

Abstract of the thesis

**“Greening China’s New Silk Road.**

**New forms of environmental cooperation to boost Sino-European political relations”**

Launched in autumn 2013 by President Xi Jinping, the “New Silk Road” (NSR) is China’s grand strategy for creating new forms of “win-win” cooperation with the countries of the Eurasian continent. To this extent, it shows that the PRC has become one of the most proactive actors in international affairs. All in all, this brave new China, sustained by its immense population and its thriving economy, can be decisive in implementing the 2030 world development agenda.

Nevertheless, this new proactivity is often looked at with great suspicion by many international actors. Accordingly, President Xi’s initiative had a lukewarm reception in Western countries, where the reactions of policy-makers, academics and public opinions have ranged from negligence to open confrontation. For this reason, the New Silk Road may also cause political frictions with Eurasian countries, rather than boosting cooperation.

The research question of the present thesis then follows:

*Why does the visionary breadth of China’s “New Silk Road” risk falling into a political impasse, especially in relations with Europe, without a ‘green’ restructuring?*

Our perspective on the subject of analysis is thus two-fold. On the one hand, implications of this strategy on the relations between the PRC and other international actors, namely Europe, are investigated under the lens of IR. On the other, considerations pertaining to Sustainable Development

are brought in by taking into account the environmental impact of what aims to be the biggest development project on the Eurasian continent in centuries. These two dimensions are analysed jointly, that is by outlining how respecting sustainability principles does produce effects on IR, as it is the case with the New Silk Road.

In doing so, our analysis arguably has a remarkable academic significance, insofar as it addresses the growing need for research on the implementational repercussions of sustainable development on country-to-country relations. Additionally, a special focus is kept on two international great powers and frontrunners of the Green Transition, i.e. China and the European Union.

Our main argument with this thesis is that China's New Silk Road can overcome the political weaknesses that threaten its visionary goals by putting sustainability at the core. A 'Green Silk Road' as such could achieve diffuse prosperity, a safer environment and better political relations for implementing the 2030 world development agenda, to the benefit of both the PRC and of its international counterparts, including Europe.

In order to demonstrate this, firstly we conduct a policy analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative, followed by a SWOT analysis. Secondly, Sino-European relations are taken as a case study. Finally, the potential to build-up the aforementioned 'Green Silk Road' is investigated mainly by looking at how it is 'constructed' in the words of experts and policy-makers. This methodology is supported by a broad selection of Western and Chinese literature and by both primary and secondary sources, including some original materials. Contents are distributed in three chapters.

In **Chapter One**, a two-step policy analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative is firstly conducted by looking at the earliest conceptualization made by the Chinese government and

at its evolution, and by describing the pillars, targets and goals of this strategy. The SWOT analysis follows, identifying the strengths that the NSR can count on and the opportunities that its implementation may open to China. Finally, the main weaknesses of this initiative are listed in order to understand which kind of threats and challenges the PRC may face while fostering its plan.

As already mentioned, in autumn 2013 the freshly-elected Chinese leaders President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang announced two ambitious foreign policy initiatives, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road”, with the aim of transforming the Eurasian continent with a thick web of connections on its lands and on its seas. Just as the famous Silk Road used to do at the time of the ancient civilizations, this network would be meant to open a new phase of prosperity and peace for Asia, Africa and Europe by pushing them towards closer economic integration, policy cooperation and people-to-people dialogue.

These two initiatives, jointly referred as the “New Silk Road”, were followed by a year of intense promotion by President Xi and Premier Li, who visited more than twenty countries and advocated numerous international fora for finding partners along the two roads. Some Memorandums of Understanding have been signed with neighbouring countries and with the most enthusiast prospective participants. In addition, new cooperation platforms and multilateral financial institutions were launched, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS New Development Bank and the Silk Road Fund.

While sponsoring the project to its international partners, the Chinese government elaborated a systematic conceptual framework under the name of “Belt and Road Initiative”. In March 2015 an Action Plan was released, sketching the guidelines for further steps in building up the New Silk Road

by listing its goals, main features and future perspectives. In particular, this initiative was said to pursue closer economic policy coordination in Eurasia as a core mission. On top of this, a sort of political objective was defined in terms of promoting new forms of international cooperation and global governance in order to achieve differentiated, independent, balanced and sustainable development in the countries of the continent.

As we see it, the Belt and Road Initiative is clearly endowed with a multi-targeted and cross-sectorial nature. As for the geopolitical areas covered, China is mainly willing to engage neighboring countries in structured partnerships, both in Central Asia and in South-East Asia. Nevertheless, the project as a whole goes far beyond the neighborhood, insofar as both the Belt and the Road cross the Middle East and Africa, eventually reaching Europe as the final destination. Furthermore, it should be noted that this project seemingly excludes any role for the United States and used to equally bypass Russia, before relations with Moscow ameliorated.

In addition to such a wide variety of targets, the New Silk Road encompasses a large number of sectors, four among others. Firstly, the economy is the core area of interest for China, who would both enjoy safer connection lines for exporting goods and services and make its Western provinces prosper. Secondly, energy is another pivotal sector, insofar as China's growing demand would be fed by resource-rich Central Asia. Thirdly, cultural exchanges and people-to-people relations are an additional priority, considered as a sort of pre-condition for peaceful relations. Finally, Western academics stress that the Belt and Road Initiative could also be the prelude to further military cooperation between the PRC and some of its partners.

In due consideration of these innovative features, it can be argued that this is the most ambitious initiative launched by the PRC since the Reform and Opening-up policy. Adding to

this, these new objectives are combined with the core values of Chinese diplomacy, such as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the inclination for “People to People Diplomacy”. It follows that the Belt and Road Initiative has a core visionary breadth that, despite the fact that China surely has the necessary means and influence, inevitably meets a number of opportunities and constraints.

As far as strengths are concerned, the New Silk Road can count on a clear conceptualization and on a concise yet flexible structure, which is able to reach a large audience and to involve many different countries. In addition, the geopolitical context arguably is increasingly favorable for the PRC, considering that economic and trade relations are now growing more than ever with both traditional and new partners and that political relations are also improving in the Asia-Pacific thanks to multilateral fora like ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3 and APEC. Similarly, Beijing’s Central Asian neighbours do appreciate renewed attentions.

For these reasons, the New Silk Road could represent a priceless window of opportunity for China’s domestic and international *actorness*. At the national level, improving connections between the Western regions of China and bordering countries will benefit local economies immensely and may help those areas catch up with the more advanced coastal provinces. At the international level, China will probably benefit from safer and faster connections with its main partners, leading to steadier and more secure economic relations. These connections, featuring lower political profiles, will also enable Beijing to play a key role in shaping future energy relations and turn its buying power into a precious asset. Thus, the balances under formation in the sectors of world economy and energy are arguably in favour of the PRC.

Nevertheless, we argue that the *political profile* of the Belt and Road initiative is not equally sound. In particular, the

composition of the NSR audience arguably is too broad and it is debatable whether a single policy based on economic integration can fit such a wide variety of socio-economic, institutional and even geographical situations. Not to mention that China's current economic slowdown forces all these countries to compete with each other, whereas some regional and global game-makers like Japan, the Philippines and the US are left apart. Furthermore, the political meta-narrative of "reviving the Silk Road" arguably is too ideological.

As a consequence, the implementation of the NSR strategy is threatened by the current state of China's political ties with international partners, which, although ameliorating, are still far from being idyllic. Many fear the existence of a "China threat", i.e. that closer integration with the PRC would forge imbalanced relations in which the latter has the upper hand. In addition, this initiative confronts itself with similar projects of regional integration and development and troubles with regional and global power along the Belt and Road may escalate into bigger and more serious confrontations. Finally, it is argued that deeper engagement of China in world politics can benefit its image, but growing exposure may also have dramatic implications on the country's internal dynamics and eventually endanger its political stability.

**Chapter Two** follows by introducing our case-study, i.e. the impact of the New Silk Road on EU-China relations. After some general considerations on the relevance of this subject, the evolution of Sino-European relations is briefly recapped, including a sketch of their current status as mirrored in the bilateral agreements sealed and in the words of the officials. A closer look at the European reception of the Belt and Road Initiative then leads to the analysis of the main challenges and opportunities for closer collaboration in this framework.

Focusing on Sino-European relations is a solid choice for three reasons. Firstly, Europe is by assumption the final

destination of both the Belt and the Road, to the extent that the whole NSR can be referred as a link between the East-Asian emerging economies to the more advanced European ones. Secondly, EU-China ties are fairly considered as holding a huge potential, given that in only five decades they have become two of the three largest economies in the world and have attained close interdependence. Thirdly, having just celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their diplomatic ties, China and the EU seem willing to give new life to their collaboration, so that guidelines and proposals are now needed. The Belt and Road Initiative can surely be the framework for developing a cooperation as such.

Sino-European relations experienced many ups and downs, history shows. The PRC and the then European Economic Communities established formal diplomatic relations in 1975 and a fruitful collaboration started immediately. A strong impetus came at a time when Europe ended to be the field of confrontation between the US and the USSR and when China was taking increasing benefits from the introduction of the Reform and Opening-up policy. Despite this good start, the first crisis burst when the Tiananmen incident and the ensuing imposition of the European arms embargo on China led to a dramatic reduction in bilateral trade. Soon back to normal thanks to the European Union's willingness to create a more structured political dialogue with Beijing, cooperation reached a peak without precedents in the period 2003 – 2005. Another crisis was but around the corner, as the EU started having a more critical and assertive stance towards the PRC. Pressured by the fear of China's economic boom and by the frustration for the lack of any significant political change in Beijing, tones became harsher and led to a halt in cooperation. The climax was reached in 2008, when European leaders boycotted the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games in retaliation for the repressions in Tibet led by the Chinese government.

The 2009 economic crisis arguably changed all previous rules in Sino-European relations. The widening gap in their economic performances has not been limited to the domestic arena, but it impacted on bilateral relations. Accordingly, lights and shadows emerged in all sectors. As far as the economy is concerned, enhancing the partnership with Beijing looked sensible to several European leaders, but the seemingly endless Chinese growth became a matter of concern as soon as rising imbalances affected the interdependence between the economies, leading the EU to adopt more protectionist policies. In high-level relations, the strong political commitment towards closer collaboration mentioned earlier was threatened by serious institutional criticisms in both systems and by the broader geopolitical context.

These dramatic changes have worsened the main long-term liabilities in Sino-European relations, i.e. some weaknesses that affect their structure and shape their evolution along path-dependency lines. Literature identifies three main constraints: 1. the absence of a *true comprehensive strategic partnership*; 2. the lack of *coherent strategies and interests*; and 3. a huge *gap in mutual understanding*. Notwithstanding these limits, future perspectives can also count on a precious window of opportunity, represented by the current leadership of President Xi and Premier Li, who seem committed to have Europe as a strategic partner.

Given this background, it is worth noting that Europe is a key target in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Accordingly, building a sound infrastructural network to boost economic integration with the European Single Market is the primary goal for the PRC, in consideration of its positive repercussions on the national socio-economic development. Europe's strong position in the Belt and Road Initiative would enhance both the New Silk Road itself and EU-China relations as a whole. Whereas it may be even argued that the success of the whole



project largely depends on the participation of the EU and of European countries, sure it is that their contribution would be decisive. For this reason, China has shown itself willing to actively promote its strategy to European leaders and include them in the project.

Accordingly, the tacit consensus among European policy-makers and academics seems to be that the New Silk Road is a good opportunity for the EU to foster its relations with China and with the other countries of the Eurasian continent. In particular, the European Union has now a rather proactive position in relations with China, insofar as growing economic prosperity at the domestic and at the regional levels are said to be a shared priority and as pleas for the creation of a common front to face global and regional challenges are made more and more often. Overall, putting together the EU's expertise in implementing trans-national projects and China's proactivity (briefly put, funding) in the NSR framework is expected to be a powerful mix.

Nevertheless, neither official answers nor any forms of political commitment have made the EU participation in the Belt and Road Initiative come true yet. The European reception was lukewarm for a number of reasons, including the facts that the PRC's policy is only at the earliest stage of formulation, that European policy-makers still have to understand the benefits it could give them and that there may be a low public awareness of China's new strategy. The fact that Beijing has been targeting its major efforts on neighboring countries may have equally lowered European expectations. Furthermore, participation in the NSR could entail a number of risks for the EU, namely commercial disputes and growing fears about Chinese ownership of important assets of European national economies. As a general rule, the most sensitive part of the European participation in the NSR would arguably be its *political profile*.

It follows that broader engagement towards the Belt and Road Initiative is unlikely to emerge from the EU if some basic conditions are not met. In general, closer collaboration between China and Europe in building-up the New Silk Road should be grounded on those principles indicated before as fundamental to Sino-European relations as a whole. Working together in formulating and implementing the Belt and Road Initiative would mean creating a common and focused agenda, shared strategic interests and joint action plans, on the basis of which a true Comprehensive Strategic Partnership can be forged. In order to do so, a general restructuring of the NSR is needed. Fostering environmental cooperation and creating a Green Partnership for Sustainable Development seem to us the most effective way to reduce conflicts and to promote new forms of political dialogue and action.

**Chapter 3** addresses the core issue of our research by showing how ‘greening’ national economies and societies can be the source of closer political relations among States. To this end, environmental cooperation between China and Europe is referred as the leading example for making the Belt and Road Initiative ‘greener’. After a brief outline of past collaboration, the basis for an EU-China ‘Green Partnership’ is found in their individual and joint engagement towards the Green Transition. Then, a tentative conceptualization of the ‘Green Silk Road’ is elaborated with the support of the original materials gathered while interning at UNEP China. Building on the recent accomplishments in international negotiations on Climate Change and Sustainable Development, the idea of new forms of ‘Green Diplomacy’ is finally sketched as food for thought.

The ‘greening era’ has just started. Since the end of the 2000s, when a set of different crises shattered the world’s dominant socio-economic paradigms, the quest for a new, combined approach to economic development and environmental protection has started. Among others, the ‘Green

Economy' paradigm aims at going beyond the traditional conundrum between sustainability and growth, by showing how to enhance world economies and societies while taking good care of the environment. This transition is not supposed to take place evenly among States, because the levels of development and of natural and human capital of each country shape different opportunities and constraints at national level. Accordingly, national transitions have had repercussions at the international level, making States either compete for the same pool of resources or forcedly coordinate with each other. To this extent, 'greening' may be a priceless opportunity for them to deepen their collaboration, thus increasing mutual understanding and boosting their political relations.

In this regard, the environmental cooperation between China and the EU arguably is a success story. Throughout more than two decades these two partners have joined efforts to the primary end of developing clean energy. A number of bilateral fora and an institutionalized mechanism for mutual coordination and cooperation gradually emerged, eventually flowing into the EU-China Partnership on Climate Change. In many cases, and especially in the field of renewables, joint projects and workshops for capacity-building were held. Starting from this common set of priorities, Sino-European collaboration has spilled over and managed to overcome the many ups-and-downs in bilateral ties, while leading to economic benefits and to closer political relations. As a matter of fact, joint ventures can also be the source of conflicts, as it is the case with the EU anti-dumping tariffs imposed on the Chinese solar panels industry, but collaboration usually prevails.

Thus, the potential for closer environmental cooperation within a new *Green Partnership* is extremely broad and is likely to emerge on several grounds. First, exposure to Climate Change impacts the physical, economic and social structures in China and in Europe in similar ways and may ask for solutions

of the same kind. Secondly, the implementation of environmental policies looks problematic in both decision-making systems, given that Chinese provincial and local governments often disregard national measures just as EU Member States are resilient in adhering to Union policies. Thirdly, the two political entities surprisingly present a similar decision-making structure in this policy area. Lastly, China is now entering a precious window of opportunity, as long as it possesses an extremely strong diplomatic position in international negotiations and as the new leadership of President Xi Jinping seems to be seriously committed to the Green Transition.

Benefits would be three-fold. Above all, the general belief is that joint actions in environmental policies could boost bilateral relations, giving them new impetus and those mutual understanding, trust and common priorities that they are desperately in need of. Focusing on environmental cooperation would also be the chance for the European Union to overcome its aggressive and protectionist stance and to actively contribute to China's Peaceful Development. Above all, a Green Partnership combining the EU's traditional engagement and *savoir fair* in environmental protection and China's growing number of good practices could facilitate international negotiations on Climate Change and bring them to success, as well as provide a method to be used both bilaterally and globally.

This same method could be firstly applied to the Belt and Road Initiative, by turning it into a *Green Silk Road*. Hints of the commitment to this kind of project can be found in some official documents and in the Chinese political narrative. The March 2015 Action Plan includes the promotion of green and low-carbon infrastructure management, green investment and trade, ecological conservation, protection of the biodiversity and Climate Change prevention among its objectives. On the

other hand, the PRC's Ministry of Environmental Protection has been very active in promoting international cooperation with Belt and Road countries. In addition, environmental cooperation is crucial for fulfilling the objectives and priorities of the Belt and Road Initiative itself, insofar as taking environmental impacts into account would be beneficial to building up a reliable infrastructure network and as closer connection in trade and currencies is likely to lead to a more efficient use of resources like water and to an increase in environmental capacity. On top of this, the "Silk Road Spirit" can count on increasing ecological awareness among Eurasian populations.

Thereof, according to experts and policy-makers, the Green Silk Road should be a platform for collaboration among China and its Belt and Road partners on the basis of the following implementational pillars: 1. *information-sharing and capacity-building*; 2. *climate financing*; 3. *building green infrastructures*; and 4. *inclusion and empowerment of local communities*. Implementing these pivotal measures will arguably make the Green Silk Road the biggest green economy project of all times.

