

SERBIA AND GEOPOLITICAL (NON)COMPLEMENTARITY OF THE DANUBE STRATEGY AND THE NEW SILK ROAD

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ABSTRACT

New geopolitical paradigms and new great powers are emerging as the postmodern global relations subjects. The most prominent one is China in its attempt to become the first power in history that built integral geopolitical identity and power – both telurocratic and thalassocratic. China's relations with other world powers will remain changeable. The relations will certainly not be harmonious, but rather competitive. As it was a case until now, dominance in Eurasia will guarantee global supremacy. China will strive to achieve supremacy through the *New Silk Road* land and sea vector bundles. The crucial European link between them will be Central and Eastern Europe that Mackinder recognized as a geopolitical key to rule the world a century ago. More powerful links in accordance with the formula "16+China" are being established in that area. In the Danube region, which is the axis of Central and Eastern Europe, integrative-expansive the EU *Danubian strategy* (and indirectly the United States) and dynamic China's *Silky conception* will confront. Their (non)complementarity will significantly affect the geo-economical and geopolitical position of Serbia that controls an important part of Central Danube region, as well as its important Morava-Vardar transmission with Eastern Mediterranean and the port of Piraeus.

Key words: Geopolitical interests, Eurasian vectors, Danube region, Central and Eastern Europe, Serbia, China.

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1. INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A GLOBAL GEOPOLITICAL NOVUM

Geopolitics rested on a naturally predisposed – although not a geodeterministic – antagonism between „land power” and „sea power“ for a long time. The thalascratic and telurocratic powers fought mostly among themselves for (trans)regional, (trans)continental, (trans)oceanic and global supremacy. The fight is considered to be the *First law of geopolitics* (Дугин, 2004а, p. 139). Unique national geopolitical identities were based on the Schmidistic “nomos” (Степић, 2012, pp. 11-40), thus forming more or less solid political, military, economic, as well as civilizational strategic blocks, generating the *Second law of geopolitics* (Дугин, 2004а, p. 143). The Cold war was a concretization of the theoretical-conceptual postulates of classic geopolitics, embodied in the existence of:

1. two superpowers that personify continentality (USSR) and maritimity (USA);
2. two opposed alliances under their leadership (WP and NATO);
3. bipolar divisions risen to the level of global dichotomy (East vs. West);
4. the competition between the authentic Eurasian geopolitical “center” (Heartland) and the instrumented “periphery” (Rimland) to control the most spacious, most populated and most important (mega)land on Earth – Eurasia;
5. ambition of the leading country on the American mainland (New World) to rule not only the “World island” but the entire planet by applying Kennan’s policy of containment of the leading country of the Afro-Eurasian mainland (Old World)...

This mechanism, driven by geopolitical inertia, continued to function in a similar manner during the transitional, unipolar period, with the obvious intention to survive in a modified form in the total post-modern changes. A quick shift from the old age to the “*New age*” and from the old to the “*New World Order*” is inevitably linked by cause and effect to the fundamental geopolitical reconfiguration. Regardless of whether it is seeking for more or less harmonious “concert” of equally powerful forces, or if it is being constituted in the form of hierarchy based pyramid scheme, or even inclining to “*New model of bipolarity*”², the forthcoming multipolarism is going to

² A. Dugin considers bipolarism as the only possible equilibrium model (Дугин, 2004).

denote the rise of new global “players” and the new geopolitical “rules”. Traditional actors of the modern era (the European colonial powers, Russia/USSR, USA) will be joined by increasingly populated India, more self-aware Islamic world, and, above all even more ambitious and unrestrainable China. They differ from the West, which has for centuries, especially in the 20th century, imposed overall global patterns not only by civilizational, but also by geopolitical identity. This indicates that the earlier geopolitical paradigms will inevitably be replaced by new ones. Not only had it not been and will not be “the end of ideology”, “the end of history” and “the end of geography” (Fukuyama, 1989, 1992, McLuhan, 1989), but the confrontations will continue on the (neo)classical, as well as the substantially transformed and/or completely new basis. The US tried to adapt the postulates of ruling the world on the basis of maritime dominance inherited from Great Britain, which was the colonial “empire where the sun never sets”, to postmodern requirements thus maintaining if not global domination, then global leadership³. The US managed to contain the Russian land Colossus in the geopolitical and geostrategical mousetrap. It is obvious that it will be less and less possible. The geopolitical system of the World in the future will be based on the (neo)classical Anglo-Saxon thalassocratic geopolitical concepts. The Heartland-Rimland pattern will remain, but not in the traditional, Eurasian scale, rather on the essentially redefined foundations and in the global spatial scales. Postmodern Heartland will include the Islamic world, but not Russia, while almost all the major powers will be located in the future Rimland, but the leading power among them will be China, not the United States. Along with the old, new geopolitical instruments, advantages, principles, rules will appear. The importance of new key zones, belts, corridors, vectors, nodes, points will increase, while the roles of previous ones will be transformed. On the basis of those changed paradigms, China will strive to become the first power in history that will build an integral geopolitical code and power - simultaneously telurocratic and thalassocratic (Зарин, 2013, p. 200). China’s relations with other world powers – primarily the USA– will be changeable,

