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## NEW SILK ROAD - CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY AND GEORGIA

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# 162

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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One Belt, One Road is no doubt the most ambitious project of the century. The initiative was first announced by China's President Xi Jinping in 2013. He said that China founded a massive infrastructure program that would involve 140 states and 30 international organizations.<sup>1</sup> Xi's grandiose ambition is to build a global network of infrastructure to ease commerce, investment and connectivity with China. Originally, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) consisted of the Economic and Maritime Silk Road. Eventually the Digital Silk Road, the Belt and Road Space Information Corridor and the Health Silk Road were added to the list.

The BRI helps China gain economic advantage by sending goods to European and other foreign markets cheaper and faster than competitors while also ensuring low-cost access to natural resources via BRI corridors. In fact, the shortage of natural resources is a huge issue for both Chinese economics and society. China wants to establish a strong and wealthy society by 2049 by increasing competitiveness and ensuring stable energy imports.

The New Silk Road has been continuously portrayed by China's authorities as an economic cooperation project based on a "win-win" collaboration that promotes global peace and development.<sup>2</sup>

A lot has been said about the project's economic and commercial benefits. However, in Western Europe as well as in the Caucasus, the Belt and Road Initiative is not viewed as a political project or part of China's grand strategy. The link between the PRC's national security and the New Silk Road is only discussed in articles published in the United States. That is because only a few people understand China or know its foreign politics. Besides, the PRC's will to become a hegemony is kept hidden. The Communist Party takes each step very carefully and uses economic and financial projects to reach its geopolitical goals. China is a very interesting player. It is different from any other of the Great Powers. Unlike Russia, the PRC prefers soft power rather than open aggression. It differs from the USA as well. Their ideologies and regimes are contrary. So are their approaches to military alliances. In fact, China is not part of any military alliance. The state only cares about its strategic interests and has no real allies or partners. For the abovementioned reasons, it is really difficult to understand the essence of Chinese politics. A lot of countries, including Georgia, underestimate the PRC's potential. Viewing the One Belt, One Road through an economic

lens and blindsiding all of the security threats that come from it is a huge mistake.

It is worth mentioning that in order to lessen the BRI's geopolitical undertones, Beijing modified the official English translation from "strategy" (战略) to "initiative" (倡议) in 2017. That way Chinese officials wanted to underline that the PRC has nothing to do with its geopolitical goals.<sup>3</sup> The same year, Xi Jinping declared: "The BRI is an initiative for economic cooperation instead of a geopolitical alliance or military league."<sup>4</sup>

However, before concluding that the People's Republic of China is a new kind of Great Power, which has little interest in hegemony, let us take a look at its military spending for the last 20 years. China's defense budget has increased from USD 36.9 billion in 1999 to USD 266.4 billion in 2019. That is second only to the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Before 2015, China's military strategy focused on defending its borders and its near-seas. After modernization, the People's Liberation Army's potential to operate further afield has been considerably enhanced. Xi aspires to make the Chinese dream come true. He wants to revitalize China's glory. Xi Jinping wants a strong army that is ready to fight and is confident to win.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, I would like to point out that the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has expanded its operational range with long-range bombers and modified special mission aircraft. China is expected to have around 124 warships and submarines capable of performing "blue water" overseas missions by 2021. Funding for the People's Liberation Army Navy has increased by roughly 82 percent. It is safe to say that the PRC's chance to successfully operate farther afield has been increased.<sup>7</sup>

### **Civil-Military Fusion**

Even though the members of the Communist Party continually dissociate civil and military sectors, they simultaneously promote civil-military integration or "fusion." It is one of China's defense strategies. The government came up with a series of laws, regulations and reforms that ensure civilian resources can be deployed to support the military.<sup>8</sup> According to the reforms, infrastructure should be built in such a way that

military and civilian resources are complementing each other and are mutually accessible.