Beyond the NSR framework, we argue that even tougher problems could be solved under the same 'greening' rationale, including the gridlock in the global environmental governance. Despite a long history of apparent success inaugurated in 1972 in Stockholm conference and continued in 1992 in Rio, international climate negotiations soon lost impetus, indeed. Accordingly, now that Climate Change and other ecological problems seem even more difficult to solve and that the impacts of environmental degradation harm world economy and societies stronger than before, hardly ever do inter-governmental negotiations reach agreements for common action. True is that the year 2015 represented a window of opportunity in which crucial accomplishments were made,

namely the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the so called “Paris Agreement”, thanks to a different, more inclusive and bottom-up approach.

China can arguably be decisive in keeping the momentum going. At national level, the PRC can count on a strong central government and on a well-oiled administrative system that may be considered as even more efficient than those of many Western democracies. At the international level, under the current leadership the PRC has proactively fostered its environmental agenda both in bilateral and multilateral relations. For these reasons, the PRC is now likely to take its full responsibilities of biggest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter, to make higher commitments than in the past and to gradually decarbonise.

To be sure, the creation of a low-carbon society is but one of the objectives of environmental governance. As a matter of fact, achieving the Green Transition is now the main issue. Governments do play a fundamental role and should operate efficiently, for instance financing innovation and green investments, but they are not the only actors. The private sector and individual citizens should take care of the environment in first place and enjoy the benefits that it offers. Academics and think tanks could promote information-sharing and the formation of know-how that cross-regional environmental policies desperately need. In other words, the g-local nature of most ecological issues arguably asks for the creation of a common front encompassing a wide variety of actors, from local governments to international and multilateral institutions.

Our argument here is that new *political* paradigms need to be elaborated alongside the socio-economic framework provided by Green Economy, and ahead of those. Indeed, strong political commitment can act as the driver of the change and lead to the successful reconciliation of prosperity and sustainability. To this end, cooperation among all the stakeholders must be ensured, with a view to join efforts and

achieve a common set of objectives. To be sure, a bottom-up process of this kind equally leaves some room to the diplomatic action, which should be able to combine the promotion of environmental issues in the international agenda at the official level with the diffusion of information, best practices and shared interests at people-to-people level, in order to enhance mutual understanding and boost political relations. To put it in another way, we should transition to a *Green Diplomacy*.

In conclusion, the contribution given by our thesis consists in the following findings. First, the New Silk Road arguably suffers from a *weak political profile* that puts the achievement of its overly ambitious mission under serious distress. Secondly, China-EU relations are calling for deeper political engagement in creating a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with focused targets, shared priorities and mutual understanding. This is also confirmed by the European reaction to the Belt and Road Initiative, which can be fairly considered as understated in comparison to the huge potential for common action in this framework. Thirdly, new forms of environmental cooperation can foster the PRC's political engagement in bilateral, multilateral and global relations. We argue that an EU-China Green Partnership, the Green Silk Road and a new Green Diplomacy should be introduced at these three levels, respectively. China fairly possesses all the potential to be a game-maker in International Relations and to lead the world in the Green Transition, but only by joining hands with its international partners can it achieve key results and build a solid leadership.

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## **GREENING CHINA'S NEW SILK ROAD**

NEW FORMS OF ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION  
TO BOOST SINO-EUROPEAN POLITICAL RELATIONS

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独木不成林, 单弦不成音.

*A single tree does not make a forest,  
A single string cannot make music.*

Chinese proverb

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## INTRODUCTION

### RESEARCH QUESTION AND ACADEMIC SIGNIFICANCE

In the last few years the People's Republic China ("the PRC" or "China" hereinafter) has arguably become one of the most proactive actors in international affairs. Upon the instalment of a new leadership in the Communist Party of China, represented by General Secretary Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, Beijing has indeed reached the apex of its three-decades-long Reform and Opening-up process. This was mainly done by formulating a set of high-level and all-comprehensive foreign policy initiatives that promote the progressive emergence of the PRC as a pivot to both international economy and world politics, under the paradigm of the so called "Peaceful Development". Within this framework, the New Silk Road strategy, which is the subject of the present thesis, can be fairly considered as China's master policy for creating new forms of "win-win" cooperation with the other regions of the Eurasian continent, including Europe. All in all, this newly proactive China, sustained by its immense population and by its thriving economy, will arguably play a primary role in implementing the 2030 world development agenda.

Nevertheless, this pro-activity is often looked at with great suspicion by many international actors. The existence of a "China threat" may be grounded on the negative repercussions that an even faster-growing Chinese market could have on many shaky Western economies, as well as on the political implications that Beijing's presumed military build-up could trigger vis-à-vis its far and near neighbours and, above all, the United States. Accordingly, President Xi's initiatives often had a lukewarm reception from Western policy-makers, academics and public opinions. For

this reason, the New Silk Road may also cause political frictions with Eurasian countries, rather than boosting closer collaboration, thus having dramatic effects on the stability of the continent and on world affairs as a whole.

As a consequence, a little more than two years after its launch in fall 2013, the New Silk Road already seems to face serious challenges. In order not to make it fall into a political impasse caused by an alleged “China threat”, the Chinese leadership now has to better define and structure its Belt and Road Initiative and to reassure its international partners, Europe among others. Identifying strengths and weaknesses of this project and building upon the former arguably is the key to success and to shape new forms of win-win cooperation on the Eurasian continent.

Our research question then follows:

*Why does the visionary breadth of China’s “New Silk Road” risk falling into a political impasse, especially in relations with Europe, without a ‘green’ restructuring?*

This question frames the subject of analysis, the New Silk Road foreign policy initiatives, in a two-fold manner. On the one hand, implications of the PRC’s strategy on its relations with other international actors, namely Europe, are investigated, thus under the lens of international relations. On the other, considerations pertaining to a different field of studies, Sustainable Development, are brought in by looking at the environmental repercussions of what aims to be the biggest development project on the Eurasian continent in centuries. These two dimensions are analysed jointly, that is by outlining how respecting sustainability principles does produce effects on IR, as it is the case with the New Silk Road.

For this reason, our research question arguably has a remarkable academic significance. Indeed, if sustainability is now diffusely considered as an important driver for economic prosperity, its implementational repercussions at both national and trans-national levels on country-to-country relations should be subject to further analysis. In addition, focusing on China and on the European Union (“the EU” or “the Union” hereinafter), who are two international great powers and frontrunners in promoting the Green Transition, is expected to provide peerless empirical examples of how International Relations and Sustainable Development relate to each other.

## ARGUMENT AND METHODOLOGY

Concerning this research topic, the present thesis aims at demonstrating that China’s New Silk Road can overcome the political weaknesses that threaten its visionary goals by putting sustainability at the core. A ‘Green Silk Road’ as such could achieve diffuse prosperity, a safer environment and better political relations for implementing the 2030 development agenda, to the benefit of both the PRC and of its international counterparts, including Europe.

In order to outline the aforementioned dynamics, a policy analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative is firstly conducted, then a SWOT analysis shows along what pattern of opportunities and constrains this policy is expected to evolve. Secondly, Sino-European relations are taken as a case study for systematic analysis. While the reasons behind the choice of this case study will be explained in greater detail in the related chapter, let us now stress that Europe is the final destination of the New Silk Road and that both the PRC and the EU are two major international actors with great potentialities in terms of Green Economy practices. In this regard, the impact of the

Belt and Road Initiative on China-EU relations will be taken as focal point, especially as far as their latest trends in the period 2008-2015 are concerned. Finally, the potential to build-up the aforementioned 'Green Silk Road' is investigated mainly by reading through the minds and words of experts and policy-makers, where this concept has progressively been 'constructed'.

Our thesis will make reference to both primary and secondary sources. The former include official documents (statements, agreements, policy papers, etc.) as well as quantitative data and statistics. Additionally, priceless insights will come from materials obtained "on the field", while interning at the Chinese office of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and at Italy's Permanent Representation to the European Union, and from an interview to a UNEP China National Officer, Ms. Jiang Nanqing. The latter are constituted by the most recent academic production on the New Silk Road and by a conspicuous literature on China-EU relations, which are briefly reviewed in the following section. Latest news have also been taken under constant consideration and contributed to the corroboration of the thesis presented in this work.

## LITERARY REVIEW

The academic sources that this writing is based upon have a wide variety of backgrounds and are affiliated to different lines of thought. Fairly enough, this multiplicity of perspectives is a sound guarantee of objectivity. In particular, collecting literature from two different parts of the world leads us to a first confrontation between Western and Chinese authors. Among the former, a further differentiation can be made between American and European writers, which often



start from common conceptual and value-based backgrounds but eventually come to diverse conclusions. Similarly, the European academia is composed by nature of a wide spectrum of voices, sometimes on a nationality basis.

As a consequence, our two main subjects are analysed under different angles by the relevant literature. Concerning the New Silk Road, a distinction has to be made among those who look at it as a pure economy-oriented project and those who conceive it as a broader geopolitical strategy with political implications. The first perspective is supported by Chinese officials, who focus on the beneficial economic repercussions for Belt and Road countries, while denying the existence of specific geostrategic targets.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Chinese academia (cf. Yan<sup>2</sup> and Pan<sup>3</sup>) considers this core economic soul of the New Silk Road as the necessary condition to reach secondary objectives such as more solid political dialogue and closer people-to-people relations, which may emerge in the longer term.

The second perspective is spread not only among Western scholars (cf. Denyer<sup>4</sup>, Escobar<sup>5</sup> and Lin<sup>6</sup>), but also in Asia (e.g. Sen<sup>7</sup> and Tharoor<sup>8</sup>). In the view of

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<sup>1</sup> English.news.cn, *China's Belt, Road initiatives not geo-strategic tool: official*, March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/21/c\\_134086252.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/21/c_134086252.htm) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Yan, Xuetong (2014), *Silk Road Economic Belt Shows China's New Strategy Direction: Promoting Integration with its Neighbors*, 21st China Business Herald. Available at: <http://carnegietsinghua.org/2014/02/27/silk-road-economic-belt-shows-china-s-new-strategic-direction-promoting-integration-with-its-neighbors/> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Pan, Zhiping (2014), *Silk Road Economic Belt: A Dynamic New Concept for Geopolitics in Central Asia*, China Institute of International Studies. Available at: [http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2014-09/18/content\\_7243440.htm](http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2014-09/18/content_7243440.htm) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Denyer, Simon (2013), *China bypasses American 'New Silk Road' with two of its own*, The Washington Post. Available at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/china-bypasses-american-new-silk-road-with-two-if-its-own/2013/10/14/49f9f60c-3284-11e3-ad00-ec4c6b31cbed\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-bypasses-american-new-silk-road-with-two-if-its-own/2013/10/14/49f9f60c-3284-11e3-ad00-ec4c6b31cbed_story.html) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Escobar, Pepe (2013), *China stitches up (SCO) Silk Rd*, Asia Times Online. Available at: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/MID-04-130913.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MID-04-130913.html) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

these authors, the New Silk Road should be better framed as Beijing's latest geostrategic project to expand its political allure over large zones of the Eurasian and African continents. Accordingly, closer economic connections would be but the first step towards the creation of a larger sphere of influence and even of military footholds, mainly to be used against the US and its allies such as India and Japan. Additionally, some deem the ideological metanarrative built by President Xi, i.e. the existence of a common and peaceful past in the Eurasian continent that China would like to restore, as equally dangerous.

A more nuanced position is taken by European scholars (cf. Brugier<sup>9</sup>, Szczudlik-Tatar<sup>10</sup>, Vangeli<sup>11</sup> and also Men<sup>12</sup>), who do not neglect that the economy is the primary level of action, yet highlight the important political implications of the Belt and Road project at the same time. Conforming to this school of thought, it will be tentatively shown how, although still at an initial stage, China's initiative has

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<sup>6</sup> Lin, Christina (2011), *The New Silk Road. China's Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 109. Available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pdf/the-new-silk-road-chinas-energy-strategy-in-the-greater-middle-east> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Sen, Tansen (2014), *Silk Road Diplomacy – Twist, Turns and Distorted History*, Yale Global Online. Available at: <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/silk-road-diplomacy-%E2%80%93-twists-turns-and-distorted-history> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Tharoor, Shashi (2014), *China's Silk Road Revival -- and the Fears It Stirs -- Are Deeply Rooted in the Country's History*, The World Post. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shashi-tharoor/chinas-silk-road-revival-history\\_b\\_5983456.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shashi-tharoor/chinas-silk-road-revival-history_b_5983456.html) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Brugier, Camille (2014), *China's way: the New Silk Road*, EUISS Brief Issue No. 14. Available at: <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/chinas-way-the-new-silk-road/> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Szczudlik-Tatar, Justyna (2013), *China's New Silk Road Diplomacy*, PISM Policy Paper No. 34 (82). Available at: [http://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=15818](http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=15818) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Vangeli, Anastas (2015), *China's New Silk Road and Its Impact on Sino-European Relations*, EU-China Observer #1.15, pp. 20-26. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer115.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer115.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Men, Jing (2015), *China's New Silk Road and EU-China Relations*, EU-China Observer #1.15, pp. 12-15. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer115.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer115.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

overly broad objectives and a number of strengths and weaknesses. This entails that its economic core cannot be disjointed from the dramatic political repercussions that it is expected to have at both the domestic and the international levels. On the contrary, the main argument here is that the solution of any potential conflict passes through the “greening” of its orientation towards economic growth and development.

Concerning the second subject of observation, that is EU-China relations, a classification can be made on the basis of the degree of optimism that the authors show on future trends. In particular, although most academics and officials agree in stating that closer collaboration between China and Europe is the ideal goal, a wide spectrum of positions is taken into account as for the real possibilities of achieving it. Very optimistic tones were common among academics before the cooling down of relations in 2008 (cf. Grant and Barysh<sup>13</sup>), and are now subject to a comeback in official discourses (cf. H.E. Ambassador Yang<sup>14</sup>). Vice versa, extremely negative perceptions on the evolution of EU-China relations are losing grounds, and can be mainly traced back to the general perception of a “China Threat” that is quite common in the US. Nevertheless, it has to be mentioned that some Chinese authors (cf. Pan<sup>15</sup>) seem to have equally low expectations on the future of this relationship, unless the European leadership changes its approach in dealing with the PRC.

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<sup>13</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Can Europe and China Shape a New World Order*, London:Centre for European Reform. Available at: [http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/p\\_837-611.pdf](http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/p_837-611.pdf) (Last access on May 11<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> H.E. Ambassador Yang, Yanyi (2015a), *China-EU Relations: Broader, Higher and Stronger*, EU-China Observer #1.15, pp. 6-7. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer115.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer115.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Pan, Chenxing (2012), *Problematizing “Constructive Engagement” in EU-China Policy* in Vogt, Roland (ed.) (2012), *Europe and China. Strategic Partners or Rivals?*, Hong Kong:Hong Kong University Press, pp. 37-57.

All in all, the majority of both European (cf. Casarini<sup>16</sup>, Vangeli<sup>17</sup>, Vogt<sup>18</sup>) and Chinese academics (cf. Men<sup>19</sup> and Song<sup>20</sup>) attempt at giving a plausible account of the state of EU-China relations in and of their future perspectives. This is done by sketching the historical evolution of the structure of opportunities and constraints that underlies this relationship on a number of dimensions, including politics, economics and culture. This line is also adopted by the present work, which will analyse Sino-European relations more generally and then focus on environmental cooperation. Fairly enough, a credible outline of future trends cannot neglect the constellation of challenges and potentialities that both European and Chinese actors have been facing so far.

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<sup>16</sup> Casarini, Nicola (2006), *The evolution of the EU-China relationship: from constructive engagement to strategic partnership*, European Union Institute for Security Studies Occasional Paper n°64. Available at: <http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/occ64.pdf> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

And also: Casarini, Nicola (2013), *The EU-China partnership: 10 years on*, European Union Institute for Security Studies Brief Issue n°35. Available at: [http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief\\_35\\_EU-China\\_partnership.pdf](http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_35_EU-China_partnership.pdf) (Last access on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>17</sup> Vangeli, Anastas (2015), *Op. Cit. supra* note 11.

<sup>18</sup> Vogt, Roland (2012a), *Europe and China: A Maturing Relationship?* in Vogt, Roland (ed.) (2012), *Europe and China. Strategic Partners or Rivals?*, Hong Kong:Hong Kong University Press, pp. 1-16.

And also: Vogt, Roland (2012b), *Europe and China after the Global Financial Crisis* in Vogt, Roland (ed.) (2012), *Europe and China. Strategic Partners or Rivals?*, Hong Kong:Hong Kong University Press, pp. 219-228.

<sup>19</sup> Men, Jing (2015), *Op. Cit. supra* note 12. And also: Men, Jing (2013), *A long term EU-China relationship*, College of Europe EU-China Observer #5.13. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer\\_issue\\_5\\_2013\\_final\\_with\\_cover.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer_issue_5_2013_final_with_cover.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Song, Xinning (2012), *Challenges and Opportunities in EU-China Relations* in Vogt, Roland (ed.) (2012), *Europe and China. Strategic Partners or Rivals?*, Hong Kong:Hong Kong University Press, pp. 19-36.

## ROADMAP

This thesis is structured as follows. Contents are organized in three different chapters. In Chapter One a two-step policy analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative is firstly conducted by looking at the earliest conceptualization made by the Chinese government and at its evolution, and by describing its pillars, targets and goals. A SWOT analysis follows, highlighting the strengths that this strategy can count on and the opportunities that its implementation may open to China. Finally, the main weaknesses of this initiative are listed in order to understand which kind of threats and challenges the PRC arguably is likely to face while fostering its plan.

Chapter Two introduces our case-study, i.e. the impact of the New Silk Road proposal on EU-China relations. After some general considerations on the relevance of this subject, a brief recap of the evolution of Sino-European relations is provided, including a sketch of their current status as mirrored in the bilateral agreements sealed and in the words of the officials. A closer look at the European reception of the Belt and Road Initiative then leads us to analyse the main challenges and opportunities for deeper collaboration between Europe and China in this framework.