³ Faced with the post-modern realities, geopolitical theorist and practitioner Z. Brzezinski concluded that the US will not be able to maintain global hegemony for long, and that it would be pragmatic to precede the events and create the future which they will achieve global leadership. Brzezinski titled his book according to that. (Brzezinski, 2004).

not harmonious, rather competing and conflicting⁴. Consequently, their geopolitical conceptions and concretizations may, in some cases, partially, tactically and temporarily, be complied, but will remain essentially non-complementary. Since the Central and (South)Eastern Europe retains its status as one of the most important geopolitical regions, the proper positioning of Serbia will be a great challenge and a vital national issue.

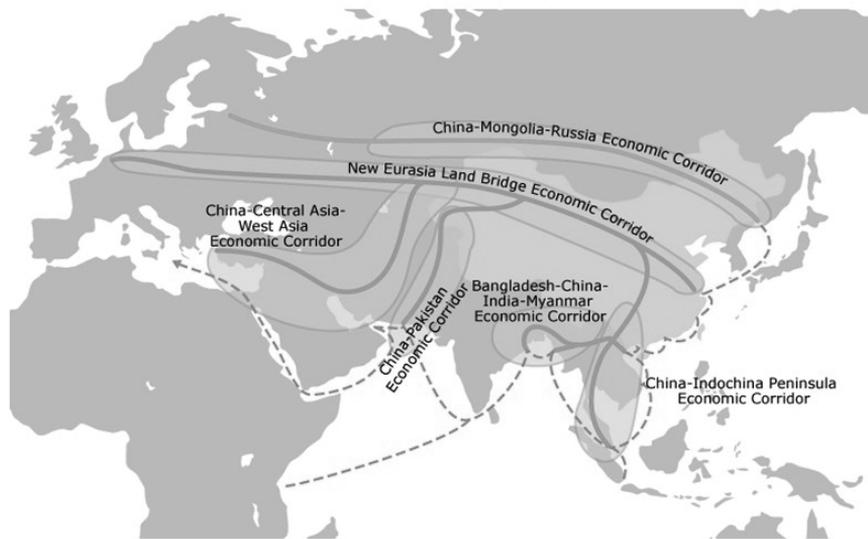
2. THE CHINESE SILK CONCEPT AND GEOPOLITICAL AMBITIONS OF “THE REST OF THE WORLD”

There is no doubt that Eurasia will remain “the main geopolitical prize” even in the late postmodern times (Brzezinski, 2001, p. 33). Without domination or at least management of this supercontinent, no one can claim the status of a leading global power, nor can one rule the world. As the United Kingdom, Russia and the United States have been aware of this geopolitical axiom, China should recognize it as well. Moreover, the control of the entire African-Eurasian land mass, would be the condition of planetary hegemony and integral geopolitical power in the future meaning that China should not allow their enforced separation by Mackinder’s region Arabia, i.e. the Middle Eastern “Broadgap” (Mackinder, 1919, p. 59). But, by the principle of geopolitical “joined vessels”, if China rules the Eurasian region, the African region will fall in its lap as well. Thus, “the generously offered” limited (macro)regional hegemony of „Greater China” in East and Southeast Asia (Brzezinski, 2001, p. 158) was an unsuccessful “bluff” of the United States in an attempt to restrain China. In contrast, China has embarked on a major Eurasian march promoting strategic orientation called *The New Silk Road*. (Map 1)

⁴ K. Mahbubani asks whether the geopolitics will prevent the creation of a new, convergent, unified world and concludes that a crisis is imminent at the moment when the United States “step into second place”, i.e. when the position of the world leader is taken by China. “In geopolitics, the most important relation is between the world’s greatest power (which is now America) and the greatest rising power (which is now China). ... Finally, it is not necessary to be a geopolitical genius to predict when a serious crisis point in US-China relations will occur. This will happen in the decade after 2016. Why after this year? Because then, according to some estimates, the US economy will cease to be the largest in the world.” (Mahbubani, 2015, pp. 161, 173) (original in English was published in 2013 in the USA).