Chinese-made civilian infrastructure projects are now required by law to meet military criteria. Further, international projects like the BRI are not exempt from this duty. These regulations also give the People's Liberation Army the power to take control of civilian assets and resources.<sup>9</sup>

In 2017, China also passed the National Defense Transportation Law which promotes the improvement of civil-military fusion in the transportation field. Articles 2 and 3 obligate "planning, construction, management and the use of resources in transportation fields such as railways, roads, waterways, aviation, pipelines and ports for the purpose of satisfying the national defense requirements."<sup>10</sup>

We should pay attention to the National Defense Mobilization Law of 2010 which maintains that any project on which Chinese citizens work during peacetime must be effectively used during warfare.<sup>11</sup> Keep in mind, each Chinese company that is operating outside of the PRC's borders and working on different infrastructural projects has to follow all of the abovementioned laws. One belt, One Road is no exception.

The Chinese government practiced using civilians and their properties for military purposes before. In the East and South China Seas, the PRC utilized fishing vessels to interfere with US naval operations. Its "first civilian, later military" approach can be clearly seen in this case. The same approach is used in BRI projects. So, infrastructure built by Chinese companies is always dual-use.

Furthermore, companies like CMPORT and COSCO have been actively participating in overseas exercises with the People's Liberation Army.<sup>12</sup>

Some might say that the aforesaid information should not cause concern in Georgia. China is far away and so the dual-usage of the infrastructure by the PLA is highly unlikely. Moreover, we have a bigger problem to worry about - our northern neighbor and its ambitions. This attitude might be pragmatic and appropriate for the short term; however, the picture can be changed in the future. The only thing that is certain is that China cannot be trusted and the state has many hidden agendas. For this reason, Georgia must be careful when dealing with the PRC and, most importantly, start

seeing BRI projects not only through commercial but also political and military lenses.

### **Digital Silk Road and Space Information Corridor**

Civil-military fusion can also be seen in Digital and Space BRI. Advanced technologies are not only economically beneficial but have a huge role in China's security and military strategy. The Digital Silk Road and Space Information Corridor gives the PRC new opportunities to increase its influence worldwide.

China started working on Space BRI in 2016. The BeiDou satellite system is central to this corridor and it is designed to act as digital glue for the BRI's roads, railroads, ports and industrial parks.<sup>13</sup> Components of the corridor are to include: communication, data centers, financial services, etc.<sup>14</sup> BeiDou will consist of 35 satellites that will allow China to minimize BRI member nations' reliance on GPS which is operated by the United States and bring them under its technology umbrella. Further, the Space Information Corridor will benefit the People's Liberation Army. The PLA will no longer use the American GPS system. In conclusion, the project is crucial for achieving Chinese economic, political, strategic and military goals.

As for the Digital Silk Road, its stated objectives include building and strengthening internet infrastructure, expanding communication connectivity, fostering e-commerce and adopting shared technical standards.<sup>15</sup>

China is planning to develop a fiber-optical cable network in BRI member countries. However, the most important part of the Digital Silk Road is founding the so-called Big Data - a data center that will contain the personal information of millions of users.

China is also developing Smart Cities and Smart Ports initiatives which combine and organize a diverse set of data sources into a single platform in order to increase efficiency and enhance commercial activity. Smart City technology monitors elements such as resource and energy usage, traffic and pollution levels in order to make cities greener and safer. However, networked cameras, sensors and location services are among

the technologies that can be employed for lawful policing or totalitarian repression.<sup>16</sup> It is my firm belief that the Chinese security and intelligence agencies will have access to all the data collected in foreign Smart Cities. This would be a huge issue for different state's cyber independence and national security. However, non-democratic BRI states using Smart Cities to spy on its citizens is a greater risk. The first Smart City in the Caucasus region will be built in Armenia by 2035.

Georgia should have been a huge part of the Digital Silk Road. The fiber-optical cable was planned to go through Georgia's territory. However, after Nexon Holding became the 100% shareholder of Caucasus Online, the project went to Azerbaijan. Georgian media emphasized that the country lost investments worth hundreds of millions as well as the chance of becoming a technological hub.