Finally, Chapter 3 addresses the core issue of our research by showing how ‘greening’ national economies and societies can be the source of closer political relations among States. To this end, environmental cooperation between China and Europe is referred as the leading example for making the Belt and Road Initiative ‘greener’. After a brief outline of past collaboration, current trends in EU-China engagement towards the Green Transition are reviewed, as for both individual and joint efforts, in order to define their basis for a ‘Green Partnership’. Then, a tentative

conceptualization of the ‘Green Silk Road’ is elaborated with the precious support of the original materials gathered while interning at UNEP China. Stemming from the same conceptual seed and building on the recent accomplishments in international negotiations on Climate Change and Sustainable Development, the idea of new forms of ‘Green Diplomacy’ to be introduced at the global level is sketched as food for thought. Some conclusions are driven on the content of the thesis up, calling for further academic research in this field.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE NEW SILK ROAD

### BETWEEN STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

#### 1.1 CHINA TAKES THE LEAD. CONCEPT EVOLUTION OF THE “NEW SILK ROAD” STRATEGY

In autumn 2013 the freshly-elected Chinese leading duo formed by President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang made a historic debut in the international arena. Two ambitious foreign policy initiatives were announced with the goal of changing the face of the Eurasian continent by creating a thick web of connections on its lands and on its seas. Just as the famous Silk Road used to do at the time of the ancient civilizations, this network would be meant to open a new phase of prosperity and peace for Asia, Africa and Europe by pushing them towards closer economic integration, cooperation in policy areas like security and people-to-people dialogue.



PICTURE 1. The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road.  
Source: Author's elaboration from Xinhua News Agency (currently not available)

The first policy initiative was the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, firstly mentioned by President Xi in his speech delivered at the University of Astana (Kazakhstan) in September 2013 and then again at the following 13<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Agreement<sup>21</sup>. It consists in a web of infrastructures connecting China and its largest market, Europe, by crossing the entire Eurasian continent. In Picture 1, the red line shows the route of the Economic Belt in its initial conceptualization.

A contemporary explorer embarking on this route would start his/her journey in the Chinese city of Xi’an, the ancient imperial capital (as well as the hometown of General Secretary Xi himself), then cross the north-western regions of the PRC, including Xinjiang, to the border with Kazakhstan. From there, s/he would go through Central Asia to Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey and eventually enter Europe through Bulgaria. Once inside the EU, this journey would touch Romania, Czech Republic, Germany and the Netherlands before reaching the Italian city of Venice<sup>22</sup>.

This foreign policy initiative was conceptualized into a proposal in five points, respectively aimed at strengthening:

1. Economic policy communication and cooperation;
2. Road connections;
3. Trade facilitations;
4. Capital convergence and currency integration;

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<sup>21</sup> Szczudlik-Tatar, Justyna (2013), *China’s New Silk Road Diplomacy*, PISM Policy Paper No. 34 (82), p. 3. Available at: [http://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=15818](http://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=15818) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Brugier, Camille (2014), *China’s way: the New Silk Road*, EUISS Brief Issue No. 14, p. 1. Available at: <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/chinas-way-the-new-silk-road/> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).



## 5. People to people relations<sup>23</sup>.

In the perspective of Chinese policy-makers the implementation of these five measures would constitute a fundamental input for closer economic cooperation across the Eurasian continent and for the build-up of a common agenda in development and welfare.

In turn, growing prosperity in this region are supposed to lead eventually bring about more peaceful relations among countries, as Chinese academics equally maintains. In this way, the build-up of an unblocked network of roads and infrastructures between the two edges of the continent would easy transport a massive flow of peoples, goods and capitals, making the New Silk Road Economic Belt a “supremely ambitious, Chinese-fueled trans-Eurasian integration megaproject [...], a sort of mega free-trade zone” with a 4 billion people-large market, the biggest in the world<sup>24</sup>. On top of this, the construction of a “Silk Road spirit” going beyond mere economic exchanges was set as the pre-condition for closer integration among Eurasian populations.

The second policy initiative was introduced at the 16<sup>th</sup> ASEAN+1 Summit in Brunei by Premier Li under the name of “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road”, and then by President Xi himself during a speech at the Indonesian Parliament<sup>25</sup>. An imaginary vessel sailing on this water route would set off from the Chinese port of Fuzhou (Fujian) and then follow the coastline of Siam before crossing the dangerous Strait of

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<sup>23</sup> Szczudlik-Tatar, Justyna (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 21, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Escobar, Pepe (2013), *China stitches up (SCO) Silk Rd*, Asia Times Online. Available at: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/MID-04-130913.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MID-04-130913.html) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Szczudlik-Tatar, Justyna (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 21, p. 3.

Malacca, as shown by the blue line in Picture 1. It would sail off the coasts of South Asia and India and eventually reach the Horn of Africa. From there, it would enter the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal and touch the shores of Greece. It would finally dock at the safe harbor of Venice, where the Maritime Silk Road links with the land route<sup>26</sup>.

Just like the Economic Belt, the purpose of this second initiative would be fostering coordination among China and its international partners in “maritime economy, environment technical and scientific cooperation”. To this end, a “2+7 framework” was established, that is a proposal for common action under the two principles of strategic trust and economic coordination and through seven policy measures (good neighbourhood treaty between China and ASEAN countries, strengthening of their Free Trade Agreements and extension to new partners from the Asia-Pacific; shared infrastructural projects; cooperation in financial regulation and risk-prevention; maritime coordination; people-to-people dialogue on culture, scientific research and environmental protection). In general, closer cooperation in these policy domains was considered not only as a pre-requisite for enhanced prosperity in the region, but also as an important chance for political dialogue, given the growing number of maritime disputes in South-East Asia as well as in other areas of the Indian Ocean<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Brugier, Camille (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 22, pp. 1-2.

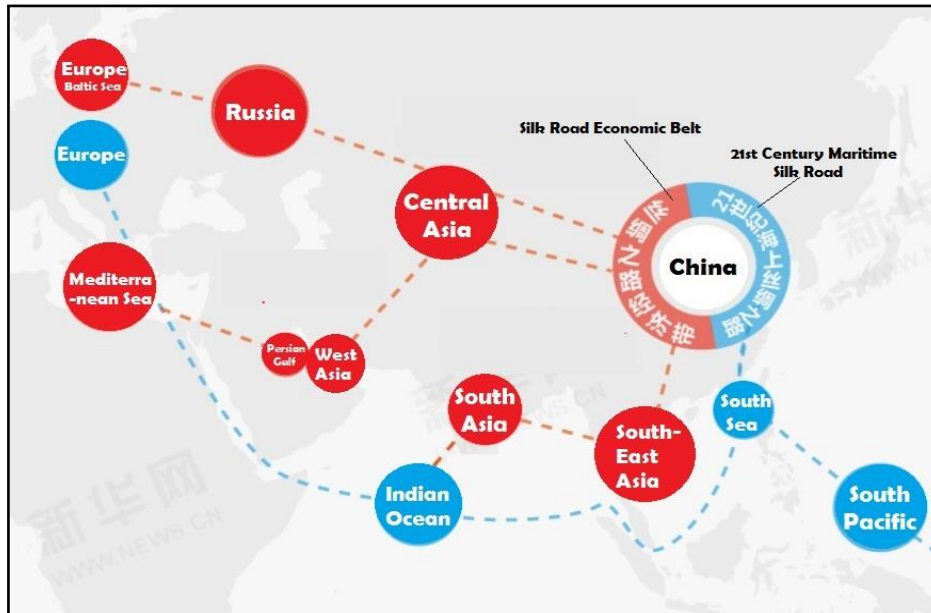
<sup>27</sup> Szczudlik-Tatar, Justyna (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 21, pp. 3-4.

These announcements, jointly referred as the “New Silk Road” (also mentioned as NSR hereinafter), were followed by a year of intense promotion from the part of the Chinese leadership. President Xi and Premier Li visited more than 20 countries and advocated numerous international fora for finding partners along the two roads. Some Memorandums of Understanding have been signed with neighbouring countries and with the most enthusiast prospective participants. In general, consultation and coordination within the region have grown, insofar as China has been showing greater attention towards its neighbours. In addition, this effort in promotion was coupled with the launch of new cooperation platforms and multilateral financial institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS New Development Bank and the Silk Road Fund<sup>28</sup>.

While sponsoring the project to its international partners, the Chinese government elaborated a systematic conceptual framework for the NSR under the name of “Belt and Road Initiative”. In March 2015 an Action Plan was jointly released by the National Development and Reform Commission, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and by the Ministry of Commerce (MOC). It sketched the guidelines for further steps in building up the New Silk Road by listing its aims, main features and future perspectives. A new map was also provided, showing the two routes from a slightly different perspective as you can see in Picture 2.

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<sup>28</sup> National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road*, March 2015. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-03/28/c\\_134105858.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-03/28/c_134105858.htm). (Last access on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016).



PICTURE 2. The “Belt and Road”.

Source: Author’s elaboration from Xinhua News Agency. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/sjxw/2015-03/28/c\\_1114795030.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/sjxw/2015-03/28/c_1114795030.htm).

In this Action Plan, the “Belt and Road Initiative” was said to aim at fostering economic policy coordination in the Eurasian region as a core mission, mainly by “promoting orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets” and by “jointly creating an open, inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all”. On top of this, a sort of political objective was also defined in terms of promoting “new models of international cooperation and global governance”. In general, the build-up of “all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks” was set as the ultimate goal, in order to “realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries”<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road*, *supra* note 28.

In the pursuit of such objectives, Chinese policy-makers listed a clear set of principles and of priorities that the initiative would follow. The former include not only the international norms contained in the UN Charter and in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, but also moral values such as openness to coordination, harmony and inclusiveness, mutual benefit and even the adherence to market-based rules. According to the Chinese government, only under these principles can the Belt and Road eventually set up a “community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility featuring mutual political trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness”<sup>30</sup>.

As for its priorities, the Action Plan basically listed those same five initially sketched by President Xi for the Silk Road Economic Belt, i.e. policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bond. Similarly, it stated that the achievement of these priorities by the PRC and by the other NSR participants passed through cooperation and consultation within the existing bilateral and multilateral mechanisms and through coordination with a multiplicity of actors, including China’s local governments<sup>31</sup>.

All in all, the March 2015 Action Plan contributed to put a systematic framework for the New Silk Road on paper. By doing so, it gave the realization of this project a clear roadmap, so that it has arguably been a good starting point for dialogue and consultation among China and prospective partners. With respect to the initial conceptualization tentatively given by the Chinese leadership in autumn 2013,

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<sup>30</sup> *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road*, *supra* note 28.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

it can be argued that not much changed, especially as for the targets, sectors and overall principles that are analysed in the following section.

To some extent, what may strike as a peculiar difference between the project proposal and its systematization in the Action Plan is the change of terminology. The two policy initiatives described at the beginning of this chapter, i.e. the “New Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road”, were announced as part of a single, broader strategy, i.e. the “New Silk Road”, which was then called “Belt and Road Initiative” in the March 2015 Action Plan. As a consequence, these two names, as well as a myriad of similar terms (such as “One Belt, One Road”, a transliteration from Mandarin) and acronyms are frequently used by policy-makers and academics in order to identify the very same project. As a matter of fact, our choice in this thesis is to refer only to the “New Silk Road” (NSR) and to the “Belt and Road” as synonyms.

## 1.2 A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL POLICY WITH BROAD GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

In our view, the Belt and Road Initiative is clearly endowed with a multi-targeted and cross-sectorial nature. As for the geopolitical areas covered, the strategic goal of the Economic Belt and of the Maritime Road is to engage China’s neighboring countries inside structured partnerships<sup>32</sup>. The former starts by involving Central Asia, a sub-region that Beijing has paid increasing attention to in due consideration of its energy resources, of its proximity to the least developed regions

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<sup>32</sup> Yan, Xuetong (2014), *Silk Road Economic Belt Shows China’s New Strategy Direction: Promoting Integration with its Neighbors*, 21st China Business Herald. Available at: <http://carnegietsinghua.org/2014/02/27/silk-road-economic-belt-shows-china-s-new-strategic-direction-promoting-integration-with-its-neighbors/> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

of the PRC and of the existence of active fora for dialogue and coordination like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)<sup>33</sup>. Similarly, the latter focuses on the set-up of a common agenda between China and South-Asian neighbours, who are a pivotal hub for Chinese trade and with whom relations have generally been improving in the last decades, despite the most recent and serious disputes in the South China Sea.

Notwithstanding this prioritization, the NSR project as a whole goes far beyond China's neighborhood. Firstly, both routes cross the Middle East and Africa, traditionally grouped by Chinese foreign-policy makers in the Western Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. In this area, which has become more and more important for China's trade both as a commercial partner and as a hub for exports to Europe, the PRC's proactive diplomacy is welcome for the massive flow of investments that it provides under no particular conditions and regardless of political regimes - what is frequently referred as the "Beijing Consensus"<sup>34</sup>. Secondly, Europe is the final destination of both the Belt and the Road, insofar as it is China's largest trading partner, with a transaction value that peaks at USD 1 billion/day<sup>35</sup>. Thirdly, it should also be noted that this project seems to exclude any roles for the United States. Equally bypassed in the beginning, Moscow was included as soon as Sino-Russian relations ameliorated and looks now central (cf. Picture 2).

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<sup>33</sup> Lin, Christina (2011), *The New Silk Road. China's Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus No. 109, pp. ix-x. Available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pdf/the-new-silk-road-chinas-energy-strategy-in-the-greater-middle-east> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Ferrara, Pasquale (2014), *Great and emerging powers in the Mediterranean*, lecture no. 5, course of Mediterranean Studies delivered at LUISS "Guido Carli" university in Rome (Italy), Master of Arts in International Relations, Academic Year 2013/2014, II semester.

<sup>35</sup> Brugier, Camille (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 22, p. 4.

In addition to such a wide variety of targets, the New Silk Road encompasses a large number of sectors, four among others. Firstly, and as already mentioned, the economy is the core area of interest for China, in a two-fold manner. At the international level, Beijing is willing to build new, faster and safer supply lines to Europe by creating an in-land infrastructural network that could both de-leverage the Suez - Shanghai maritime route<sup>36</sup> and cut out areas with higher geopolitical risks like the Malacca Strait and the Persian Gulf<sup>37</sup>. In this way, securing export markets could counterbalance the negative repercussions of the global economic financial crisis on the export-oriented and FDI-driven Chinese model, which has become less effective<sup>38</sup>. At the domestic level, the NSR would open new opportunities for developing Western regions, thus narrowing their gap vis-à-vis the better-off Eastern provinces<sup>39</sup>. In turn, growing prosperity is expected to have longer-term benefits on political stability in those areas, especially in Xinjiang<sup>40</sup>.

To this extent, in the eyes of the Chinese leadership the NSR objectives fully coincides with those of the 13<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan, the national blueprint containing a number of social and economic policies to guide China's development from 2016 to 2020. At a time when the national economy experiments lower growth rates than before, these guidelines define a "new normal" for the PRC, based on a 6,5% GDP growth rate per year and aim to gradually shift from the current low-wage, manufacturer and export-oriented development model to the middle-class, consumer

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<sup>36</sup> Brugier, Camille (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 22, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Szczudlik-Tatar, Justyna (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 21, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Szczudlik-Tatar, Justyna (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 21, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> Brugier, Camille (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 22, pp. 2-3.



economy of the future. To this end, the leadership – namely President Xi himself – is expected to promote the implementation of a “third industrial revolution” centered on connectivity and decarbonisation of the economy<sup>41</sup>. It follows that deeper infrastructural and digital integration along the Belt and Road would equally serve this goal, i.e. what Escobar defines as the “Chinese dream of creating a Jeremy Rifkin-esque [...] economic space spanning the vast European continent”<sup>42</sup>.

Secondly, energy is another pivotal sector in the NSR strategy. In due consideration of the growing energy demand in its expanding economy, since the 2000s China has been trying to increase its energy security by means of closer ties with Russia<sup>43</sup>. Among the latest initiatives, deals were signed for opening the PRC’s third supply line of Russian gas<sup>44</sup> and for financing Russia’s “Yamal” LNG project through the Silk Road Fund itself. Nevertheless, reduction in the dependence on Russian gas is considered a valid alternative. To this end, China has been looking new providers in the oil-rich Central Asia, a “Pipelineistan” that would be able to feed the PRC’s growing need<sup>45</sup>. In addition, the creation of a region-wide infrastructural network could secure to China broader influence in key areas like the Central Asian “strategic energy ellipse”, which possesses the 70% of proven world’s

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<sup>41</sup> Escobar, Pepe (2015), *The Chinese dream: Jeremy Rifkin and the economic conquest of Eurasia*, Energy Post. Available at: <http://www.energypost.eu/chinese-dream-jeremy-rifkin-economic-conquest-eurasia/> (Last access on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>43</sup> Brugier, Camille (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 22, pp. 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> English.news.cn, “Belt & Road” initiative aims to connect energy network, October 5<sup>st</sup>, 2015. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/video/2015-10/05/c\\_134684591.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/video/2015-10/05/c_134684591.htm) (Last access on January, 30<sup>th</sup> 2016)

<sup>45</sup> Escobar, Pepe (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 24.

energy reserves<sup>46</sup>, and the pivotal “Four Seas” (Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, the Gulf and the Caspian Sea)<sup>47</sup>. In addition to purchasing traditional energy sources, China could make use of new supply lines to feed the growing energy demand in South-East Asia with its booming renewables production, especially in the photovoltaic sector where the country has built a solid leadership that accounts for the 70% of world capacity<sup>48</sup>.