Map 1: Approximate Corridors of the New Silk Road

The Belt and Road Initiative: Six Economic Corridors Spanning Asia, Europe and Africa



Source: <http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/One-Belt-One-Road/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A36B7.htm> (30.5.2016.)

Announcing in 2013, first the idea of *the Silk Road Economic Belt* and *the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, China has proclaimed mainly its developing-economic, financial-trading, political-integrational, energetic-communicational, friendly-partner, cultural-civilizational, and similar, benign dimensions. However, it is not difficult to recognize the inevitable geoeconomical and geopolitical “rudeness of interest”, behind “the softness of silk”. Approximate routes and belts of land and maritime heading will, in fact, form an internally cross-linked ring that will cover and connect almost all “the levers” that enable dominance over Eurasia – consequently, the World Island and the world. And the very complete defining of this (geo)system as *One Belt, one Road*⁵ confirms

⁵ The “One Belt, One Road” was officially promoted in March 2015 by the document “Visions and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road”, in which it is defined, as an aim “to promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas,

that China forms an integral geopolitical identity, and suggests the outline of a consistent concept that can be named *the Silk (geopolitical) concept*. In spite of partial agreement and occasional practical partnership of interest, there is no doubt that China will essentially oppose the geopolitical concepts and concretization of other autochthonous (Eurasian) and introduced (USA) forces:

- *Russian* continentalistic neoeurasian conception is now in its counter strategic (second) stage. It is characterized by the formation of “fans” of geopolitical vectors, i.e. “axis of friendship” (Дугин, 2009, p. 113) from Moscow to other major countries of Eurasia (and China) aiming to establish “association of barbarians” on the anti-American basis. The *Silk Road Economic Belt*, which is also continentally profiled and which penetrates into the former Heartland, intersecting directions of these vectors and undermining their pro-Russian connective function. Therefore, China’s “silk” geopolitical orientation is analogous to the US “by the parallel orientation” and it is contrary to the Russian “by the meridian” orientation, along the so-called alternative vertical (Панарин, 1999, p. 150). The Russian idea of the future multipolar order implies the division of the world into four zones, elongated north-south⁶. The Pan-Eurasian zone would be under Russian domination, and would fully intersect the land and maritime “route” of *The New Silk Road*. A strong rivalry for the neoeurasian leadership would emerge between Moscow and Beijing. In this case, the direct crossing of interest would be the post-Soviet Central Asian Muslim republics. This does not mean that China and Russia will not take advantage of the possibilities of total and effective stakeholder cooperation, particularly in order to achieve the priority goal – suppression of the United States from Eurasia.
- *US* efforts to maintain global hegemony are based on the traditions of “the power of the sea” and neocold-war containment, encirclement and

establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road, set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries”.(National Development and Reform Commission, 2015).

⁶ Cartographic representations of the neo-Eurasian vision of quadrupole, i.e. the division of the world into four zones, elongated along the meridians, from 2001 and 2002, differ in a few important details. See: *Евразийский взгляд...*, 2001, p. 44 and <http://www.geopolitica.ru/sites/default/files/map-1.jpg> (02.06.2016.).

suppressing of Russia (and even directly China), i.e. Eurasia as a whole. The control over Spykman's, unique (Spykman 1944, p. 52) or Zbigniew's, three-part (Brzezinski, 2001, p. 37) Rimland, especially its European and the Far East "bridgehead", is still considered "the magic formula", although it is becoming more and more unsustainable. It is in direct collision with the *21st century Maritime Silk Road*, which represents not only the thalassocratic "image" of future China, but it can mostly be identified with the spatial (aqua-territorial) belt of the Eurasian rim and marginal seas. Moreover, China already makes it clear in the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and the South China Sea, that it will not agree to be confined to the western Pacific coast, but more openly indicates strategic challenges to the American presence. It is possible that the confrontation between China and the USA along the maritime part of the *New Silk Road* will not be inevitable only in the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Persian Gulf, but it will spread to the Central Asian and West Asian sector of the inland route. Accordance of the Chinese *Silk conception* with the American vision of the „Eurasian chessboard" cannot be excluded only in the context of an „anaconda" around Russia and burning desires to gain Siberian resources. A similar symbiosis of their interests is possible to further restrain the aggressive Islamic geopolitical factor.

