

# Securing the New Silk Road

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**Abstract:** The renewed Chinese ambitions to develop trade along the different branches of the Silk Road bring several new traditional and non-traditional security challenges. The Chinese government has vowed to address them with new security concepts. Yet, these concepts might not be adequate to advance China's security interests. Moreover, China seems to have difficulties overcoming the contradictions between different security interests: the quest for prosperity and the safeguarding of security; China's economic aspirations and their consequence of becoming the largest economy; peaceful development and unification with Taiwan and the regain of lost territories; and the dilemma in the guiding diplomatic principles. As a result of these contradictions, Europe faces three uncertainties: How will the tensions in the Pacific develop? How will China seek to defend its interests along the New Silk Road? How will the tensions in the Pacific affect China's behavior in the common Eurafasian interface? These uncertainties bring about two more strategic choices for Europe: trying to continue its work with China along the Silk Road and balancing; prioritizing the huge challenges in the wedge of hardship and Europe's immediate neighbourhood and responding calls to join the United States in its rebalancing to the Pacific. This will make it difficult to establish meaningful cooperation and to work towards burden sharing with the European Union at the other end of the Silk Road.

**Keywords:** Chinese security thinking; European perspective; Sino-European cooperation; New Silk Road

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This paper attempts to make sense of China's security thinking from a European viewpoint. It complements with the other papers in this special issue by looking primarily at how China seeks to secure the vast wedge of hardship and instability that sits between the two ends of the Eurasian continent. This geopolitical interface becomes increasingly important for China as it turns into a leading trading nation and makes commerce boom along the different branches of the Ancient Silk Road. For a few decades now, trade via the Central Asian corridors and the Indian Ocean has been expanding rapidly, with caravans being replaced by railways and pipelines, and junks by triple E container ships and super tankers. One of the promises with which the new Chinese leaders stepped into the footlight was to develop these networks of commerce even more. That, it is aware, will also bring new security challenges, challenges, this paper posits, that inevitably test China's traditional security policies in terms of their geographic reach, their threat spectrum, and their responses. The paper goes on to explain that neither recent adjustments in China's official thinking on security, as for example reflected by President Xi Jinping's references to a new "common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable" Asian security concept, nor the idea of a grand security concept, which figures centrally in this special issue, will be adequate to secure the economic interests that are advanced by the new Silk Road. The main reason for this is that even if this new thinking on security has a wider scope and recognizes growing interdependence, it does not offer any solution to some persistent dilemmas that coincide with China's rise. This weakness, the paper argues further, presents an opportunity for the countries at the other end of the Silk Road – the ones assembled in the European Union – to gain more leverage upon Asian powers like China, to coax them into meaningful cooperation, and at the same time to avoid overextending their capabilities by joining the United States in its rebalancing towards the Pacific.

## 1. The New Silk Road and the Risk of Overstretch

As both the largest exporter of manufactured goods and the second largest importer of primary commodities, China depends heavily on smooth commerce. And for all the talking about rebalancing towards domestic consumption and more efficient production, this dependency has only grown. Since 2003, when the first pledges were made to rebalance the economy, the reliance of China's manufacturing on export has actually increased from 13 to 34 per cent, as has the reliance of China's total economy on export-oriented manufacturing: from 4 to 11 per cent.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, dependence on imports of energy, ores, and agricultural products has continued to rise. Between

1 These figures concern: the surplus of trade in manufactured goods divided by total manufacturing value added and the surplus of trade in manufactured goods divided by China's GDP. Source: Calculations based on World Development Indicators and UNCTAD Statistical Database.

2003 and 2012, dependence on foreign supplies of oil increased from 38 to 57 per cent, on foreign natural gas from 0 to 25 per cent, and on foreign iron ore from 33 to 70 per cent. Regarding the major agricultural goods, China moved from a production deficit of 6 per cent to a deficit of 11 per cent.<sup>2</sup> It comes thus not as a surprise that Beijing stresses the need for a New Silk Road.