Thirdly, cultural exchanges and people-to-people relations are an additional priority, insofar as the built-up of a “Silk Road Spirit” is set as a pre-condition for economic cooperation<sup>49</sup>. This objective belongs to a well-defined political meta-narrative, i.e. the idea that the New Silk Road aims to “revive ancient ties of friendship in the contemporary globalized world”<sup>50</sup>. In this respect, the Ancient Silk Road imagery was frequently referred to by President Xi in his speeches, e.g. recalling the travels to the Southern seas and to Central Asia made by Chinese historical figures Admiral Zhang He and Zhang Qian respectively. This political metanarrative contributes, in the words of Tansen Sen<sup>51</sup>, to the promotion of the “nation’s historic role as harbinger of peace and prosperity” in Asia and in the world.

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<sup>46</sup> Ferrara, Pasquale (2014), *Op. cit. supra* notes 34.

<sup>47</sup> Lin, Christina (2011), *Op. cit. supra* note 33, p. xii.

<sup>48</sup> English.news.cn, “Belt & Road” initiative aims to connect energy network, October 5<sup>st</sup>, 2015. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/video/2015-10/05/c\\_134684591.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/video/2015-10/05/c_134684591.htm) (Last access on January, 30<sup>th</sup> 2016).

<sup>49</sup> Pan, Zhiping (2014), *Silk Road Economic Belt: A Dynamic New Concept for Geopolitics in Central Asia*, China Institute of International Studies. Available at: [http://www.ciiis.org.cn/english/2014-09/18/content\\_7243440.htm](http://www.ciiis.org.cn/english/2014-09/18/content_7243440.htm) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>50</sup> Tharoor, Shashi (2014), *China’s Silk Road Revival -- and the Fears It Stirs -- Are Deeply Rooted in the Country’s History*, The World Post. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shashi-tharoor/chinas-silk-road-revival-history\\_b\\_5983456.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shashi-tharoor/chinas-silk-road-revival-history_b_5983456.html) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>51</sup> Sen, Tansen (2014), *Silk Road Diplomacy – Twist, Turns and Distorted History*, Yale Global Online. Available at: <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/silk-road-diplomacy-%E2%80%93-twists-turns-and-distorted-history> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

In particular, this seems to be the case of the Middle East, where President Xi has recently proposed a “Chinese way” to solve the numerous issues of the region, i.e. fostering economic development and dialogue under the good offices – and with the funding – of Beijing<sup>52</sup>.

Finally, Western academics stress that the Belt and Road Initiative could also be the prelude to further military cooperation between the PRC and its partners. In particular, the 15-year-old Shanghai Cooperation Organization is conceived as a security project, initially aimed at stabilizing Central Asia and Chinese Xinjiang, that could easily evolve in military cooperation on the model of NATO<sup>53</sup>. Similarly, the creation of economic hubs in the Asia-Pacific allegedly enables China to set military footholds in the Mediterranean, in the Persian Gulf and in the Indian Ocean, in order to counter the US “Rebalance strategy”<sup>54</sup> and to encircle American allies in the region (the so called “String of Pearls” strategy<sup>55</sup>). To tell the truth, the Chinese government repeatedly denied the existence of any strategies as such<sup>56</sup>.

Having in mind the multi-target and cross-sectorial nature of the New Silk Road project analyzed above in great detail, it can thus be argued that this is the most ambitious and innovative initiative launched by China since the beginning of the

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<sup>52</sup> Xinhua, *China Voice: Chinese wisdom for Middle East problems*, January 24<sup>st</sup>, 2016. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/25/c\\_135043468.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/25/c_135043468.htm) (Last access on January, 30<sup>th</sup> 2016).

<sup>53</sup> Escobar, Pepe (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 24.

<sup>54</sup> Denyer, Simon (2013), *China bypasses American ‘New Silk Road’ with two of its own*, The Washington Post. Available at: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/china-bypasses-american-new-silk-road-with-two-if-its-own/2013/10/14/49f9f60c-3284-11e3-ad00-ec4c6b31cbed\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/china-bypasses-american-new-silk-road-with-two-if-its-own/2013/10/14/49f9f60c-3284-11e3-ad00-ec4c6b31cbed_story.html) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Lin, Christina, *Op. cit. supra* note 33, p. xi.

<sup>56</sup> English.news.cn, *China’s Belt, Road initiatives not geo-strategic tool: official*, March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/21/c\\_134086252.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-03/21/c_134086252.htm) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

Reform and Opening-up policy. Adding to this, new objectives like the primacy of the neighborhood, are combined with the traditional principles of the PRC's foreign-policy making in the NSR framework. First and foremost, the political goals of peace and harmony through mutually beneficial cooperation and of peaceful resolution of international conflicts are the core values of Chinese diplomacy. Accordingly, they are included among the well-known Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, together with the States' rights to self-determination, non-interference and sovereign equality. These principles, formulated in the 1955 Bandung Conference, were immediately adopted by the Chinese Constitution and kept through all the constitutional revisions<sup>57</sup>. On these grounds, China's diplomacy has been promoting the nation's "Peaceful Development", i.e. "making China rich and strong while simultaneously reducing international fears of the fast-growing material power"<sup>58</sup>.

In addition, the aforementioned goal of creating a "Silk Road Spirit" is in complete continuity with Chinese traditional foreign policy-making. Indeed, the PRC has always been very active in what is generally referred as "People to People Diplomacy", that is in boosting cultural exchanges and informal ties among societies rather than mere intergovernmental relations<sup>59</sup>. Through time, China has made increasing use of soft power measures in trying to ameliorate its image in the world, including sport events like the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the promotion of Chinese language and culture through the activities of the Confucius Institutes around

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<sup>57</sup> Qiu, Huafei (2014), *Contemporary Chinese Foreign Affairs and International Relations*, Beijing: Current Foreign Affairs Press, p. 73.

<sup>58</sup> Qiu, Huafei (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 57, p. 298.

<sup>59</sup> Qiu, Huafei (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 57, p. 105.

the world. The set-up of a “community of shared destiny and interests” in Eurasia arguably is grounded on this same pillar.

In general, these features endow the Belt and Road Initiative with a core visionary breadth. The goals of promoting closer economic cooperation and forging stronger political ties among the countries and the populations of the Eurasian continent could not be more ambitious. Sure is that China is one of the few international actors possessing the necessary means and influence to achieve them, but no intervention from the PRC can avoid to fall within the structure of opportunities and constraints that is described in the following section.

### 1.3 SWOT ANALYSIS

Even if the targets and objectives just described had not already been overly ambitious to reach, the Belt and Road Initiative does not impact on a political vacuum. The behaviors of other international actors, be them NSR partners or not, and world trends such as the shift of power from West to East, the enduring economic recession in many developed countries and pressing global challenges like Climate Change will arguably influence the implementation of this project<sup>60</sup>. As a consequence, both assets and liabilities in the NSR structure can be either ameliorated or worsened by the latter. For these reasons, a SWOT analysis is now conducted in order to identify the main strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats of the Chinese proposal.

As far as strengths are concerned, the New Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road can both count, first, on a clear conceptualization

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<sup>60</sup> Szczudlik-Tatar, Justyna (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 21, pp. 1-2.

and on a concise structure. The five priority areas listed in the March 2015 Action Plan can be easily understood by a variety of partners with different backgrounds and go straight to the point by stressing the multiple benefits that they could take from working with China. Even the political meta-narrative of a “Silk Road Spirit” is framed in very practical terms too, meaning as a precondition for economic cooperation. Overall, the Chinese leadership has built an open and flexible structure that is able to reach a large audience and to involve many different countries. Accordingly, the criteria for partnership set by the PRC are far less stringent than those of the so called “Washington Consensus”, so that the Belt and Road ends up being much more inclusive than previous policies of the same kind.

A second strength lies in the increasingly favorable geopolitical context for the PRC. Accordingly, economic and trade relations are now growing more than ever not only with traditional partners like Europe, but also in new areas such as Africa and the Middle East. Political relations are also improving, namely in the Asia-Pacific where dialogue in multilateral fora like ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3 and APEC arguably proceeds on a longer-term perspective than the maritime disputes in the South China Sea<sup>61</sup>. Similarly, the increasing attention that Beijing has been paying towards its Central Asian neighbors is often appreciated in an area that traditionally suffers from geopolitical isolation. In general, all along the Belt and Road soft power-oriented measures are likely to find a favorable environment.

In due consideration of these excellent assets, the New Silk Road could represent a priceless window of opportunity for China’s domestic and international

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<sup>61</sup> Sen, Tansen (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 51.

*actorness*. At the national level, improving connections between the Western regions of China and bordering countries will benefit local economies immensely and may help those areas catch up with the more advanced coastal provinces. As mentioned, the growth of the country as a whole will be nourished by a gradual shift from the previous export-driven model to a more mature development line with lower, but steady rates. In further addition, prosperity is likely to have positive repercussions on the stability of Western regions, especially in Xinjiang where export to Central Asia can make local trade flourish and foster integration of the Uighur community, with no need of more interventionist policies from the part of the central government.

At the international level, China will probably benefit from safer and faster connections with its main partners, leading to steadier and more secure economic relations. On the one hand, trade with Europe will count on a renewed potential, as soon as Chinese products are able to reach European markets in half of the time (11 days against the current 20 to 40 days)<sup>62</sup>. On the other, the PRC will enjoy stronger energy security, thanks to the new infrastructural networks feeding its demand directly from Central Asia. These connections, featuring lower political profiles, will also enable Beijing to play a key role in shaping future energy relations and turn its buying power into a precious asset. Overall, the balances under formation in the sectors of world economy and energy are arguably in favour of the PRC, in the current scenario.

On this basis, the realization of the NSR holds the potential to open very bright and positive opportunities for China. Nevertheless, alternative scenarios are

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<sup>62</sup> Brugier, Camille (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 22, p. 4.

way less optimistic, in consideration of a number of criticalities and threats that constrain the future evolution of the Belt and Road Initiative. As a general rule, we argue that, whereas the aforementioned assets make this project an extraordinary tool at the economic level, its *political profile* is not equally sound and its performance in this domain may prove to be poorer without an appropriate revision. In particular, two structural weaknesses stand out.

Firstly, the composition of the NSR audience is arguably questionable in its breadth. With its overly ambitious plan, Beijing aims at covering a geographical area beyond limits, crossing three different continents, including almost 4 billion people and showing very different socio-economic and political patterns. To this extent, it whether a single policy based on economic integration can fit such a wide variety of socio-economic, institutional and even geographical situations and of needs is fairly debatable<sup>63</sup>. In addition, China's current economic slowdown forces all these countries to compete with each other for investments, and to race towards the same pool while it is shrinking<sup>64</sup>. Some thoughts should be equally given to the fact that the multiplicity of actors and inclusiveness described above actually leave some regional and global game-makers apart, such as Japan, the Philippines and the US. It should not be a matter of surprise that, originally excluded by the project before the general restructuring that followed the amelioration of Sino-Russian ties, even the Russian

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<sup>63</sup> Mc Bride, James (2015), *Building the New Silk Road*, Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: <http://www.cfr.org/asia-and-pacific/building-new-silk-road/p36573> (Last access on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016)

<sup>64</sup> Shtraks, Gregory (2015), *A Cold Summer for China and Russia?*, The Diplomat. Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/a-cold-summer-for-china-and-russia/> (Last access on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016).



Federation had looked with some suspicions at President Xi's proposal, as Chinese officials were aware of<sup>65</sup>.

Secondly, the political meta-narrative of "reviving the Silk Road" remains controversial and is often referred as mere ideology. Accordingly, authors like Sen contend that it is deprived of any historical truth, insofar as "neither the overland route nor the maritime channels, termed collectively as the Silk Routes, were peaceful or fostered friendly exchanges through Chinese presence, as modern narratives suggest"<sup>66</sup>. To the contrary, this imagery arguably belongs to a rhetorical new world order under Chinese predominance, a sort of new imperial *tianxia* (天下). In other words, these kinds of ideological references arguably undermine the idea of a Chinese "Peaceful Development" and worsen its image in the eyes of its counterparts, especially neighbours<sup>67</sup>.

As a consequence, the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative is threatened by the current state of China's political ties with international partners. Even if ameliorating, they are still far from being idyllic. Overall, many countries fear the existence of a "China threat", i.e. that closer integration with the PRC could forge imbalanced relations in which the latter has the upper hand. This idea is supported not only by unfriendly social segments that are present in many Belt and Road countries, especially in Central Asia<sup>68</sup>, but also by other world powers such as the US, whose intervention under a "Rebalance Strategy" is frequently called for by allies in the

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<sup>65</sup> Gabuev, Alexander (2015), *Eurasian Silk Road: Towards a Russia-China Consensus?*, The Diplomat. Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/06/eurasian-silk-road-union-towards-a-russia-china-consensus/> (Last access on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016).

<sup>66</sup> Sen, Tansen (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 51.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>68</sup> Pan, Zhiping (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 49.

Asia-Pacific, and by Russia, whose traditional influence on the Central Asian “backyard” may be menaced by Beijing’s initiatives.

To be sure, clashing with the ambitions of other international game-makers would be the most serious threat for China to face. On the one hand, the Belt and Road Initiative confronts itself with similar projects of regional integration and development, including Russia’s “Eurasian Economic Union”<sup>69</sup> and the homonymous “New Silk Road” conceived in 2011 by the US for Afghanistan<sup>70</sup>. In this respect, some sort of “division of labor” and common goals may be even pursued, as recently pledged by Vladimir Putin and President Xi, but coordination would require unprecedented efforts and strategic partnerships at bilateral level that China does not have at the present moment, especially in relations with Russia<sup>71</sup>. On the other, troubles with regional and global power along the Belt and Road could escalate into bigger and more serious confrontations, as it may be the case if the United States build on the feeling that China can upturn its leadership in world affairs - what is referred as a “Thucydides trap”<sup>72</sup>.

Furthermore, it is argued that deeper engagement from the part of China in world politics can benefit its image of responsible member of the international society, but will also put it face to its judgements and standards. Growing exposure may also be a threat for the country’s internal dynamics, which are permanently evolving. As a

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<sup>69</sup> Mc Bride, James (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 63.

<sup>70</sup> U.S. Department of State, *U.S. Support for the New Silk Road*. Available at: <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/> (Last access on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016).

<sup>71</sup> Gabuev, Alexander (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 65.

<sup>72</sup> Escobar, Pepe (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 41.

consequence, internal problems like political stability could also get worse while the country further opens up, in what Johan Nylander refers to as the “Black Death effect”<sup>73</sup>. Just like the old Silk Road contributed to the prosperity of the ancient civilizations but also to their annihilation by spreading plague, opening the doors of China is likely to weaken the control of the central government on what sneaks in.

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>
<p>Clear and concise structure and conceptualization</p> <p>Increasingly favorable geopolitical context</p>	<p>Enhancement of China’s national and int’l actorness</p> <p>Steadier and more secure economic connections</p>
<p>Broad number of partners</p> <p>Controversial political metanarrative</p>	<p>"China threat"</p> <p>Clash with great powers</p> <p>"Black Death effect"</p>
<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Threats</b>

PICTURE 3 **Synthesis of the SWOT analysis**  
Source: Author’s elaboration

Correcting the structural criticalities of the NSR and avoiding the emergence of serious threats like those listed in Picture 3 surely is not an easy task. In order to strengthen the Belt and Road Initiative and steer it towards a successful implementation, the Chinese leadership will need to engage in deeper political relations with old and new partners. In other words, further steps in the evolution of the New Silk Road strategy only pass through closer consultation and synergy with relevant international actors. European countries and the European Union arguably are the first players for China to involve, as it is discussed in the next chapter.

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<sup>73</sup> Nylander, Johan (2014), *The perils of China’s Silk Road revival*, Al Jazeera. Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/09/perils-china-silk-road-revival-2014913123241888153.html> (Last access on May, 9<sup>th</sup> 2015).

## CHAPTER TWO

### HEADING TO EUROPE

#### IMPACT OF THE NEW SILK ROAD ON CHINA-EU RELATIONS

##### 2.1 OUR CASE STUDY

As presented in the previous chapter, the New Silk Road is a multi-dimensional political initiative, built on a variety of cross-sectorial targets and on a multiplicity of actors. As a consequence, picking just one of the many international partners that China has in this project as a parameter to judge the whole of it could lead to questionable choices, at the least. In general, this foreign policy strategy promoted by the Chinese government will arguably produce effects all along the NSR, but unevenly. As a matter of fact, focusing on Sino-European relations fairly seems to us a valid choice for a number of reasons, three among others.

Firstly, Europe<sup>74</sup> is by assumption the final destination of both the Belt and the Road, as frequently mentioned in the previous chapter. The whole NSR can be referred as a project to link the East-Asian emerging economies to the more advanced European ones by cutting through the still-developing Central Asia<sup>75</sup>. Securing new, faster and safer supply lines to the export markets for Chinese goods in the Old Continent is indeed one of the main goals of the PRC, whose Europe is the largest

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<sup>74</sup>To the end of our research, “Europe” and “the European Union” are operationally used as synonyms, if not indicated otherwise. Even if we fully acknowledge the profound difference between the two, the assumption is made that the European Union and its Member States constitute the main political subject in the continent and, thus, a privileged point of reference for analyzing Sino-European relations.

<sup>75</sup> Pan, Zhiping (2014), *Silk Road Economic Belt: A Dynamic New Concept for Geopolitics in Central Asia*, China Institute of International Studies. Available at: [http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2014-09/18/content\\_7243440.htm](http://www.ciis.org.cn/english/2014-09/18/content_7243440.htm) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

trading partner<sup>76</sup>. In addition, the joint build-up of an infrastructural network to guarantee closer economic integration has already started, namely with railways connections such as the Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe International Railway or *Yuxinou* (渝新欧)<sup>77</sup>. Cooperation has been growing equally in the financial sector, given that some European countries have entered the Chinese-sponsored Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as prospective founding members<sup>78</sup>.