- *The Islamic world* is in the process of a complete "awakening" and geopolitical emancipation, which, along with China's rapid rise, already produces fundamental global changes. The Islamic population explosion, the religious-expansionist spirit of civilization, incomparable collective commitment, economic and financial impact and energy wealth, the size and central position of the global Islamic space; these are all factors that can form a new Global Heartland out of the North African-Middle Eastern-Central Asian Islamic areal. Its potential formation would transform the Islamic world from a manipulated geopolitical object into a powerful geopolitical entity world-wide. Existence, compactness and geopolitical role of the Islamic Heartland would depend on the great powers that would territorially (terrestrially) be threatened by it (excluding the US). Among them is China with the (geo)system *One belt, one road* that directly involves and fragments the potential Islamic Heartland's most important part in a geopolitical sense. Thus, *the Silk Road Economic Belt* will penetrate through its Central Asian part (primarily through Kazakhstan as the largest country), and *the 21st Century Maritime Silk*

Road will fragment it along the route of the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. In contrast, the two “silk axles” can get a good integrative function as far as the geo-economic plan is concerned, thus “connecting” deficient China with Muslim oil and gas riches. Geopolitically, a Sino-Muslim symbiosis may contribute in competing with Russian Eurasianism, especially when it comes to anti-American (anti-Western) actions.

- *India* and China, the two most populous and the most spacious (excluding Russia) countries of Eurasia, are traditional rivals. There is a long list of mutual misunderstandings and conflicts from the former Indian reception of the exiled Dalai Lama, to a number of territorial and border issues. However, there is an obvious trend of establishing partnerships, primarily on the economic and trade front. Both countries are members of gigantic integrational non-Western blocs BRICS and the SCO, and advocates for the end of American hegemony and introduction of multipolarism. In the future, India might indirectly end in that position – particularly in relation to China although it consistently avoids the position of a geopolitically manipulative instrument and classification by the formula “two against the third”. Also, Chinese encirclement and containment of India through Pakistan to the West and Myanmar to the East cannot be excluded. The important staples for the land and the sea route of the (geo)system *One belt, one road* are projected to run through these countries. But, the most important scene of Sino-Indian competition will be the Indian Ocean, through which *the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* is paved. The Indian Ocean will be less of a mediator between the two current major ocean basins – the Atlantic and Pacific – and more the “Central Ocean” in the future geopolitical structure of the world.⁷ Strait

⁷ Back in t 1990s Belgian (Flemish) geopolitical thinker Robert Steuckers anticipated future global importance of the Indian Ocean, recommending that Europe should be more involved in this area. A similar conclusion, but from the standpoint of American interests, was later made by Robert Kaplan, who predicted that in the basin of the Indian Ocean phases of conflict and cooperation will alternate, comparing the process with periodic changes of blowing of the summer (warm, moist) and winter (cold, dry) monsoons. Accordingly, Kaplan warned the United States of the necessity of enhancing the impact of the Indian Ocean, where they will be faced not only with the interests of China and India, but also other actors (Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Tanzania ...). (Kaplan, 2010)

of Bab el Mandeb, Ormuz and in particular Malacca (including the Kra isthmus through which channels will be dug) will be the key and possible future crisis point.

- *The European Union* (whether it is the final?) is considered as a final destination of the *New Silk Road*. It is the point of conjuring of *the Silk Road*, *Economic Belt* as the telurocratic and *the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* as a thalassocratic vector of the Chinese *Silk geopolitical conception*. Linking the two geo-economic poles – China in the Far East (as seen from Europe “view point”) and the European Union on the “Far West” (seen from the Chinese “view point”) – should be the logical outcome of the integration of the Eurasian supercontinent. However, the question is whether this will take the form of a partnership, of equal treatment, since the EU is not an independent factor, but a US transatlantic exponent. Therefore, the EU will represent the subject of competition to achieve global supremacy. The Chinese version of (neo)eurasianism will attempt to do what the Russian one does not succeed in a faster and more efficient way– to attract, and then “steal” the EU from the US. In order to achieve such an important and far-reaching aim, similar to an earlier idea of Russian neoeurasianists that gas pipelines would be the “integration agent” (Дугин, 2009, p. 204), the role of an important geopolitical instrument is intended for land and maritime “silk belt”. Accordingly, the European strategies, which are, in fact, sub strategies of American and Western expansion to the east, are essentially non-complementary with *Chinese New Silk Road*. However, this does not mean that the strategies will not be able to fit in it partially. The belt of Central and (South)Eastern Europe will be a place where the European strategy, including the *Danube Strategy*, either crashes or agrees with the Chinese ones.

