic power, and focuses heavily on cooperation and win-win relations.

The geopolitical components can be defined by several elements of the BRI, in general, and of the CPEC. In particular, these include:

- Firstly, the BRI has been showing that some Western analysis is completely removed from the Chinese reality. Brzezinski (2001) highlighted that “China is not going to become a global power, though it is a regional power capable of asserting its national interests. And the BRI is showing exactly the contrary.”
- Trying to analyze a way of retaking the *heartland* would be to consider that China is trying to reduce Russian influence in Central Asia, for example. That might seem doubtful. China’s increased presence in the region may be achieved without affecting relations with Russia. Consideration must also be given to the alliance between China and some Central Asian countries.

³⁸To date, the Ministries of Science and Technology of the two countries have not allowed the disclosure of the agreement terms, or the themes of 26 projects involved in the construction of the South Asia Technology Transfer Center (CSTTC), at PCSIR Head Office Islamabad.

- There seems to be no clear evidence of classical territorial domination, as the early 20th century period as well the Cold War strategies showed. This is the point I believe to be challenging for Western geopolitical thinking which is obviously scared and will try to smear the image of the initiative (as we witnessed in May 2017, when the magazine *The Economist* published an article indicating that the acronym for the Belt and Road Forum[?] would be BARF, when it was officially dubbed BRF). I believe there is already a campaign in this direction, which makes it difficult to analyze the mechanisms, errors, correctness and consequences of the BRI more effectively. It is evident that the information published in the media and the analyses bear a substantial degree of ideological influence.
- Financial resources are a very important weapon and must be used. China has been showing a great capacity to use them, as could be noted in the study conducted by Blackwill and Harris (2016).
- Greater internal and external integration of Western China looking for new logistics routes (flows of raw material, products and people–cultural exchanges);
- Overcoming the difficulties that the Strait of Malacca presents, from the great flow of vessels to the intense and increasing piracy activity in recent years. The CPEC may mitigate the problems that China has been facing with this issue;
- Caution in relation to diversification of the energy matrix and alternative supply solutions for its growing demand for energy. In this regard, China has been more concerned about global warming, signing the Paris Treaty and introducing innovations that allow the use of other energy sources. Pakistan is a very important ally in this quest and the agreement in question mentioned earlier is an example of this;
- China is putting STI at the center of the debate. This is a really important tool in modern geopolitics, with the likely generation of more adequate results and less conflict.

Now, what exactly would be the issue that would lead us to rethinking geopolitics based on the BRI in the case of Pakistan in particular? There is no mention of the military aspect apart from some important security projects; in other words, they are cooperating in some military sectors, especially in productive areas, but there is no underlying military plan of the initiative. There is no reference in contemporary history of such a clear, well placed and well advertised initiative as the BRI. The expansion of American multinationals was done with the help of the American State in the 1960s and 1970s during the Cold War but not with such an explicit and delimited plan. From an economic planning point of view, there are no precedents, not least because we no longer are living in a Cold War with restricted communication systems. Today, we have access to information and information can be used as propaganda.

Finally, the present study concludes that there are more questions to be asked rather than an effective analysis that we could perform at this moment in time. The efficiency of geopolitics based on cooperation, with elements of STI, is not enough to assert anything beyond the fact that it is a challenging strategy.

It is very important to emphasize that the theoretical framework of geopolitics tends to be accompanied by a very strong ideological content that can disrupt any analysis. The case of Pakistan tends to present a successful example of the initiative. The numbers of the partnership are already reliable, as demonstrated, and the expansion into other areas, as is the case of the Technology Transfer Center, supports this assertion. But caution is necessary since it is a friendly country that, in recent years, has increased tensions with the USA. And, therefore, the strategy of approaching China is far more important than in any other period. In addition to the BRI, it offers an alternative path to develop the neediest areas of the country, especially Balochistan. It is fundamental to separate criticisms that originate in central countries with a long imperialist and colonialist tradition from serious and constructive criticism such as those pointed out in the considerations outlined herein.

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