Secondly, EU-China ties are fairly considered as holding a huge potential. As it will be seen in the following section, since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1975 the two parties have become increasingly integrated, to their mutual benefit. In the timespan of five decades only, both Europe and China have jointly risen from the devastation and turmoil suffered in the course of the XIX century and ended up being two of the three largest economies in the world. In doing so, they have also attained close interdependence thanks to a “largely complementary symbiosis, coupled with a complete absence of competing strategic and military interests or territorial claims”<sup>79</sup>. Starting from the economy, relations have then spilled over to other sectors like culture, sustainable development and human rights. Even if results in these fields are controversial, the general belief has always been that further

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<sup>76</sup> Brugier, Camille (2014), *China's way: the New Silk Road*, EUISS Brief Issue No. 14, p. 4. Available at: <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/chinas-way-the-new-silk-road/> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015),

<sup>77</sup> China Daily Europe, *Rail route to Europe improves freight transport*, September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Available at: [http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2013-09/13/content\\_16966629.htm](http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2013-09/13/content_16966629.htm) (Last access on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>78</sup> List of prospective founding members of the AIIB as of May, 10<sup>th</sup> 2015. Available at: <http://www.aiibank.org/html/pagemembers/> (Last access on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>79</sup> Vogt, Roland (2012a), *Europe and China: A Maturing Relationship?* in Vogt, Roland (ed.) (2012), *Europe and China. Strategic Partners or Rivals?*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, p. 6.

engagement by the PRC and by Europe in cooperation could benefit not only the two parties, but the global society as a whole<sup>80</sup>.

Thirdly, having just celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their diplomatic ties, China and the EU seem willing to give new life to their collaboration. Whereas the 2000s saw a negative trend in Sino-European relations, as next section describes in greater detail, the two partners now hopefully look forward to a new start. For its part, Europe is fully aware of the importance of Chinese support in recovering from the ongoing economic crises and welcomes further joint ventures in the economic field as well as in facing common geopolitical and global challenges<sup>81</sup>. Similarly, China expresses satisfaction at the growth of bilateral ties and calls for a “new vision” that could “bridge the Chinese dream and the European one” through “broader, higher and stronger relations”<sup>82</sup>. Given these high political commitments, it arguably is time for setting guidelines and making proposals for closer collaboration. China’s Belt and Road Initiative, in which Europe plays a central role, could be the main framework for dialogue and the main tool for developing cooperation, as it is argued in the rest of the thesis.

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<sup>80</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Can Europe and China Shape a New World Order*, London: Centre for European Reform, p. 103. Available at: [http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/p\\_837-611.pdf](http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/p_837-611.pdf) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>81</sup> H.E. Ambassador Hans Dietmar Schweisgut (2015), *EU-China 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: Expectations for Expanding Connections*, EU-China Observer #1.15, pp. 9-10. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer115.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer115.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>82</sup> H.E. Ambassador Yang, Yanyi (2015a), *China-EU Relations: Broader, Higher and Stronger*, EU-China Observer #1.15, pp. 6-7. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer115.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer115.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

## 2.2 SINO-EUROPEAN RELATIONS: STATE AND PERSPECTIVES

The People's Republic of China and the then European Economic Communities (now European Union) established formal diplomatic relations in 1975 (see Picture 4). Joint ventures were launched in the economic sector, as soon as two Trade and Cooperation Agreements were signed in 1978 and in 1985 respectively. Right after, a delegation of the European Commission was received in Beijing for the first time in 1988<sup>83</sup>. Seemingly, a fruitful collaboration started immediately, even if these “quick wins” did not come out of a political vacuum. As a matter of fact, the progressive detachment of Europe from the former colonial empires in the Far East during the 1950s, the normalization of relations with the PRC in the 1960s and the end of China's isolationism throughout the 1970s were all processes that paved the way to a good and productive beginning in the cooperation between Brussels and Beijing<sup>84</sup>.

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<sup>83</sup> Song, Xinning (2012), *Challenges and Opportunities in EU-China Relations* in Vogt, Roland (ed.) (2012), *Europe and China. Strategic Partners or Rivals?*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, p. 18.

<sup>84</sup> Vogt, Roland (2012a), *Op. cit. supra* note 79, p. 6.



PICTURE 4 **Official establishment of diplomatic ties between the PRC and the EECs.**

Source: Fardella, Ostermann and Craus (ed.), *Sino-European relations during the Cold War and the rise of the Multipolar World*, Wilson Center (front cover).

The end of Cold War in 1989 constituted a major turning point in bilateral relations. An even stronger impetus came at a time when Europe ended to be the field of confrontation between the US and the USSR and when China was taking increasing benefits from the introduction of the Reform and Opening-up policy in the previous decade. On the way towards deeper economic and political integration under the provisions of the 1993 Maastricht Treaty, the then become European Union equally started looking with renewed interest towards the rising power at the other edge of the continent. Recommendations and action plans formulated in that period then merged into the first EU policy paper on China in 1995<sup>85</sup>.

In the following decades and at the beginning of the new century, Sino-European relations experienced many ups and downs. Song Xinning<sup>86</sup> validly

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<sup>85</sup> Song, Xinning (2012), *Op. cit. supra* note 83, p. 18.

<sup>86</sup> Song, Xinning (2012), *Op. cit. supra* note 83, pp. 18-24.



classifies them in three main periods. First, the “Transitional Period” (1989 – 1994), when the imposition of the European arms embargo on China after the Tiananmen incident led to a dramatic reduction in bilateral trade. Nevertheless, the relationship was soon back to normal, with a general restructuring of the Union’s policy towards a rising PRC and the willingness to create a more structured political dialogue. The second phase, that of “Rapid Development” (1995 – 2002), was opened by two EU policy papers in 1995 and 1998, which framed relations with China in terms of “comprehensive engagement/partnership” and “practical cooperation”, i.e. with an overall extension of the reciprocal engagement.

The third period of “‘Imaged’ Honeymoon” (2003 – 2005) saw a level of cooperation without precedents. On both sides, stronger intentions were put on paper in the first European Security Strategy and the 2003 country paper *A Maturing Partnership* and in the PRC’s very first strategic policy paper on Europe, respectively. In October 2003, on the occasion of the 6<sup>th</sup> EU-China Summit, a *Strategic Partnership* was eventually sealed, supporting economic and trade ventures as well as joint operations in science and technology. At that time, a broad number of high-level meetings expressed optimism on future perspectives, namely on the creation and implementation of a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership”. However, older and new problems soon caused Sino-European relations to bounce back<sup>87</sup>.

In a little more than five years, the “honeymoon” spirit between China and Europe was over. Since 2005, when the efforts made by the UK to lift the arms embargo had failed, the European Union started having a more critical and assertive

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<sup>87</sup> Song, Xinning (2012), *Op. cit. supra* note 83, pp. 18-24.

stance towards the PRC. Pressured by the fear of China's economic boom and by the frustration for not seeing any real political change in Beijing, tones soon became harsher and led to a halt in cooperation<sup>88</sup>. The 2005 enlargement to more Atlanticist member and renewed relations with the incoming US Obama administration<sup>89</sup>, combined with the rise of conservative leaderships in France and Germany<sup>90</sup> also contributed to this shift in the European position. The climax was reached in 2008, when European leaders boycotted the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympic Games in retaliation for the repressions in Tibet operated by the Chinese government.

By looking at the historical evolution just outlined, some drivers in Sino-European relations can be identified, three among others. First, trade and economic exchange traditionally constitute the core area for cooperation, where an unprecedented interdependence has been achieved<sup>91</sup>. Second, the US factors plays a crucial role. The normalization of ties between Washington and Beijing was indeed the precondition for European countries to foster their economic and commercial interests in China, whereas joint efforts between Europe and the PRC were made in order to balance the US unipolar momentum, especially after the American unilateral intervention in Iraq in 2003<sup>92</sup>. Third, mutual perceptions and expectations have great

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<sup>88</sup> Song, Xinning (2012), *Op. cit. supra* note 83, pp. 25-29.

<sup>89</sup> Casarini, Nicola (2013), *The EU-China partnership: 10 years on*, European Union Institute for Security Studies Brief Issue n°35, p. 2. Available at: [http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief\\_35\\_EU-China\\_partnership.pdf](http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Brief_35_EU-China_partnership.pdf) (Last access on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>90</sup> Pan, Chenxing (2012), *Problematizing "Constructive Engagement"* in EU-China Policy in Vogt, Roland (ed.) (2012), *Europe and China. Strategic Partners or Rivals?*, Hong Kong:Hong Kong University Press, p. 38.

<sup>91</sup> Vogt, Roland (2012a), *Op. cit. supra* note 79, p. 6.

<sup>92</sup> Casarini, Nicola (2006), *The evolution of the EU-China relationship: from constructive engagement to strategic partnership*, European Union Institute for Security Studies Occasional

impacts on both actors' behaviors, which have experienced the highest satisfactions and the deepest frustrations alternatively.

As for the last driver, Europe's consuetudinary position towards China is generally referred as 'constructive engagement', i.e. a "particular normative project which aims, explicitly or implicitly, at the transformation of China more or less in the image of a European self"<sup>93</sup>. In other words, the European Union, which is frequently believed to be a "civilian superpower" endowed with incomparable normative capacity, has traditionally attempted to use economic and trade relations as means to actively support the democratization and liberalization of the PRC, in order for it to be a "good world citizen" and a full member of the international society<sup>94</sup>. This policy has been considered by European leaders as the key to success in dealing with China for a long time. Nevertheless, the overly imbalanced nature of a relation as such, in which "the EU and China are unequal partners, with the former as a teacher and the latter as a student"<sup>95</sup>, made their hopes crumble down on the occasion of the assertive stance taken by the Chinese government against the Tibetan independentism and led them to give up further engagement.

The 2009 economic crisis arguably changed all previous rules in relations between China and Europe. The former was somehow shielded from the worst repercussions of the collapse of world financial markets by its "capitalism with

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Paper n°64, p. 9. Available at: <http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/occ64.pdf> (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>93</sup> Pan, Chenxing (2012), *Op. cit. supra* note 90, p. 39.

<sup>94</sup> Casarini, Nicola (2006), *Op. cit. supra* note 92, p. 21.

<sup>95</sup> Men, Jing (2013), *A long term EU-China relationship*, College of Europe EU-China Observer #5.13, p. 3. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer\\_issue\\_5\\_2013\\_final\\_with\\_cover.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer_issue_5_2013_final_with_cover.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

Chinese characteristics” and kept its economic boom and growing prosperity steady. The latter entered a dramatic stagflation, in which many European countries are still blocked and enormous economic and social costs have been paid. Sure it is that the widening gap in the performances of the two economic systems has not been confined to the domestic arena, but it has impacted on bilateral relations and on the broader geopolitical context. Accordingly, the structure of opportunities and constraints in which Chinese and European policy-makers have been acting in the last few years is characterized by lights and shadows in all sectors, as a consequence of the dramatic changes that both parties have been experiencing.

As far as the economy is concerned, in the Old Continent closer integration with China is perceived with hopes and fears at the same time. On the one hand, enhancing the partnership with Beijing seems sensible to several European countries struggling with the ongoing sovereign debt crisis and with the restructuring of their public balances. Accordingly, China’s Central Bank has always shown itself willing to help through massive purchases of national bonds and, in this respect, some say that the survival of the Eurozone can be fairly considered as a new common strategic interest<sup>96</sup>. On the other, the seemingly endless Chinese growth has become a matter of concern for European leaders, insofar as rising imbalances affect the interdependence between the two economies<sup>97</sup>. In particular, growing economic tensions – driven by an overall decrease in EU competitiveness, coupled with a rise in the external deficit towards China, and by frequent disputes on the lack of reciprocity and on intellectual

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<sup>96</sup> Casarini, Nicola (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 89, p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Op. cit. supra* note 80, p. 32.

property rights violations, among other things – have pushed the Union to adopt more protectionist policies that could escalate in a harsher confrontation if unsolved<sup>98</sup>. Furthermore, in many sectors like energy the assumed complementarity between the two systems looks weakened and competition has emerged soon<sup>99</sup> in the form of a number of international trials on alleged Chinese dumping and arbitrations on EU anti-dumping measures under WTO rules.

In high-level relations, the strong political commitment towards closer collaboration mentioned earlier is threatened by serious institutional criticisms in both systems and by the broader geopolitical context. In November 2013 the *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation* was signed as the first step towards a “strategic partnership to the benefit of both sides, based on the principles of equality, respect and trust”, and as a tool to express the “present potential for synergies to enhance cooperation for win-win results”<sup>100</sup>. In addition, the general belief is that the EU and China could make a common front in addressing global challenges such as reducing world poverty, fighting terrorism, facing Climate Change and reforming the global governance<sup>101</sup>. Notwithstanding this potential, the absence of an effective common voice in the European Union, especially upon the failures in Libya (2011) and in Ukraine (2013), and the lack of transparency in the hyper-centralized and often procedurally-confused Chinese foreign policy-making make hard for the parties to

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<sup>98</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Op. cit. supra* note 80, p. 32.

<sup>99</sup> Vogt, Roland (2012b), *Europe and China after the Global Financial Crisis* in Vogt, Roland (ed.) (2012), *Europe and China. Strategic Partners or Rivals?*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, p. 223.

<sup>100</sup> *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*, November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013. Available at: <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/zywj/zywd/t1227624.htm> (Last access on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>101</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Op. cit. supra* note 80, p. 103.

shift from mere structured dialogues to a real strategic engagement<sup>102</sup>. As it can be observed in many current hotspots in the world like Ukraine, the two are more often than not on very different positions, insofar as Europe has realigned to the US and China enjoys a renewed interest-based convergence with Russia.

Overall, the economic and political crises of the last few years have impacted on China-Europe relations by triggering a “relative change of comparative power and influence between the two sides”<sup>103</sup>. Instead of acknowledging the failure of the “constructive engagement” policy described earlier, European leaders have been struggling to maintain a sort of “patron” status, despite the PRC’s growing discomfort and assertiveness. In this respect, European leadership and superiority have been seriously put into question by the vulnerabilities emerged in their socio-economic models and in the EU political system as a whole while facing the crises. In other words, “post-crisis Europe is much less interesting to Chinese decision-makers than before”<sup>104</sup>. For this reason, the Union still has to understand that in no way will the PRC enter a closer partnership without an equal status and that Europe “stands to gain much more from a confident and economically developed China than a poor and isolated one”<sup>105</sup>. To put it in another way, European engagement has to be not only ‘constructive’, but ‘*reciprocal*’ too, i.e. based on mutual understanding<sup>106</sup>.

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<sup>102</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Op. cit. supra* note 80, pp. 20-26.

<sup>103</sup> Men, Jing (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 95, p. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Vogt, Roland (2012b), *Op. cit. supra* note 99, p 225.

<sup>105</sup> Vogt, Roland (2012a), *Op. cit. supra* note 79, p. 8.

<sup>106</sup> Delanty, Gerard and Baogang He (2008), *Cosmopolitan Perspectives on European and Asian Transnationalism*, *International Sociology* 23:3, p. 338. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2030066> (Last access on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

In an effort of synthesis, the dramatic changes experienced by both China and Europe in the last few years have worsened the main long-term liabilities of their relationship. These weaknesses do affect the structure of Sino-European relations and shape their evolution along path-dependency lines. Literature on this subject (cf. Grant and Barysh<sup>107</sup>, Vogt<sup>108</sup> and Men<sup>109</sup>) highlights three main constraints:

1. The absence of a *true comprehensive strategic partnership*, which currently is short term-projected, economy-oriented and loosely-focused;
2. The lack of *coherent strategies and interests* in both parties, due to an inefficient internal organization and to their focus on different priorities;
3. A huge *gap in mutual understanding*, that creates misperceptions and false expectations and eventually leads to discomfort and frustration.

Notwithstanding these constraints, future perspectives of China-EU relations can also count on a precious window of opportunity, represented by the current leadership of General Secretary Xi and Premier Li. As proved by China's latest EU policy paper *Deepen the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit and Win-win Cooperation*, released in April 2014, Beijing is now willing to foster cooperation between the "two major civilizations advancing human progress" through a number of partnerships, including trade and economics, people-to-people dialogue and the peaceful resolution of disputes<sup>110</sup>. In other words, the PRC has

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<sup>107</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Op. cit. supra* note 80, p. 18.

<sup>108</sup> Vogt, Roland (2012a), *Op. cit. supra* note 79, p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> Men, Jing (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 95, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2014), *China's Policy Paper on the EU: Deepen the China-EU Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit and Win-win Cooperation*, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014. Available at: <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/zywj/zywd/t1143406.htm> (Last access on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

shown itself willing to fulfill its duties of major power and would like Europe to be a strategic partner in achieving diffuse prosperity and in promoting a more equitable world order. This could not be clearer in the New Silk Road initiative, whose repercussions on Sino-European relations are explained in greater detail through the next sections.

### 2.3 EUROPE IN THE NEW SILK ROAD

As frequently mentioned in the previous chapter, Europe is a key target in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Accordingly, the Belt and the Road both head towards Europe and connect the two edges of the Eurasian continent by crossing Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. As also recalled, building a sound infrastructural network to boost economic integration with the European Single Market is a primary goal for the PRC, in consideration of its positive repercussions on the national socio-economic development.