3. CENTRAL AND (SOUTH) EASTERN EUROPE AS A “LINK” OF LAND AND MARITIME ROUTE OF THE NEW SILK ROAD: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DANUBE AND THE DANUBE STRATEGY

3.1. Geopoliticality of Central and (South) Eastern Europe – from Cordon Sanitaire to 16+China

The countries of Central and (South) Eastern Europe have traditionally had a great geopolitical importance. They make a “curtain” from the Baltic to Mediterranean basin, which can be “lowered” or “lifted” at the very centre of the European continent, more precisely between the borders or the spheres of interest of the two telurocratic giants – Germany at the heart of Europe and Russia at the heart of Eurasia. Even British geographer H. J. Mackinder, the classic of geopolitical science, emphasised the significance of that area for the achievement of planetary dominance and established the well-known expression: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World Island; Who rules the World Island commands the World.” (Mackinder, 1919, p. 106). Thus he came up with something that the western thalassocratic powers – the winners of the First World War established and organised both politically and territorially which was the Sanitary cordon with triple function – to be an obstacle to some new German attempt at penetrating into the Southeast and Persian Gulf, to hinder the Russian/Soviet “warm seas” ambitions towards Adriatic and Aegean basins, and to prevent territorial contact of strategic “axis” between the two continentalist powers, Germany and Russia. In the last hundred years or so, the Central and (South) Eastern Europe have kept their significant role both in theoretic-conceptual and practical geopolitical sense: for Russian Eurasians they represented a *zone of dilemma* of the reach of Russia-Eurasia towards the west; during the period of bipolarity, they were divided by *the Iron curtain*; in the first decade after the Cold War, Huntington drew a line of division through that area *the conflict of civilisations* (Western and Orthodox), while Brzezinski marked the contact among three out of four “fields” of the *Eurasian chessboard*; surfacing of multipolarity reactivated their zonal form and their function of a buffer – from Rumsfeld’s *New Europe* and Dugin’s *Great Eastern Europe*, to Koen’s *Gateway region* that could easily be turned into a *Shatterbelt* (which actually came true). In the beginning of the second decade of the 21st

century, China as well emerges in this zone. By establishing a specific infiltrative format “16+China”, this Far Eastern colossus not only “tailors the area” encompassed by the “Sixteen”⁸ according to its own measure but it also proves that the Central and (South) Eastern Europe have remained “litmus” used to geopolitically confirm the status of a great power with global ambitions⁹.(map 2)

Map 2: The similarity between the *Cordon sanitaire* (1919) and the “Sixteen“(of 2012)



Source: H. J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideal and Reality*, p. 115



Source: Author's Map

⁸ Neither geographically nor geopolitically is it utterly true that the countries of the “Sixteen” belong to the area defined by the name of the “Central and Eastern Europe”. Only three Baltic post-Soviet states – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia belong to Eastern Europe, although according to some opinions they even belong to Western Europe. The remaining 13 countries are positioned in Central and Southeast Europe.

⁹ M. Sepić (2015, pp. 203-228) gives more detailed geopolitical analysis of the position of Central and Southeast Europe, and the interests of the great powers in that area.

The Chinese geopolitical deliberation and planning quite justly fully acknowledge the permanent importance of Central and (South) Eastern Europe. Just a year after the first “16+China” summit held in Poland in 2012 and almost concurrently with the idea of Chinese President Xi Jinping about the *New Silk Road* presented in September and October 2013, Yu Hongjun¹⁰ began his address quoting the Mackinder syllogism at the scientific Conference “Serbia and Eurasian Geopolitical area” held in Belgrade in the beginning of November 2013 (Ју Хонџун 2013, pp. 161-162). Hence, the zone of Central and (South) Eastern Europe is perceived not only as a geo-economic link, but also as a first class geopolitical stronghold. That is why “China will not allow itself such an omission not to be present in the area where, according to the ‘Mackinder rule’, the power and status of a great power are traditionally demonstrated” (Stepić, 2015, p. 225). Although this is the case of a “non homogeneous block of states, with communist past and geography as almost the sole common denominator” (Зарић, 2016), a group of countries among which 11 are relatively new EU members, while 5 of them are “on hold” of indefinite duration, and of the area encompassed by two traditional geopolitical regions – Mitteleuropa (partially) and the Balkans – China perceives the “Sixteen” as a whole, giving it a modicum of geopolitical subjectivity. Serbia, being the central Balkan country, is predisposed for the role of politico-territorial pivot of that zone, while the Danube basin and Morava-Vardar valley make its integrating axis.