However, we have to realize that Chinese technologies do not come without the Chinese intelligence service. A great example of this is the case of the African Union headquarters in Addis-Ababa, Ethiopia. The headquarters was built by a Chinese company in 2012. Five years later, information technology department employees realized that every night files were sent from the servers to Shanghai. After investigating, they found spy cameras and microphones hidden in the office. The Chinese government denied the accusations.<sup>17</sup>

Huawei is allegedly part of the Chinese espionage system as well. The US Embassy in Georgia refused to work with companies that use Huawei technologies for the abovementioned reason. Huawei has been on the Georgian market for more than 20 years. It has developed 75% of the communication network. The company has been collaborating with SilkNet and provides its Wi-Fi routers. The Chinese brand worked on introducing 4.5G to Georgia's market.

Regarding fifth generation wireless communications networks (5G), the United States and Georgia signed a memorandum on 5G security. The US and Georgia emphasized the importance of promoting frameworks that effectively protect 5G networks from unauthorized access or interference. The memorandum also encouraged the participation of reliable and trustworthy network hardware and software suppliers in 5G markets while taking into account risk profile assessments.<sup>18</sup>



The USA without a doubt wants to make sure that partner countries' cyberspace is safe. Moreover, it deterred China's digital power in the Caucasus region.

## **Maritime Silk Road**

The Maritime Silk Road is a crucial part of the BRI. China is interested in building and managing deep-water ports. The PRC's strategy is to become one of the dominant powers on the sea. It is not consequential that in 2015 when the People's Liberation Army started modernization, the government emphasized the need for PLA Navy advancement.

In the Republic of Djibouti, East Africa, China already has one official overseas military base. Even though Djibouti is not a strong player when it comes to economics or international politics, its location gives the PLA a huge advantage. The base is located between the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean.

China is actively engaged in the construction and development of dual-use ports. The PRC's plan is to establish military bases at deep-water ports around the world. In the Indo-Pacific region, China has already built and managed ports that have important geopolitical locations. These ports are known as the String of Pearls. The majority of the ports are commercially useless but have strategic advantages.

The String of Pearls consists of Pakistan's Gwadar Port, Cambodia's Koh Kong Port, Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port and Myanmar's Kyaukphyu Port.<sup>19</sup>

The most important ones are Gwadar and Hambantota as both are on China's maritime lifeline which stretches from the Indian Ocean to the Middle East. Gwadar is positioned near the mouth of the Persian Gulf while Hambantota lies on one of the busiest maritime routes in the Indian Ocean.

According to the *South China Morning Post*, Chinese military insiders have suggested that PLA Marine Corps units could be stationed in Gwadar in the future. It is a smart move as justifying it would not be an issue. The Chinese government could claim that PLA soldiers are there for counterterrorism as in 2017 when the Balochistan Liberation Army's attack near Gwadar

claimed the lives of ten Chinese workers. A Chinese company actually holds a 40-year lease on the port.<sup>20</sup>

Hambantota is also in the PRC's hands for 99 years. In order to get this strategic strongpoint, the Chinese government used "debt-trap" diplomacy.<sup>21</sup> The theory of debt-trap diplomacy is that the creditor country intentionally extends excessive credit to a debtor country. This is done with the intention of extracting economic or political concessions from the debtor country when it becomes unable to meet its debt repayment obligations. This is what the PRC did to Sri-Lanka in order to manage the Hambantota port for a century.

Even though China effectively controls the abovementioned ports, it is unlikely that the PRC will have huge overseas military bases in the USA style. It is not China's cup of tea. Even the Djibouti base is "just a logistic center" according to Chinese officials. However, underground bunkers, advanced technology ready for cyberwarfare and infrastructure needed for the air force aircraft are opposing their claims.<sup>22</sup>

Overall, the String of Pearls provides China with enormous military benefits that reinforce and increase its ability to project power. The ports, first and foremost, greatly expand the military's logistics and support network. A developing network of Chinese-operated ports will benefit the PLA Navy. It has a bigger chance of conducting successful far-sea military operations. These strategic strongpoints have symbolic meaning as well - they make China look like a powerful, ambitious and dominant state.