For these reasons, the EU would be a privileged partner in building-up the New Silk Road. In this respect, Chinese officials have adapted the five targets listed by the March 2015 Action Plan to the Sino-European partnership as follows:

1. *Increasing policy coordination*, in the framework of the existing bilateral dialogues like the EU-China Summit and with a spirit of mutual support;
2. *Building-up synergy*, in fields like connectivity, investment and trade, IT and sustainable development;
3. *Focusing on priorities in bilateral relations*, namely a China-EU FTA;



#### 4. *Building bridges between peoples*<sup>111</sup>.

Consequently, Europe's strong position in the Belt and Road Initiative would arguably enhance both the New Silk Road framework itself and EU-China relations as a whole. First, it is coherent with the "NSR spirit", to the extent that it goes well beyond a mere effort of economic coordination. In particular, people-to-people exchanges for deeper mutual understanding, the creation of a new set of rules and institutions at the regional level, growing responsibilities for China in international affairs and further domestic development all are objectives that a partnership between the PRC and the EU would cover<sup>112</sup>. These priorities were also set by President Xi Jinping, who visited Brussels and the EU headquarters for the first time in April 2014, in his landmark speech at the College of Europe. On that occasion, the Chinese leader stressed that "to move [the] relationship forward, China needs to know more about Europe, and Europe needs to know more about China" and that closer cooperation can benefit both countries and the whole world<sup>113</sup>.

Secondly, the role attributed to Europe in the NSR is also coherent with the priorities set forth by China for their partnership. Among others, the institution of a Bilateral Trade Agreement (or China-EU FTA) is a strategic target, as stated by the PRC's 2014 EU policy paper<sup>114</sup>. In addition, the proposed four partnerships for Peace,

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<sup>111</sup> H.E. Ambassador Yang Yanyi (2015b), *China to Revive Ancient Silk Road*", EU Observer, May 12<sup>th</sup>. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/eu-china/128666> (Last access on May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>112</sup> Men, Jing (2015), *China's New Silk Road and EU-China Relations*, EU-China Observer #1.15, p. 13. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer115.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer115.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>113</sup> H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China (2014), Speech at the College of Europe (Bruges, Belgium), on April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014. Available at: <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/jd/t1143591.htm> (Last access on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>114</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 110.

Growth, Reform and Civilization will be the pillars of “a bridge of friendship and cooperation across the Eurasian continent”<sup>115</sup>. In the intentions of Chinese policy-makers, only in this way can the “Chinese Dream” and the European one be connected and prosper together<sup>116</sup>.

Overall, the remarkable European component of the New Silk Road project is the sign of a “growing involvement of China in the wider European neighborhood”<sup>117</sup>. In particular, Anastas Vangeli points out that the PRC’s foreign-policy makers seem to target not only the continent as a whole, but the existence of “several Europes”. Accordingly, their action is three-fold, as it addresses the most advanced economies like Germany and two sub-regions separately. The former include Central and Eastern Europe Countries (the so called CEECs) who are thirsty for Chinese financial investments and share with it similar political backgrounds due to their Soviet legacies. The second focuses on the “Wider Mediterranean”, that is Southern Europe and North Africa, where diplomatic relations are flourishing with countries in need for help like Greece and Turkey<sup>118</sup>.

All in all, the role reserved to Europe in the New Silk Road is significant. Whereas it may be even argued that the success of the whole project largely depends on the participation of the EU and of European countries, sure it is that their contribution would be decisive. Similarly, the general belief is that the Belt and Road Initiative holds a huge potential for boosting EU-China relations, especially as far as

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<sup>115</sup> H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People’s Republic of China (2014), *Op. cit. supra* note 113.

<sup>116</sup> H.E. Ambassador Yang, Yanyi (2015a), *Op. cit. supra* note 82, p. 6.

<sup>117</sup> Vangeli, Anastas (2015), *China’s New Silk Road and Its Impact on Sino-European Relations*, EU-China Observer #1.15, p. 20. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer115.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer115.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>118</sup> Vangeli, Anastas (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 117, pp. 22-24.

the achievement of their top priorities is concerned. For this reason, China has shown itself willing to actively promote its strategy to European leaders and include them in the project. Notwithstanding this effort and the potential benefits of joint cooperation in the NSR framework, an official consent has been long to be waited, as it is now discussed.

## 2.4 EUROPEAN RECEPTION OF THE NSR AND IMPACT ON CHINA-EU RELATIONS

In the words of the EU Ambassador to the People's Republic of China and Mongolia, the Union "is with great interest following the formulation of plans for the "One Belt, One Road" initiative"<sup>119</sup>. Indeed, the tacit consensus among European policy-makers and academics seems to be that the New Silk Road is a good opportunity for the EU to foster its relations with China and with the other countries of the Eurasian continent, thus contributing to the development of both the Union itself and of the region as a whole<sup>120</sup>. Additional declarations from EU and national officials<sup>121</sup> confirm the existence of this belief.

In particular, the European Union seemingly has now a rather proactive position in relations with China. First of all, growing economic prosperity at the

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<sup>119</sup> H.E. Ambassador Hans Dietmar Schweisgut (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 81, p. 9.

<sup>120</sup> Vangeli, Anastas (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 117, p. 24.

<sup>121</sup> *Inter alia*, officials from:

Austria (cf. English.news.cn, *Interview: Austria, China have massive potential for cooperation on new Silk Road: official*, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-10/16/c\\_134721324.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-10/16/c_134721324.htm) - Last access on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016);

Bulgaria (cf. English.news.cn, *Chinese, Bulgarian leaders eye broad prospects for cooperation under "Belt and Road" initiative*, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-10/16/c\\_134720324\\_2.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-10/16/c_134720324_2.htm) - Last access on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016);

and Cyprus (cf. English.news.cn, *Interview: Cyprus to actively support "Belt and Road Initiative": President*, October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Available at [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-10/14/c\\_134713806.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-10/14/c_134713806.htm) - Last access on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016).

domestic and at the regional levels is said to be a shared priority, so that a common agenda is promoted by welcoming Chinese investments both in EU Member States and in bordering countries<sup>122</sup>. To this end, discussions were resumed on granting China the Market Economy Status (MES) by 2016<sup>123</sup> and the membership of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD)<sup>124</sup>. Secondly, pleas for the creation of a common front to face global and regional challenges are made more and more often, namely as for defense, Climate Change and international crises<sup>125</sup>, but also for jointly supporting neighbouring areas like Central Asia<sup>126</sup>. Third, collaboration between China and some EU member states has already become operational, as proved by the construction of new trans-continental railways<sup>127</sup> and by the European backing of the PRC-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank<sup>128</sup>.

Overall, putting together the EU's expertise in implementing trans-national projects and China's proactivity (funding, to put it briefly) in the NSR framework is expected to produce dramatically positive effects<sup>129</sup>. Among other things, the flow of Chinese investments that would come to Europe through the Belt and Road Initiative

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<sup>122</sup> H.E. Ambassador Hans Dietmar Schweisgut (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 81, p. 9.

<sup>123</sup> Euractiv.com, *EU straining to grant China MES*, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016. Available at: <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/trade-society/eu-straining-grant-china-mes-321523> (Last access on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016).

<sup>124</sup> English.news.cn, *China's EBRD membership a boost to Belt and Road initiative: PBOC*, December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/15/c\\_134917919.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/15/c_134917919.htm) (Last access on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016)

<sup>125</sup> Xinhua, *Interview: EU-China summit key moment to strengthen relations: Mogherini*, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Available at: [http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off\\_the\\_Wire/2015-05/05/content\\_35486710.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/Off_the_Wire/2015-05/05/content_35486710.htm) (Last access on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>126</sup> H.E. Ambassador Hans Dietmar Schweisgut (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 81, pp. 9-10.

<sup>127</sup> China Daily Europe, *Rail route to Europe improves freight transport*, September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Available at: [http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2013-09/13/content\\_16966629.htm](http://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2013-09/13/content_16966629.htm) (Last access on May, 10<sup>th</sup> 2015).

<sup>128</sup> List of prospective founding members of the AIIB as of May, 10<sup>th</sup> 2015. Available at: <http://www.aiibank.org/html/pagemembers/> (Last access on May, 10<sup>th</sup> 2015).

<sup>129</sup> Vangeli, Anastas (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 117, pp. 24-25.

can highly benefit those Member States that are still recovering from economic stagnation and be the source of further growth and prosperity for the less developed areas. In addition, the EU could help China create a new “Eurasian neighbourhood”, i.e. a space of peace and prosperity to be enjoyed by all countries in this region<sup>130</sup>.

Nevertheless, neither official answers nor any forms of political commitment have made the EU participation in the Belt and Road Initiative come true yet, whereas its European reception was lukewarm. It is argued that there are multiple reasons behind this “silence”, four of which are identified by Jing Men<sup>131</sup>. Firstly, the PRC’s policy is only at the earliest stage of formulation, so that its effects on the EU are fairly considered as too far in time. Secondly, European policy-makers may still have to study the New Silk Road and to understand what benefits it could give them. Similarly, there can be a low public awareness of China’s new strategy, given that the debate is ongoing and much more pressing issues now dominate the European public agenda. Fourthly and lastly, the fact that Beijing has been targeting its major efforts on neighboring countries may have lowered European expectations on this project<sup>132</sup>.

Furthermore, participation in the NSR could entail a number of risks for the EU. Indeed, the projects already implemented often met a number of issues, including commercial disputes<sup>133</sup> and growing fears about Chinese ownership of important assets of European national economies. For instance, the port of Piraeus was initially acquired by a Chinese shipping company, but the Greek government eventually

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<sup>130</sup> Vangeli, Anastas (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 117, pp. 24-25.

<sup>131</sup> Men, Jing (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 112, p. 14.

<sup>132</sup> Men, Jing (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 112, p. 15.

<sup>133</sup> Vangeli, Anastas (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 117, p. 25.

blocked its privatization<sup>134</sup>. Hardly ever these kinds of problems are dealt with at the European level, so that the EU's capacity of being a coherent political actor – already limited – may be put under further distress<sup>135</sup>. As a general rule, the most sensitive part of the European participation in the NSR would arguably be its *political profile*, insofar as instabilities both in Europe and at its borders are the most serious risk for the strategy of the PRC<sup>136</sup> and as the Union's foreign policy possesses a normative core that frequently bears prejudices on Beijing<sup>137</sup>.

As a consequence, it is unlikely that broader engagement towards the Belt and Road Initiative will emerge from the part of the EU if some basic conditions are not met. The latter include, firstly, closer contact with European institutions, meaning more efforts from PRC leaders in promoting their strategy not only in European capitals, but especially in Brussels. Secondly, mutual benefits and fairness need to be the principles for future Chinese interventions in Europe, especially as far as transparency and respect for European legislations in allocating investments are concerned. Thirdly, further initiatives for the formulation and implementation of the NSR have to be taken through consultation and in the most appropriate bilateral and multilateral fora, for the EU to give its own contribution<sup>138</sup>.

In general, closer collaboration between China and Europe in building-up the New Silk Road should be grounded on those principles indicated before as

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<sup>134</sup> Men, Jing (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 112, pp. 13-14.

<sup>135</sup> Stahl, Anna Katharina (2015), *China's New Silk Road Diplomacy: Implications for China's Relations with Europe and Africa*, EU-China Observer #1.15, 18. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer115.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer115.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

<sup>136</sup> Men, Jing (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 112, p. 14.

<sup>137</sup> Vangeli, Anastas (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 117, p. 25.

<sup>138</sup> Men, Jing (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 112, p. 14.

fundamental to Sino-European relations as a whole, i.e. the prioritization of common interests and mutual understanding. For this very reason, boosting cooperation in the NSR framework can thus provide the PRC and the EU the assets that they need to overcome those structural weaknesses of their relations outlined in the previous section. To put it in another way, working together in formulating and implementing the Belt and Road Initiative would mean creating a common and focused agenda, shared strategic interests and joint action plans, on the basis of which a true Comprehensive Strategic Partnership can be forged.

In order to do so, a general restructuring of the NSR is needed. De facto, at least in the European component the political profile of the Belt and Road arguably proves to be too weak to achieve its ambitious goals of peace and prosperity and thus has to be strengthened. Where to start? Fostering environmental cooperation and creating another “bridge” across the Eurasian continent, that of a Green Partnership for Sustainable Development, seem to us the most effective way to reduce conflicts and to promote new forms of political dialogue and action, as we are about to show.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A GREEN SILK ROAD BETWEEN CHINA AND THE EU

#### 3.1 'GREENING' FOR BETTER POLITICAL RELATIONS

What does 'greening' mean? And, how does it relate to International Relations? Whereas answering these two questions is our core mission with this thesis, the analysis developed through this chapter and the three contributions that we are giving to academics and policy-makers need some introductory remarks.

The 'greening era' sprang up at the end of the 2000s, when a set of different crises shattered many of the illusions of the world's dominant economic and social paradigms. To be sure, the economic and financial crisis was the one striking world communities and citizens the hardest, leading to diffused losses in wealth and jobs, irrespectively of national boundaries. On top of these dramatic implications, other quandaries were lying underneath the economic structure and endangered the very pillars of the system, including its institutional functioning and the environment in which it operates<sup>139</sup>.

Calls for solving the structural weaknesses of the world's development model and for finding a way forward started to emerge. Among other things, many pointed at the very essence of this social and economic paradigms, that is how and for what the market and its operators - be them public or private, collective or individual - spend their money. A "gross misallocation of capital" was identified as the main

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<sup>139</sup> UNEP (2011), *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication - A Synthesis for Policy Makers*, p. 1. Available at: [http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/Portals/88/documents/ger/GER\\_synthesis\\_en.pdf](http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/Portals/88/documents/ger/GER_synthesis_en.pdf) (Last access on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016).



cause of the economic, social and environmental crises, insofar as it had promoted the accumulation of limited capitals like the physical, the financial and the human, while leading to an irreversible depletion of the natural capital and of the renewable goods and services that it offers<sup>140</sup>. As a result, addressing this issue and eradicating those negative externalities that are systemically related to this system has meant developing a new, combined approach to economic development and environmental protection.

In particular, the ‘Green Economy’ paradigm aims at going beyond the traditional conundrum between sustainability and growth, by showing how to enhance world economies and societies while taking good care of the environment. In the words of UNEP, the economy is ‘green’ when it produces “*improved human wellbeing and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities*”, i.e. it "is low carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive"<sup>141</sup>. To this end, a series of policy measures (ranging from climate financing and investments in alternative energies, transport and infrastructures to sustainable consumption and individual actions) that would set the enabling conditions for markets and societies to undertake this ‘Green Transition’ were defined and addressed to decision-makers<sup>142</sup>.

National policy makers would react differently to the call of the ‘Green Transition’, as it was clear since the beginning<sup>143</sup>. Among many drivers, the levels of

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<sup>140</sup> UNEP (2011), *Op. cit. supra* note 139, p. 1.

<sup>141</sup> UNEP (2011), *Op. cit. supra* note 139, p. 2. Italics in the original.

<sup>142</sup> UNEP (2011), *Op. cit. supra* note 139, p. 38-39.

<sup>143</sup> UNEP (2011), *Op. cit. supra* note 139, p. 4.

development and of natural and human capital of each country were expected to shape different structures of opportunities and constraints for transforming the economy at national level. On the one hand, developed countries would have to decrease their impacts on the environment without decreasing the quality of life for their citizens. On the other, emerging and developing economies would need to achieve further progress and growth, but without compromising their ecological system<sup>144</sup>.

On top of this, what made this ambitious task even more demanding is that national boundaries often mean little when dealing with economic and environmental issues in a world that has become increasingly interdependent. Accordingly, transitioning towards a green economy at the national level has had a series of repercussions at the international level, insofar as States have found themselves either competing for the same pool of resources or forced to coordinate with each other for achieving results. In other words, competition and coordination in international relations are a direct consequence of national policy-making on economic and environmental issues. To this extent, ‘greening’ often puts States at odds with each other, but it may also be a priceless opportunity for them to deepen their collaboration, thus increasing mutual understanding and boosting their political relations, as our analysis will show through the rest of this chapter.

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<sup>144</sup> UNEP (2011), *Op. cit. supra* note 139, p. 4.

### 3.2 EU-CHINA ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION: A SUCCESS STORY

The cooperation on Environment and Energy covers more than two decades of EU-China relations, insofar as it took off in the aftermath of the 1992 Rio Summit<sup>145</sup>. Since then, the two partners have joined efforts in the primary goal of developing clean energy, i.e. reducing carbon emissions from fossil fuels and finding alternative sources through technological advancement<sup>146</sup>. Starting from this common priority, Sino-European collaboration has spilled over other environmental sectors and managed to overcome many political ups-and-downs, as we are about to show. For these reasons, it can be fairly considered as a remarkable success story.

Li Xinlei classifies China-EU joint initiatives in three stages<sup>147</sup>. In the initial phase (1994-2002), a number of bilateral fora on Energy and Environment were created and an institutionalized mechanism for mutual coordination and cooperation gradually emerged, especially on the occasion of the annual EU-China Summits. In those years, the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol by both the PRC (2001) and the Union (2002) also led to common actions in fighting Climate Change. The second stage (2003-2008) witnessed the creation of a true cooperation, opened by the 2003 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership which upgraded the institutional dialogue to vice-ministerial first, and then to ministerial level, and by the EU-China Partnership on Climate Change. Finally, in the third stage (2009-Present day), successful

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<sup>145</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Renewable Energy Policy Evolution in China and its Implications for EU-China Climate Change and Energy Cooperation: A Chinese View* in Austermann, Frauke, Anastas Vangeli and Xiaoguang Wang (ed.) (2013), *China and Europe in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Global Politics: Partnership, Competition or Coevolution*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 138.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>147</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, pp. 139-144.

cooperation between the PRC and the Union, especially in the field of Renewable Energy Sources (RES), has pushed them to implement new projects and to held joint workshops and initiatives for capacity-building.