3.2. The New Silk Road vs. the Danube Strategy and the intersection of the two intermariums

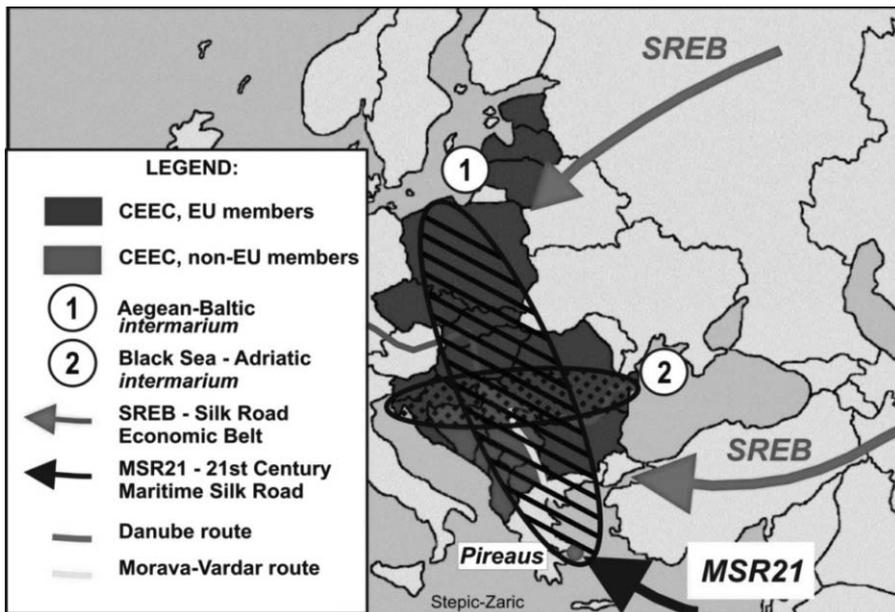
Geopoliticality of the Danube basin is a historical constant. Among modern great powers, particularly interested in the Danube basin were Austria (Austro-Hungary) and Germany, or in other words Germanic ethnic-regional and geopolitical actor. After a relative Cold War hibernation, the expansionistic ambitions towards the Danube basin have resurrected – primarily in the Euro Atlantic camp and (again) in Germany under its

¹⁰ At the time Yu Hongjun was scientifically and politically highly positioned Chinese official – Vice Minister for International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Director of Chinese Centre for Contemporary World Studies.

auspices. Particularly favourable “climate” was created after a “tsunami” of NATO enlargement (in 1999, 2004 and 2009) and the EU enlargement (in 2004 and 2007). Having in mind that “a greater part of the Danube geopolitical and geostrategic “mosaic” was complex” (Stepić, 2014, p. 620), it was first the European Commission in 2010, and subsequently the European Council, in the middle of 2011, that adopted the EU *Strategy for the Danube region* (or shorter *the Danube Strategy*). By means of two documents – the “Communique” and the “Action Plan” – and 4 main goals (pillars) and 11 priority areas defined and developed therein, the *Danube Strategy* was established as a basis for the enhancement of connectivity, environmental protection, building prosperity and institutional-security strengthening within the Danube region (Stojović i dr. 2012). However, behind those seemingly “benign” tasks, there lay hidden recognisable expansionistic motives and elements of (neo)classical geopolitical concepts from the actors known from earlier times. Although it formally represents a “guide” for the Danube countries on the “road without alternative” to the “Eldorado” of Euro-Atlantic integration, the *Danube Strategy* is in fact passed for the purpose of “making the EU geopolitical area complete and the EU (and NATO) geopolitical penetration to the Black Sea basin” (Степић, 2014, p. 625). And yet, it is primarily in service of establishing a German (neo)mitteleuropian sphere of interest, and its reactivated “South-eastern orientation” adapted to postmodern conditions and with less militant, but not less efficient methodology. One should not forget that for Russia, (again) subject to containment in a neokeanistic way, to “choking” based on the *Anaconda Strategy* and to weakening caused by the western sanctions, the Danube basin could be a “south west vent” towards the Balkans and the Central Europe. Furthermore, the Danube basin represents an alternative for Russia to act against the attempts to block indirect “axis of friendship” with Germany, as well as to prevent the projected neo-Eurasian Southern sideline of the *Gas pipeline strategy* (Степић, 2014, p. 628) and for possible obstructing the passability of Bosphorus and Dardanelles. The said strategies of Germany and Russia, those “geopolitical veterans” in Central and (South) Eastern Europe, can be upset by the *Silk strategy* of China – a “geopolitical novice” in that area. The Chinese *New Silk Road* reaches the zone of the “Sixteen” in Central and (South) Eastern Europe. Between the Piraeus to the south, the port that geographically has never ceased to belong to Greece, but it has become Chinese by ownership, and the Polish coast to the north, a specific *Aegean-*