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While talking about the Maritime BRI, we must also mention the so-called Arctic Silk Road. If no action is made to combat climate change and global temperatures continue to climb at current rates, the Arctic may be devoid of sea ice throughout the summer by 2030. This offers up a number of new maritime routes, a potential that China is now pursuing through a series of development initiatives.

The northeast passage around Eurasia, the northwest passage over North America and the central Arctic Ocean route are three possible routes across the Arctic. They provide China with a faster and less expensive alternative

to conventional shipping routes that travel through the Indian Ocean and the Suez Canal to reach key European markets.<sup>23</sup>

Russia is the most influential state in the Arctic region. I firmly believe that the Russian government will try to make the Arctic maritime routes commercially viable and safe. Russia is expected to seek to construct a network of port facilities and logistics hubs along the route which would necessitate significant investments beyond Moscow's meager resources. When it comes to the promise of large finance for infrastructure development, China's Belt and Road Initiative becomes an appealing prospect in this regard. In conclusion, the Arctic Silk Road is a new opportunity for Sino-Russian cooperation.

China is not an Arctic state but it considers itself "near-Arctic." Even without Russia's partnership, the PRC still navigates in the Arctic Ocean. Chinese scientists research different natural characteristics of the region. The scientific expeditions have dual-use as well. For example, in November 2019, Danish defense intelligence officials warned that the Chinese People's Liberation Army was increasingly using scientific research as a means for entering the Arctic, describing such activities as more than just a matter of science but also serving China's strategic and military objectives.<sup>24</sup>

According to this case, civil-military fusion is not only a matter of the private and the public sectors but of science as well. The PRC uses every opportunity to become a hegemon not only in Southeast Asia but in the world.

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China is interested in Georgian ports as well. It should not come as a surprise if we take Georgia's strategic location into consideration. China views the South Caucasus as its gateway to Europe. Because of that, increasing its influence in Georgia and building critical infrastructure is extremely important to China.

In 2017, the Chinese company CEFC CHINA ENERGY became the owner of 75 percent of shares in the Poti Free Industrial Zone. After the company was declared bankrupt, the Euro-Asian Management Group LLC became the asset manager of the CEFC. Eurasian Invest LLC owns 50% of the Euro-

Asian Management Group while China International Group Corporation Limited owns 50%. Eurasian Invest's Supervisory Board includes Ivane Chkhartishvili, and its director is Rati Ghvamberia, a business partner of Ivane Chkhartishvili.

However, the Poti port has a huge disadvantage - it is not a deep-water port. Accordingly, the port of Anaklia is far more interesting for the PRC. Chinese SOE POWER CHINA was participating in the tender to build the new Anaklia Black Sea port in 2015. After the American company that originally won the tender gave up on the project, China will probably try to design and build the port and then hold the lease for quite some time. Partnership with the PRC is very attractive for developing countries like Georgia. Moreover, Chinese officials love being on good terms with the BRI partner countries' elites. That way they easily get what they want. The same goes in Georgia. According to Transparency International - Georgia, in February 2018, Georgia's former Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili was appointed as an advisor to the Supervisory Board of the company managing regional projects of CEFC Energy Company Limited. He worked there until March of 2019. The total amount he received for his job was GEL 401,705.<sup>25</sup>

## **Protecting Chinese Citizens and Investments**

The last thing I want to mention is the Chinese rhetoric that seems a lot like Russia's "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) narrative. President Xi Jinping often mentions the importance of protecting Chinese citizens and investments abroad. More than 40,000 Chinese businesses have offices outside of the country's borders. China's overseas properties and investments are thought to total roughly USD 7 trillion.<sup>26</sup> Hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers are employed on One belt, One road projects. However, understanding the principle of the "Responsibility to Protect" as an obligation to protect citizens outside of a state's borders is not part of international justice norms and for the most part is just Russian propaganda. Russia uses it to justify military intervention.