As mentioned, clean energy has thus constituted the bulk of EU-China cooperation, insofar as the transition to more sustainable energy consumption patterns does not only benefit the economy, but equally reduces Greenhouse Gases (GHG) emissions and, thus, the overall contribution to Climate Change<sup>148</sup>. In particular, European countries frequently recurred to the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) adopted under the Kyoto Protocol, which allows developed countries (the so called Annex B parties) to meet their targets also by investing in emission-reduction projects in developing countries<sup>149</sup>. As a consequence, China soon became the focal point for developing CDMs, which were strategically managed by the national government to boost the country's sustainable development, especially in the renewables industry<sup>150</sup>.

Nevertheless, Sino-European collaboration has proved to be fruitful beyond clean energy. For instance, the import of European waste incineration technology has initially stimulated an increase in waste management in China and the creation of a solid know-how, to the point that the national government has then replaced import with cheaper domestic technologies<sup>151</sup>. Similarly, European CDM-driven projects in China have given a decisive contribution to the initial large-scale investment needed

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<sup>148</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, p. 144.

<sup>149</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, p. 133.

<sup>150</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, p. 141.

<sup>151</sup> Rech, Maximilian (2013), *Environmental Policy in a Changing Environment: A European View* in Austermann, Frauke, Anastas Vangeli and Xiaoguang Wang (ed.) (2013), *China and Europe in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Global Politics: Partnership, Competition or Coevolution*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 116-119.

in the RES industry, which then evolved into an independent and structured market<sup>152</sup>. Low-carbon development has been another area of coordination, since the hurdled yet successful implementation of the European Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS)<sup>153</sup> was taken as a model by China for establishing pilot programs in seven among major cities and provinces, as a first step for building up a nation-wide carbon trading center<sup>154</sup>. In further addition, international climate negotiations on air pollution are another field in which EU-China cooperation has made the difference and may flourish even more in the near future<sup>155</sup>.

Driven by an increasing political engagement, cooperation in environmental affairs between the PRC and the European Union has brought remarkable benefits to the two partners, both domestically and in their bilateral ties. Four positive effects arguably stand out, among others<sup>156</sup>. First, comparable policy environments, especially in the field of RES, have contributed to the formation of an agenda-setting balance between China and the EU, i.e. similar domestic priorities on the same issues. Secondly, the institutionalization of bilateral cooperation mechanisms has not only meant an increase in the capacity of Chinese bureaucracy to deal with environmental policies, but also mobilized academics and local communities. Thirdly, with the support of European technology transfers, a fully-fledged green market has progressively emerged in the PRC, following the shift from government-led policies

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<sup>152</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, pp. 133-134.

<sup>153</sup> Cameron, Edward and Hillary McMahon (2010), *The EU-China Partnership. Forging a New Space on Global Climate Change* in Men, Jing and Giuseppe Balducci (ed.) (2010), *Prospects and Challenges for EU-China Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, “College of Europe Studies” No. 12, Germany:P.I.E. Peter Lang S.A., pp. 182-184.

<sup>154</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, p. 137.

<sup>155</sup> Rech, Maximilian (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 151, p. 119.

<sup>156</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, pp. 145-152.

to more dynamic businesses in the private sector. Fourthly, the growing maturity of China's sustainable development makes it more resilient to international pressure, including that from European policy-makers, and more flexible in cooperation.

Overall, it can be argued that expanding collaboration surely led economic benefits to both partners, but it has also strengthened the political profile of EU-China relations. Accordingly, coordination in environmental policies steadily resisted to the 2008 crisis in bilateral ties, thanks to the existence of the aforementioned institutional mechanisms, which safeguarded communication and joint ventures<sup>157</sup>. As a matter of fact, this policy area can also be a source of conflicts in bilateral relations from time to time, as it is nowadays due to the anti-dumping and anti-subsidy tariffs imposed by the European Union on the Chinese solar panels industry<sup>158</sup>, but cooperation usually prevails. Indeed, there is a clear political will to join efforts in fighting Climate Change and in promoting Sustainable Development, as shown by the creation of a common front in the initial stages of the recent Paris international negotiations<sup>159</sup>.

It follows that the potential for closer environmental cooperation is extremely broad, as it is about to be examined.

### 3.3 BUILDING THE EU-CHINA GREEN PARTNERSHIP

As shown, China-EU environmental cooperation can be fairly considered as a story of success that would not collapse easily. To the contrary, under the right conditions there is room for fostering collaboration between the two main political

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<sup>157</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, p. 142.

<sup>158</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, p. 151.

<sup>159</sup> EUObserver, *EU and China to agree 'common approach' on climate*, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/eu-china/128612> (Last access on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

entities of the Eurasian continent to the benefit of both parties, of their relationship and of the whole international society. Having outlined the current state of affairs in the previous section, the structure of opportunities and constraints where Chinese and European policy-makers are operating is now analysed in order to make predictions on future perspectives, as well as on measures to take for making their cooperation more operational and fruitful.

In particular, closer collaboration is likely to emerge on several grounds. First, both the PRC and European states do share a problem which is increasingly urgent and pressing, that is Climate Change. The former has been already affected by the repercussions of global warming, mainly with an increase in the frequency of floods, with coastal erosion and with water scarcity, which put the livelihood of the most part of the country under serious threat. The latter may seem to face smaller issues, but Climate Change-related impacts are growing in size. Rising temperatures, retreating glaciers, reduced water availability, risks of flooding and illnesses are all factors that put both the European continent and its economy under distress<sup>160</sup>. Trends in other issues like environmental migrations need to be equally monitored and may become problematic in the near future, especially when adding to the pressing and ongoing refugees' issue. All in all, exposure to Climate Change thus impacts the physical, economic and social structures in China and in Europe in similar ways and may ask for solutions of the same kind.

Accordingly, both Beijing and Brussels are deeply engaged in fighting Climate Change and are two frontrunners in Sustainable Development. As for the EU,

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<sup>160</sup> Cameron, Edward and Hillary McMahon (2010), *Op. cit. supra* note 153, pp. 176-177.

its diplomacy is traditionally the most proactive in international negotiations and it is acknowledged many achievements, including the Kyoto Protocol itself and the most recent Paris Agreement. Domestically, the Union has promoted comprehensive policy frameworks such as the European Climate Change Programme (ECCP), the EU Climate Change Action Plan and the most recent climate and energy targets for 2030. Quite successful policies like the aforementioned European ETS, the proactivity of Member States such as Sweden, Denmark and Germany and the EU's growing engagement towards developing countries are also to be mentioned<sup>161</sup>. For its part, the PRC has been gradually overcoming the cumbersome dependence on coal which fueled its impressive economic growth. Thanks to a renovated domestic political commitment, a well-built legislative framework was built in order to promote energy efficiency and technological modernization and to turn China into an emerging leader in sustainable innovation<sup>162</sup>. This seems to be very true for RES, a field in which the national government was able to gradually become a solid world number one<sup>163</sup>.

Sure is that unilateral action is frequently limited, but the two partners sometimes share the same sets of issues and can thus find similar solutions. EU initiatives suffer from implementational issues often deriving from a lack of governance at European level and of coordination with Member States. In addition, the economic stagnation has arguably worsened these criticalities and prevents many commitments taken by decision-makers from being fulfilled, with a sort of gap

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<sup>161</sup> Cameron, Edward and Hillary McMahon (2010), *Op. cit. supra* note 153, pp. 178-183.

<sup>162</sup> Cameron, Edward and Hillary McMahon (2010), *Op. cit. supra* note 153, pp. 184-185.

<sup>163</sup> Li, Xinlei (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, pp. 133-138.



between rhetoric discourses and real accomplishments<sup>164</sup>. On the other hand, China often struggles in dealing with economic growth and environmental protection at the same time. This is mainly due to a weak capacity-building that obstacles the implementation of national plans at the provincial and local levels and in some sectors, but also to an overall absence of knowledge and transparency in measures and evaluations<sup>165</sup>. All in all, implementation looks problematic in both decision-making systems, given that Chinese provincial and local governments often disregard national policies for bigger gains in economic performance and legitimacy<sup>166</sup>, just as EU Member States are resilient in adhering to the Commission's regulations and directives.

Another ground for deeper collaboration lies in the similar structure of decision-making that the two political entities surprisingly present in this policy area. In his analysis, Maximilian Rech recurs to theoretical concepts like the Ideal-Type Rational Actor Choice applied to global commons, Moravcsik's New Liberal theory and Putnam's Two-Level Game to sketch state preferences formation in China and in the EU<sup>167</sup>. Awkwardly enough, having different political regimes does not imply that these two decision-making systems cannot work under similar dynamics. In particular, relations among the actors are equivalent, as Brussels is opposed to its Member States just as Beijing to the provincial governments, which frequently hold the reins of local

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<sup>164</sup> Cameron, Edward and Hillary McMahon (2010), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, p. 184.

<sup>165</sup> Cameron, Edward and Hillary McMahon (2010), *Op. cit. supra* note 145, pp. 186-189.

<sup>166</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Can Europe and China Shape a New World Order*, London: Centre for European Reform, p. 73. Available at: [http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/p\\_837-611.pdf](http://www.cer.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/p_837-611.pdf) (Last access on May, 11<sup>nd</sup> 2015).

<sup>167</sup> Rech, Maximilian (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 151.

industries<sup>168</sup>. In addition, the progressive melting-down of the traditional 'industrialists vs. environmentalists' cleavage in Europe and the gradual emergence of an environmentally-conscious civil society in China are steering towards the same triangular structure "politics – business – civil society" in both systems<sup>169</sup>.

Lastly, a huge potential for cooperation with the European Union comes from the window of opportunity that China is now entering. On the one hand, the country does possess an extremely strong diplomatic position in international negotiations on Climate Change, given that it has been the largest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter since 2007 and that emissions are likely to rise until 2030. In addition, neither other developing countries nor global powers like the United States may ever accept new agreements on capping GHG unless the PRC is part of them, as happened in Paris<sup>170</sup>. On the other, if in 2008 Grant and Barysh expressed the following wish, that

Perhaps China's rulers, deservedly famed for their ability to think long term, will grapple seriously with the issue of climate change. They could use the state media to educate the public, and they could try to force local authorities to enforce environmental laws and energy efficiency targets. An emissions trading scheme, similar to that of the EU, would not be viable for now: no part of the government currently has the means to verify what individual companies emit. A serious attempt to tackle carbon emissions would require cruder, quantitative methods, perhaps focused on individual cities. If China's leaders want to be respected by their peers in many other parts of the world, they will need to find a way of shaping and joining the post-Kyoto system that is due to start in 2012.<sup>171</sup>

it can now be argued that the new leadership of President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang is accomplishing these tasks, as proved by the numerous awareness campaigns on ecosystems preservation, by the creation of new monitoring

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<sup>168</sup> Rech, Maximilian (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 151, pp. 114-116.

<sup>169</sup> Rech, Maximilian (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 151, pp. 120-124.

<sup>170</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Op. cit. supra* note 166, p. 71.

<sup>171</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Op. cit. supra* note 166, p. 76.

systems, by the setting-up of Carbon Trading pilot schemes in all the major cities and provinces and by China's new proactivity in international negotiations.

Given that there is room for enhancing collaboration on the grounds that have been just described, deeper environmental cooperation between China and Europe could arguably be beneficial in a three-fold manner. Firstly, the general belief (cf. Rech<sup>172</sup> and Cameron and McMahon<sup>173</sup>) is that it could facilitate international negotiations on Climate Change and bring them to the success. In particular, "the EU-China partnership has the potential to steer the global community from principles to practice"<sup>174</sup>. In other words, combining the EU's traditional engagement and *savoir fair* in environmental protection and China's growing number of good practices can provide the international society as a whole and its single members with a method to be applied both domestically and globally.

Secondly, joint actions in environmental policies can benefit the overall course of bilateral relations. In fact, the importance of energy and the environment in fostering economic development and in shaping geopolitical dynamics is growing immensely<sup>175</sup>, so that competition in this domain may hinder further achievements, whereas cooperation would expectedly lead to many<sup>176</sup>. As a consequence, win-win collaboration in the environmental field can give new impetus to Sino-European relations, providing both parties with those mutual understanding and trust and those common priorities that they are desperately in need of, as explained in the previous

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<sup>172</sup> Rech, Maximilian (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 151, p. 124.

<sup>173</sup> Cameron, Edward and Hillary McMahon (2010), *Op. cit. supra* note 153, p. 173.

<sup>174</sup> Cameron, Edward and Hillary McMahon (2010), *Op. cit. supra* note 153, p. 195.

<sup>175</sup> Rech, Maximilian (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 151, p. 124.

<sup>176</sup> Rech, Maximilian (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 151, p. 125.

chapter. Accordingly, Sustainable Development constitutes the main part of the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation and outnumbers even economic coordination, with 46 initiatives against 28<sup>177</sup>. Thereof, joining efforts in implementing these policies will give a new goal to EU-China relations and the necessary political soul.

Thirdly, focusing on environmental cooperation would be the chance for the European Union to overcome its aggressive and protectionist stance and to actively contribute to China's Peaceful Development. In particular, new forms of reciprocal engagement can support the PRC in behaving as a responsible stakeholder of the international community and may lead to the creation of new multilateral institutions to address Climate Change and other pressing global challenges<sup>178</sup>. Additionally, sharing experiences arguably is the right way to find common solutions to the similar domestic problems mentioned earlier, namely in helping China to handle its changing society and any political issues that may arise in the future.

Notwithstanding this huge potential for prosperous collaboration, the environment could also be a source of conflicts in EU-China relations<sup>179</sup>. Overall, the two have prioritized complementary but different goals so far. In particular, the PRC, which still is a developing country, focuses on energy efficiency and sustainable development, whereas the European developed economies are pressed by cutting GHG emissions and fighting Climate Change. This adds to an increasing number of

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<sup>177</sup> *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*, November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013. Available at: <http://www.chinamission.be/eng/zywj/zywd/t1227624.htm> (Last access on May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>178</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Op. cit. supra* note 166, p. 78.

<sup>179</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Op. cit. supra* note 166, p. 70.

bilateral disputes around the alleged lack of transparency and competition in the Chinese business environment. In particular, widespread violations of Intellectual Property Rights prevent European enterprises from exporting technology and triggered the anti-dumping tariffs mentioned earlier. All in all, a pessimist outlook emerges from the fact that PRC's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are rising steadily, while ecological awareness in the unstructured Chinese civil society will take time and efforts to emerge<sup>180</sup>.

As a consequence, some conditions have to be met in order to overcome these limitations and forge a new form of environmental cooperation. The most relevant literature (cf. in particular Cameron and McMahon<sup>181</sup>) suggests four missions:

1. Developing a *better understanding*, based on mutual recognition and trust but also on equity in assigning responsibilities and duties;
2. Shaping a *common vision and political commitment*, e.g. by setting challenging environmental targets that can create a virtuous circle with other political entities;
3. Introducing a *governance reform*, in order to solve the hardest implementational issues and to combine good administration with sustainable development. In particular, more balanced state preferences, i.e. better representing the needs of both national businesses and civil society, may facilitate international negotiations<sup>182</sup>;

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<sup>180</sup> Grant, Charles and Katinka Barysh (2008), *Op. cit. supra* note 166, pp. 74-75.

<sup>181</sup> Cameron, Edward and Hillary McMahon (2010), *Op. cit. supra* note 153, pp. 192-194.

<sup>182</sup> Rech, Maximilian (2013), *Op. cit. supra* note 151, p. 119.

4. Fostering *practical collaboration* on policy initiatives like those listed in the 2020 Strategic Agenda and on the enhancement of funding from both the public and the private sectors.

Interestingly enough, these conditions look very similar to those listed in the previous chapter, when dealing with how to foster EU-China relations. It follows that meeting these requirements will benefit both equally.

In other words, environmental cooperation holds the potential to bring China and Europe closer to each other and to boost their political relationship. Accordingly, together with the partnerships for Peace, Growth, Reform and Civilization that the Chinese government wants to build with its European counterparts<sup>183</sup> there should be a *Green Partnership* to sustain the other four and to foster friendship between the PRC and the Union.

### 3.4 GREENING CHINA'S NEW SILK ROAD

Building on the findings from the case study developed through the previous writing, the focus now shifts back to China's Belt and Road Initiative, which was analysed in Chapter One. The main argument here is that 'greening' the New Silk Road and turning it into a tool able to foster environmental cooperation among the PRC, Europe and the other NSR countries can solve its main structural issues and comprehensively strengthen it. Put in another way, closer coordination in environmental policies arguably is the key for China to boost economic integration

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<sup>183</sup> H.E. Ambassador Yang, Yanyi (2015a), *China-EU Relations: Broader, Higher and Stronger*, EU-China Observer #1.15, p. 6. Available at: [https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/eu-china\\_observer115.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/eu-china_observer115.pdf?download=1) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

and cultural exchange with its partners and the pillar on which peace and prosperity in Eurasia can be built.

Hints of the development of a *Green Silk Road* can be found already in some official documents and in the Chinese political narrative. On the one hand, the March 2015 Action Plan already points at “mak[ing] the Silk Road an environment- friendly one”, mainly through the promotion of green and low-carbon infrastructure management, green investment and trade, ecological conservation, protection of the biodiversity and prevention from the impact of Climate Change on constructions<sup>184</sup>. On the other, the PRC’s Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) has been very active in promoting international cooperation with Belt and Road countries in more than 40 bilateral and regional mechanisms and in fostering information-sharing through the creation of dedicated research institutes, like the China-ASEAN Environmental Cooperation Center/China Centre for SCO Environmental Cooperation (CAEC/CSEC). In particular, CSEC effectively promotes the greening of the NSR framework by means of its “One Belt and One Road” Environmental Information Sharing Platform and of its Green Silk Road Envoy Plan<sup>185</sup>.