Baltic Intermarium is being created, having a role of a “clasp” linking the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road with two key land vectors of the *Silk Road Economic Belt* (north and south) (map 3). This will not be an amorphous territorial construct, but a zone with a clear geopolitical (and geo-economic) function. Its “spine” is naturally predisposed, not in a geo-deterministic but geo-possibilistic manner. It is composed of mid (Pannonian) Danube basin, with an “axis” Belgrade-Budapest, which is yet to be developmentally functionalised and geopolitically operationalized. This “lever” makes it easy to “open” the key regions – “Vienna Doors”, “Czech Fortress”, “Corridor of Wars”, the Near-Baltic and the Baltic basin. To the other side, towards the south the *Aegean-Baltic Intermarium*, down the Morava-Vardar valley and its Nišava-Marica line, penetrates through Cvijić’s “Central zone of the Balkan peninsula” and reaches the key starting points of the contact between Europe and Asia Minor. Along this line, the “axis” Belgrade-Skopje-Thessaloniki-Athens should come in the focus as bifurcation towards Constantinople.

Map 3: Intermariums in the function of Chinese New Silk Road



Source: Author's Map

The spatial morphography, geographic position, structural properties and geopolitical orientation enable the Aegean-Baltic Intermarium to obstruct the spreading of EU (and NATO) influence based on the Danube strategy, and they enable China to monopolise Germany in the Danube basin. Some forms of complementarity of interests of the two powers will probably be possible in the future, but only if the Danube strategy is subordinated to the Silk Strategy. Also, the Aegean-Baltic Intermarium crosses the Russian trans-Balkan routes of access to the “warm seas” and wedges itself between Germany and Russia. Hence this will block the telurocratic Berlin-Moscow axis, which was the cause of fear of not only the traditional maritime powers, but the China itself has the reason to be uncomfortable about it, having in mind that this “connection” can be a seed of a powerful “Euro-Russian Block” in the future (Stepić, 1997, pp. 37-41). However, for China’s infiltration and its stable position in the zone of Central and (South) Eastern Europe the existence of the Aegean-Baltic Intermarium along the Danube-Morava-Vardar “vertical” alone will not be sufficient, and it will be necessary to consolidate it along the East-West line. The Danube-Sava “horizontal” naturally imposes itself as a basis for the establishment of the *Black Sea-Adriatic Intermarium*. Its starting points are Constanța and the Danube delta on the one side and the Kvarner Gulf (or the Gulf of Trieste) on the other. The two intermariums cross in Belgrade – at the “Doors to the Balkans” the embodiment of the “characteristics of blending and permeation”, as well as the “character of isolation and separation” (Цвијић, 1991, p. 25, 31), and the focal geopolitical point of the contact between Central and (South) Eastern Europe. This crossing is predisposed by the existence of a specific convergent composition of several river valleys and important communications and strategic routes marked by those valleys – the Belgrade confluence (Stepić, Dragicevic, 2014, p. 60).

3.3. The Danube Strategy – the Balkan Geopolitical Knot – New Silk Road

The Balkans is one of a few regions in the world which throughout the history continuously display a strong “geopolitical magnetism” that no great power can resist. The intermediate position of the Balkans as “Catena mundi” makes this differentia specifica and at the same time, it is the historical-geopolitical constant. What can be perceived as the variable is that oscillating power of interested foreign actors, out of which emanate the starting points,