China has already tried using R2P. The PLA was tasked with defending Chinese nationals residing abroad. Thousands of people were evacuated by PLA soldiers during the 2011 Libyan war. The PLAN's Gulf of Aden

Counterpiracy Flotilla was tasked with evacuating 800 civilians as the war in Yemen escalated in 2015. Even though both of these operations were peaceful, China normalized the using of PLA troops in foreign countries in the name of R2P.<sup>27</sup>

For the PRC, the safety of important infrastructure projects matters no less than the safety of its citizens. For example, the PIPELINE D that goes from Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and should import 25 percent of gas to China by 2024<sup>28</sup> and this is so important for the PRC that the official figures changed their usual rhetoric. In 2018, the Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe stated that China was ready to “provide strong security guarantees” for BRI projects.<sup>29</sup>

When discussing Central Asia, the Tajikistan case should be brought up. Fifty percent of Tajikistan’s foreign loans were given by China.<sup>30</sup> The more dependent the state is on the PRC’s money, the more we see Chinese PLA on their territory. The PLA builds different kinds of military infrastructure there and also leads trainings, etc.

Military infrastructure was built near the Tajik border with Afghanistan. It is said that PLA soldiers are patrolling near the border.<sup>31</sup> PRC officials will justify it by calling it a counter-terrorism measure. However, the PLA appeared by the Afghan border shortly after the USA announced its withdrawal from the country. I think in the future China might send peacekeepers to Afghanistan and become the most influential power there as well.

The Central Asian case makes it clear that Chinese ambitions and influence have increased so much that China is not satisfied by being a hegemon in Southeast Asia and, therefore, also has its course looking West. Although seeing PLA troops in the Caucasus is highly unlikely today, we should keep in mind that seeing Chinese soldiers in Central Asia seemed highly unlikely 20 years ago. China is a smart player. It hides its strategic plans and uses investments and acts of counter-terrorism to achieve them. Being careful and using soft power has not let China down yet.

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Lastly, I want to emphasize that China is one of the most important trade partners for Georgia. However, only seeing the Chinese presence in the country through an economic lens will cause a lot of national security issues. In fact, Beijing wants the One Belt, One Road initiative to be viewed as an apolitical project that has nothing to do with the Chinese National Security Strategy. This way, achieving its goal – hegemony, first in Southeast Asia and Oceania, then in the whole world, will be much easier.

The People’s Republic of China is a desirable partner for developing countries like Georgia. Free trade agreements, educational and cultural programs, cheap products, services and advanced technologies - cooperation with China has a lot of advantages. Still, we should understand that Chinese investments never come without Chinese intelligence. Both SOEs and private companies work according to the PRC’s grand strategy. Additionally, because of civil-military fusion, even private companies have to make sure that any project on which they work will benefit the People’s Liberation Army.

If a Chinese company wins the tender to build the Anaklia Deep Sea port, it will become a huge problem for Georgia’s national security. If a Chinese SOE builds the port and then holds the lease, an Eastern European port will be added to the String of Pearls. Even if the SOEs only design and build it, without actually holding a lease, the risk of espionage will still exist.

Another huge issue is threats in Georgian cyberspace. Even though Georgia is not a Digital Silk Road member country and we have signed a memorandum on 5G safety with the US, our cyberspace still is not safe. Huawei - a brand that has been suspected of spying for the PRC’s intelligence - is a very important player on the Georgian communication market. We should also keep in mind the fast growth of Digital BRI and Space Information Corridor networks. If Georgian governmental institutions or private companies use the BeiDou satellite system, a lot of theoretical issues will come to real life, including database insecurity, the loss of cyber independence and espionage, etc.

Even though BRI projects come with a great risk, we should not refuse to cooperate with China. However, we should take into consideration the

PRC's geopolitical goals, its security strategy, its will to become a hegemony and its nature. We should realize that China plays a very smart game. If we do not want to lose, we must learn the rules and play along. We can use the PRC's interest in the South Caucasus to benefit our interests. The Georgian government could form a partnership with the USA to a new level and help it deter China in the region. This way, Georgia might have a greater chance of becoming a member state of either NATO or the new eastern military alliance - QUAD. In conclusion, if we play smart, we can make the One Belt, One Road initiative not only commercially useful but also beneficial to our national security, strategy and military.

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