The general belief among Chinese policy-makers is that the creating a Green Silk Road would be the best way to achieve the PRC’s interests in this policy domain. Accordingly, this could be the right framework for the MEP to fulfill its main tasks,

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<sup>184</sup> National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road*, March 2015. Available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-03/28/c\\_134105858.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-03/28/c_134105858.htm) (Last access on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

<sup>185</sup> Guo, Dongmei (2015), Presentation *Overview of the Cooperation on Environmental Protection and Green Economy in Central Asia*, delivered at the UNEP Workshop on Green Economy in Central Asia and Mongolia, Beijing, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

i.e. strengthening the Chinese strategy of the “Ecological Civilization” and fostering regional cooperation in facing trans-border challenges. To put it in another way, the creation of comprehensive and effective dialogue and coordination mechanisms can foster governmental action on a number of issues that involve multiple regional stakeholders. For instance, desertification, fire prevention, wildlife protection and deforestation can be addressed through common action on the Land Road, while conservation of marine ecology and biodiversity can be enhanced along the Maritime Road. In this regard, policy measures like introducing a regional ecology and environmental code of conduct, supporting joint research between Chinese and foreign institutes and think tanks and promoting *pro bono* initiative for environmental protection can facilitate trans-boundary dialogue and coordination<sup>186</sup>.

In addition, working on environmental cooperation arguably is crucial in fulfilling the objectives and priorities of the Belt and Road Initiative itself. First, taking the environmental impacts of constructions into consideration will be beneficial to the build-up of a reliable infrastructure network. Secondly, closer connection in trade and currencies is likely to lead to a more efficient use of vital resources like water and to an increase in environmental capacity. Thirdly, the “Silk Road Spirit” can count on increasing ecological awareness among Eurasian populations and may eventually connect “peoples’ hearts” with one another<sup>187</sup>.

In other words, giving a “green soul” to the New Silk may be a remarkable achievement, as pointed out by Ms. Jiang Nanqing, UNEP China National Office, in

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<sup>186</sup> Guo, Dongmei (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 185.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibidem*.



the interview conducted by the author. In her opinion, the Belt and Road Initiative will enable the PRC to promote the infrastructural development of the Eurasian region, while respecting the vulnerability of its ecosystems. In particular, this should be done by taking account of environmental impacts not only in single projects, as it is frequently done, but in policy planning as a whole. As a matter of fact, threatening or even destroying extremely vulnerable ecological systems like those of Central Asia may hinder their restoration and could generate serious ecological catastrophes, so that attention should be paid when implementing infrastructural projects along the New Silk Road Economic Belt.

In addition to this contribution in terms of green infrastructure-building, she stressed that “it is not only about the environment, it is also about political issues”. Accordingly, a Green Silk Road should be built to the benefit of local communities, i.e. improve their livelihood and boost employment. Only in this way can Chinese businesses make investments without getting into troubles for the opposition by the locals, as often happened in the past. In turn, taking good care of the social and environmental structures in target countries can improve dramatically the image of China abroad<sup>188</sup>.

According to Ms. Jiang, sure is that this project will face some challenges. In particular, Belt and Road partners distinguish themselves from what China is used to in terms of environment, national and local institutions and cultures. This couples with a lack of expertise in international collaboration on the part of the PRC’s policy-makers, given that the country has been opening-up only for a few decades. As a

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<sup>188</sup> Interview with Ms. Jiang Nanqing, National Officer, United Nations Environment Programme in the PRC, made by the Author on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 in the UNEP China Office, Beijing.

consequence, the interviewee believes that a serious work of information-sharing and capacity-building should be done as a preliminary step to making investments. Operationally, an initial feasibility study, i.e. an analysis of the state and the needs of local ecosystems, laws and regulations, should be followed by a gap study, based on a comparison with to the domestic situation.

To sum up, according to experts and policy-makers the Green Silk Road should create a platform for collaboration among China and its Belt and Road partners on the basis of the following implementational pillars:

1. *Information-sharing and capacity-building*, which is the precondition for any further actions to be environmentally and socially conscious;
2. *Climate financing*, mainly through the enhancement of green public procurement and of Public Private Partnerships (PPPs);
3. *Building green infrastructures*, meaning at the level of physical, economic, energy as well as institutional and even cultural systems;
4. *Inclusion and empowerment of local communities*, who have to be protagonist in this project for it to success.

Implementing these pivotal measures will arguably make the Green Silk Road one of the most important contributions to the Green Transition at the global level and, paraphrasing Escobar<sup>189</sup>, a supremely ambitious, Chinese-fueled trans-Eurasian integration *green economy* megaproject.

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<sup>189</sup> Escobar, Pepe (2013), *China stitches up (SCO) Silk Rd*, Asia Times Online. Available at: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/MID-04-130913.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/MID-04-130913.html) (Last access on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015).

All being considered, “greening the Silk Road is a very big, long-term picture that will really change the strategic position of China in the world and make it take the lead”, as stated by Ms. Jiang. Consequently, a good performance in environmental protection, e.g. by sharing the many good practices and lessons that it has developed, can help China solve its pressing environmental challenges and bring equal benefits to its partners. In other words, deeper environmental cooperation can give a political soul to the New Silk Road and forge the community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility in the Eurasian continent to which it aims<sup>190</sup>. As Ms. Guo Dongmei, Director of Division at CSEC, puts it, “conflict will be changed into harmonization by environmental cooperation”<sup>191</sup>. If this is true for China, Europe and the other partners in the New Silk Road, it could also work for the global community as a whole, as it is argued in the following section.

### 3.5 TOWARDS A GREEN DIPLOMACY FOR IMPLEMENTING THE 2030 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

Despite a long history of apparent success inaugurated by the 1972 Stockholm conference and continued by the 1992 Rio Summit, it is believed that global environmental governance soon got gridlocked. Accordingly, when Climate Change and other ecological problems seem even more difficult to solve and the impacts of environmental degradation harm world economy and societies stronger than before, hardly ever do inter-governmental negotiations reach agreements for common action, as happened in Copenhagen in 2009 and in the “Rio+20” Summit in 2012.

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<sup>190</sup> Guo, Dongmei (2015), *Op. cit. supra* note 185.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibidem*.

Institutional inertia and fragmentation, often coupled with a rapidly-changing distribution of power and responsibilities, arguably make international actors unable to overcome this gridlock, and calls for a general reform of the global governance have become more and more frequent<sup>192</sup>. In particular, the fight against Climate Change within the UNFCCC and the so called “Kyoto model” is deemed to have failed and new approaches to this issue are invoked<sup>193</sup>.

True is that the year 2015 represented a window of opportunity in which intergovernmental negotiations got new impetus. In September, the post-2015 development agenda was adopted by the United Nations, setting the framework of the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ for 2030<sup>194</sup>. The following December, the 21<sup>st</sup> session of the Conferences of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21 hereinafter) approved the so called “Paris Agreement”, introducing a binding mechanism on all UN members to progressively decarbonise their economies, in order for global warming to stay “well below” 2°C. This success came quite as a surprise, after that the aforementioned 2009 summit in Copenhagen had failed to accomplish a similar task. Together with the different global scenario and with increasing evidences of the dramatic effects of Climate Change, what changed and made the difference in Paris was the negotiating procedure and its

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<sup>192</sup> Hale, Thomas, David Held and Kevin Young (2013), *Gridlock. Why Global Cooperation Is Failing When We Need It Most*, Cambridge:Polity Press, p. 182.

<sup>193</sup> Prynns, Gwin *et al.* (2010), *The Hartwell Paper. A new direction for climate policy after the crash of 2009*, Oxford Institute for Science, Innovation and Society and LSE Mackinder Programme, Executive Summary. Available at: [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/27939/1/HartwellPaper\\_English\\_version.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/27939/1/HartwellPaper_English_version.pdf) (Last access on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

<sup>194</sup> United Nations, Resolution 70/1 "*Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*", adopted by the General Assembly, 70<sup>th</sup> Session, on 25 September 2015 [A/RES/70/1]. Available at: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1) (Last access on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

underlying approach, as European and Italian diplomatic sources point out in internal reports.

In particular, countries were asked to publicly commit to decarbonisation by preparing Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) well in advance of COP21, as a basis for discussions. According to unofficial European Commission sources, this “bottom-up” approach was crucial for the following intergovernmental negotiations to succeed, insofar as it gave all countries the chance to choose for themselves and to arrive in Paris without the feeling that a “top-down” process would impose something on them. Only in this way could the hardest issues be discussed and solved, including the principle of differentiation, accountability and the review process, and the broadening of the donor base. As a consequence, building on the record of 186 INDCs submitted, the Paris summit was eventually able to seal the deal and pave the way for Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to be redacted as a next step, on the basis of the template established by Lima COP20 and with the purpose of allowing for comparisons among countries in a broader picture.

China can arguably be decisive in keeping the momentum going. In this respect, positive trends seem now at the horizon, as the PRC is likely to take its full responsibilities of biggest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter and make higher commitments than in the past, as also predicted by Ms. Jiang<sup>195</sup>. At national level, the PRC can count on a strong central government and on a well-oiled administrative system that fix national targets in GHG emissions and then calculate quotas at the provincial and local levels<sup>196</sup>.

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<sup>195</sup> Interview with Ms. Jiang Nanqing, *supra* note 188.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibidem*.

Accordingly, even if implementational issues may arise, setting carbon caps follows by nature a top-down policy-making structure, in which China's political regime may be considered as even more efficient than those of many Western democracies.

At the international level, under the current leadership the PRC has proactively fostered its environmental agenda both in bilateral and multilateral relations. In November 2014, despite the alternate evolution of Sino-American relations and the numerous issues in the South China Sea, an historic joint statement was released by President Obama and President Xi on Climate Change, announcing stronger commitments by both parties to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions<sup>197</sup>. Similarly, Chinese negotiators consciously started preparing for Paris well in advance and in cooperation with other global powers like the EU and the US, with the aim of playing a decisive role, instead of ending up being isolated as it had happened in Copenhagen<sup>198</sup>. Even if, in the course of the negotiations, the Chinese progressively abandoned this spirit of collaboration for tougher stances, as diplomatic sources report, the deal was eventually sealed only with their consent, obtained by the direct intervention of President Obama. For these reasons, we can expect that the action of the Chinese government will be crucial for the implementation of the Paris Agreement and for the decarbonisation of world economy.

Nevertheless, as Ms. Jiang recalled, the creation of a low-carbon society is but one of the objectives of environmental governance. As a matter of fact, achieving the

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<sup>197</sup> The White House, Press release “*U.S.-China Joint Presidential Statement on Climate Change*”, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/25/us-china-joint-presidential-statement-climate-change> (Last access on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016).

<sup>198</sup> Hornby, Lucy and Christian Shepherd (2015), *China learns lessons from past failure of talks*, Financial Times. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/480e813a-8f81-11e5-a549-b89a1dfede9b.html#axzz3yp9aBClf> (Last access on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016).

Green Transition is now the main issue at stake, as proved by the many initiatives and innovations that are emerging in China at both national and local levels<sup>199</sup>. In particular, the environment is not perceived as a solely public affair anymore, but, as recalled in the first section of this chapter, the Green Economy paradigm has been increasingly successful in showing that both businesses and peoples can make huge benefits out of it. The former have understood that the ecological industry can be a big source of profit thanks to governmental incentives and to the growing consumers' propensity to spend in environmental-friendly goods and services. Similarly, the latter are aware of how much wealth can be saved e.g. through energy efficiency. All in all, "Green Economy still is *economy*"<sup>200</sup>.

In this framework, governments do play a fundamental role and should operate efficiently. For instance, financing innovation will be increasingly necessary in order to boost green investments. In fact, the bank sector does not possess yet either the capacity or the expertise needed to give loans to projects that have no present assets, will give benefits only in the longer term and to a broader spectrum of beneficiaries, that is society as a whole. As a consequence, national institutions are now asked to provide the necessary guarantees to green financing, as the Central Bank of China is planning to do by issuing Green Bonds. Together with fostering green public procurement, boosting PPPs can be another way to create virtuous circles in solving environmental issues and creating development at the same time<sup>201</sup>.

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<sup>199</sup> Interview with Ms. Jiang Nanqing, *supra* note 188.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibidem*.

However, national governments are not the only actors in the Green Transition. As already mentioned the private sector and individual citizens should take care of the environment in first place and enjoy the benefits that it offers. Additionally, academics and think tanks could promote information-sharing and the formation of know-how that cross-regional environmental policies desperately need. Similarly, the g-local nature of most ecological issues arguably asks for the creation of a common front encompassing a wide variety of actors, from local governments to international and multilateral institutions. The former should support and incentive the introduction of good practices in sustainable development and oversee implementation under the principles of transparency and administrative efficiency. The latter have the precious task of coordinating all other actors and of facilitating communications and experience-sharing, just as UNEP is doing, with a view to further engagement and greater decisional capacity within a general reform of global governance.

In other words, our argument here is that new *political* paradigms need to be elaborated alongside the socio-economic framework provided by Green Economy, and ahead of those. Indeed, the general belief is that a strong political commitment can act as the driver of the change<sup>202</sup> and lead to the successful reconciliation of prosperity ad sustainability. To this end, cooperation among all the stakeholders must be ensured, with a view to join efforts and achieve a common set of objectives. To be sure, a bottom-up process of this kind equally leaves some room to the diplomatic action, which should be able to combine the promotion of environmental issues in the

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<sup>202</sup> UNEP (2011), *Op. cit. supra* note 139, p. 38-39.



international agenda at the official level with the diffusion of information, best practices and shared interests at people-to-people level, in order to enhance mutual understanding and boost political relations.

Only in this way, we argue, environmental cooperation could fully express its potential in bilateral ties such as those between China and Europe, in trans-national and cross-regional frameworks like the Green Silk Road, and at the global scale. Creating synergies among the aforementioned actors requires to build-up a sound political network oriented towards friendship, peace and prosperity. Just as transitioning to Green Economy can bring similar benefits to our societies, this would be the mission of what is tentatively defined here as *Green Diplomacy*.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our aim with this thesis has been to give a systematic and concise overlook of what can be fairly considered as the most ambitious foreign policy measure of the People's Republic of China in the last couple of decades, that is the Belt and Road Initiative. Even if this project is only at an earlier stage of formulation, the visionary breadth of its mission, i.e. to bring peace and prosperity to the whole Eurasian continent and to Africa, has attracted our utmost interest. In particular, the structure of opportunities and constraints that will shape the future evolution of the New Silk Road was taken as a dependent variable, especially as far as its lukewarm reception by European countries, among others, is concerned. Focusing on China-EU relations as a case-study has led us to identify the *absence of a sound political profile* in the NSR framework as the independent variable. Starting from these findings, our research has then looked at how environmental cooperation could solve this structural weakness, arguing that the creation of a 'Green Silk Road' would be a successful model for China and its international partners to implement the 2030 development agenda.

As far as the Belt and Road Initiative is concerned, our policy analysis has sketched the conceptual evolution of this strategy from its announcement in fall 2013 to the current formulation established by the March 2015 Action Plan. A multi-dimensional nature, based on a multiplicity of actors and on cross-sectoriality, has emerged as the key feature of this project, together with sound principles that combine continuity with the traditional Chinese foreign policy-making and innovativeness. The SWOT analysis has then shown that the clear and concise, yet

flexible structure of the New Silk Road can build on an increasingly favorable geopolitical context, for China to get remarkable benefits at both domestic and international levels. These would mainly include the development and stabilization of its Western regions and the overall enhancement of Chinese economic and political presence in key areas of the world. At the same time, an overly broad audience and an ambiguous ideological metanarrative have been found to be the two main weaknesses that could put the strategy of the PRC leadership under serious distress. Namely, growing fears of China's rise could worsen relations with many international partners, and especially with global powers like Russia and the US, and eventually contribute to an overall destabilization of the country itself. As a consequence, Chapter One finally called for a general restructuring of the political profile of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The case study analysed in Chapter Two has essentially confirmed the need for deeper political engagement by the PRC in making international relations prosper and in creating win-win cooperation with its partners. Looking at the historical evolution and at the drivers of Sino-European ties in the last four decades has been a good exercise in order to sketch their underlying structure of opportunities and constraints and to elaborate recommendations for policy-makers. Above all, it has emerged that China-EU relations arguably hold a great potential to create benefits for the two partners and for the international society as a whole. Nevertheless, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that European and Chinese foreign policy-makers have been looking for cannot take shape in the absence of deeper mutual understanding and of the introduction of a common set of strategic priorities and

interests. This has equally emerged with respect to the European position in the New Silk Road, where the part that the European Union could have is decisive in terms of implementation. In spite of that, European leaders still show a lack of interest and a number of conflicts currently have the upper hand. Thereof, the case study confirmed our previous findings, by highlighting the political threat under which the New Silk Road could be in the near future.

Notwithstanding this, the success story of EU-China environmental cooperation has given us the key to bring the Belt and Road Initiative to its fulfillment. A common agenda, permanently institutionalized dialogue and coordination, the promotion of sustainable markets and flexible and coherent national policy-making systems are the most important legacy of more than three decades of collaboration, and can be fairly considered as the grounds for building a new *EU-China Green Partnership*. On this basis, it has been demonstrated that, according to experts and policy-makers, fostering environmental cooperation is the best option for the PRC to forge sound economic and political relations with Belt and Road countries, in the framework of a *Green Silk Road*. Finally, we have shown that further upgrading this experience can lead the international society as a whole to persist in ‘unlocking’ intergovernmental negotiations on Climate Change and to support the Green Transition at a global scale, by means of new forms of cooperation that are tentatively gathered here under the term of *Green Diplomacy*.

In conclusion, we welcome further research on the interactions between International Relations and Sustainable Development. Achieving diffuse prosperity, peaceful and inclusive societies and a healthier environment is an ambitious mission that, we believe, only a fruitful concert of policy-makers, academics and individual citizens can accomplish.

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