number, directions, concentration, duration and the force of vectors oriented towards the Balkans. Complexly intertwined “bundle” of vectors has produced the *Balkan geopolitical knot* (Степић, 2001, p. 100), where Germany has traditionally been active. In the Danube strategy, Germany found an instrument by means of which it would, after the first and second waves of the post Cold War expansion of the EU, strengthen the line of influence from the northwest quadrant, ensure a lasting control over the “knot” and using this EU document, make its domination official without evoking historical associations about the “Idea of diagonal” or the “Idea of Baghdad”. However, in the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, German geopolitical and geo-economic expansionism, masked by “peace-loving nature” of the EU Danube strategy, collided at the “Southeast” with an actor that appeared in that region for the first time in history – with China. The Chinese New Silk Road represents an entirely new bundle of interest vectors within the *Balkan geopolitical knot*. It is and epochal, crucial fact with far-reaching consequences which are difficult to predict. How will it affect other world and regional powers whose interest tie them firmly to the Balkans, and what will be the effects on more or less “aligned” indigenous peoples, states and state-like creations? Will China as well, just like the majority of powerful states, prove its incoming global influence and credibility right on the Balkans as a geopolitical laboratory? Will it by its unstoppable geopolitical and geo-economic offensive oust other powers (or the majority of them) from the Balkans thus cutting the “geopolitical knot” in the Gordian-like manner, removing, at that, the vector of German Danube Strategy? Or will it complicate it further, by becoming (yet) another actor? Even if it had the intention, China could not entirely eliminate the interests of the USA, Russia, Turkey, Vatican, EU (and its individual members) from such globally important region such as the Balkans. Indeed, concurrently with its ever deeper infiltration, the obligations and risk of the engagement in the “Balkan barrel of gunpowder” will increase, where already existing “fuses” are multiplied by the new ones (fitted) left behind in the process of “smashing-breakup” of Yugoslavia. That is why China, not allowing to be forced out or excluded, whether it wants it or not, will have to engage itself in the Balkan “squaring of the circle”. Among the most significant issues that it will face are the great-state projects and the old (inherited) or newly formed “inadequate borders” (Huntington, 1996, pp. 217-218) of the Balkan states or state-like creations, which were created and selectively supported by all great powers – actors in the *Balkan geopolitical*

knot. Consequently, China as well will look for its Balkan favourites and exponents. Is that Serbia, i.e Serbian lands?

4. INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: CHINA AS ANOTHER FACTOR IN SERBIAN “GEOPOLITICAL SCHIZOPHRENIA”

In the Balkans, a complicated combinatorics of the “symbiosis of interests” never ceases. It lasts internally, among the Balkan states, but it is predominantly the result of the competition among the great powers to ensure the geopolitical influence in the “Catena mundi” by the agency of local exponents. Serbia, or Serbian people and their territory as a whole have always been perceived by the West as the “Balkan Russians”, “Russian outpost on the Balkans”, “Russian Cossacks’ grooms to the warm seas”... Due to the traditional rivalry between the West and Russia, the Serbian actor has been paying dearly for this stereotypical qualification – in immense human sacrifices, mass banishments, violent religious and national conversion, fragmentation and reduction of national territory, destruction of material goods, economic losses... Hence the official creators of the contemporary (geo) political orientation in Serbia have placed a thesis that the way out rests in the neutral positioning of the country. This (rhetorical?) illusion of noncommitment, stemming from self-delusional neo-Titoist simulacrum, from the strategic viewpoint cannot be sustained in the long run. Instead of evasive postponing picking sides in this America-Russian (Euro Atlantic-Eurasian) “seesaw”, the Serbian actor is in for a much more complex challenge. The pattern “neither the East nor the West/both the East and the West” is to be made senseless uncompromisingly and swiftly by a third “player” – China – which has openly demonstrated that it is Serbia that it considers its favourite in the Balkans. Finally, a power has emerged that does not treat Serbia and Serbian territory like a periphery, antechamber, contact, frontier or “small change”, but points out the quality of its central position in the Balkans and endeavours to give it its due value in accordance with its interests. And yet, the “Chinese challenge” will make the already far gone Serbian “geopolitical schizophrenia” even more complex. The powerful do not tolerate “sitting between several chairs”, so the Serbian alignment will not be ever more explicitly demanded only by the West and Russia, but it can be soon expected

from China as well. Even in the postmodern competing among great powers for global primacy, the Balkan theatre and the Serbian territory as its part cannot be left aside. It is imposed by the unyielding geopolitical logic. Will Serbian participation in the Danube basin be utilised as a comparative value or will it become a burden in the context of the new geopolitical reality? Will the EU Danube Strategy continue to be vital, current and effective or will Serbia at a certain point, with a strategic delay, notice that it is the hostage of an obsolete project, which can only be subordinated to the Silk Strategy of an energetic actor that is arriving unstoppably in Europe from the Far East? Can Serbia allow itself, as it already happened in the past, to become an instrumentalised “blood clot” that will for somebody else’s benefit and against its long-term interests disrupt free circulation through the infrastructural “circulatory system” which is being set up speedily? Is Serbia sufficiently ready to establish Morava-Vardar valley as an axis of the Aegean-Baltic Intermarium which links the maritime and land routes of the New Silk Road or will this main passage of the Balkans only remain a permanent physical geography potential the role of which can be even transferred into the one of a barrage? Will the Black Sea-Adriatic Intermarium, predisposed by Danube-Sava “spine”, represent an additional trump card of Serbia that will be important not only for strengthening of Chinese, but for the penetration of the Russian (neo) Eurasian geopolitical and geo-economic influence?

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