It is true that Silk Road thinking goes beyond advancing commerce. It is often invoked to cultivate economic expectations and good will in partner countries. Chinese border provinces refer to it in their relentless quest to narrow the prosperity gap with coastal provinces. In fact, it is hard to discern a clear master plan that guides all the new infrastructure projects, the trade facilitation schemes, and so forth. It is clear, however, what China is up to. A first corridor of pipelines and railways reaches into Russia's resource-rich East. A similar corridor stretches towards the gas and oil fields of Central Asia. President Xi called to develop this further into a Silk Road Economic Belt with railways connecting China to Western Europe. A third branch goes south. It consists of the China-India-Myanmar-Bangladesh economic corridor and the Maritime Silk Road that is supposed to enhance the connectivity between ports in China, Southeast Asian, and in the Indian Ocean onwards even to Africa. Today, these passages channel about 55 per cent of China's exports of manufactured goods, 54 per cent of its fuel imports, 21 per cent of its imports of metal ores, and 22 per cent of its imports of agricultural products.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, direct threats to commercial interests in the large geographic interface between China and the other end of Eurafasia, as Arnold Toynbee called the complex of the interconnected continents, have been limited to a few piracy incidents and a few dozen expatriates that became the victims of armed incidents. Since 2008, China has been guarding the over 13, 500 kilometres of maritime vulnerability between Malacca and Gibraltar with only three to four warships. It is present in an area where it has parked over US\$ 75 billion in direct investments, often in strategic mining and infrastructure projects, with less than 2, 200 soldiers – most of them in peacekeeping missions of the United Nations.

Still, this new Silk Road of lorries, pipelines and ships threads its way through vast tracts of uncertainty and many challenges remain. Most of the interface between Europe and Eastern Asia forms a wedge of hardship, consisting of many unstable states, plagued by poverty, and destabilized by fast demographic growth. Between 2000 and 2012, the total population in the countries along the Silk Road grew annually by more than 33 million. If the annual population growth rate was 2 per cent, the annual increase of the number of people employed was below 1 per cent.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the economies in the region did not develop fast enough to stay ahead of the demographic curve. Moreover, if annual nominal economic growth per capita was 14 per cent, real

2 Average production deficit for 90 categories of commodities. Source: Calculations based on Faostat.

3 Shares of the value of exports and imports. Source: calculations based on UNCTAD Statistics.

4 World Development Indicators and ILO Labour Statistics Database.

economic growth was only 1 per cent. Growth did thus not only fail to create jobs in many countries along the new Silk Road. Its benefit was also largely levelled out by high inflation. Chinese leaders have acknowledged these economic concerns on many occasions. They also recognize that in addition to this economic vulnerability it is a hotbed of terrorism, piracy, armed crime, and political strife. The New Silk Road goes through large number of the world's most fragile countries and fifteen countries that are torn with armed conflict. In 2013 alone, violence cost the lives of Chinese citizens in Pakistan, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Kenya. The International Chamber of Commerce reports over 80 incidents of maritime piracy between the Gulf of Bengal and the Mediterranean. Chinese assessments of the prospects for stability are sceptical. The area between the Gobi Desert and the Mediterranean and from the Caucasus to the Sahel is widely reckoned to be degrading into a dangerous sanctuary for Islamic extremists and terrorists.<sup>5</sup> In his brilliant yet controversial essay about the security of the Silk Road, Zhang Wenmu describes it as follows: "America's gradual withdrawal will lead to a strategic vacuum and with other powers like China or Russia or regions like the European Union unable to fill it; this can only precipitate the rise of Islamic forces."<sup>6</sup>

But the area also forms another arena of great power competition. Russia, Iran, India, and the United States try to expand their influence in Central Asia. Despite the American plans to withdraw from Afghanistan, it clings to its bases and readies to monitor the country and its surroundings more efficiently with a combination of drones and hubs for Special Forces.<sup>7</sup> Russia signed an agreement with Tajikistan that allows it to use its military facilities until 2042 and Vladimir Putin's success is expected to embolden his policies towards other smaller countries in Central Asia, like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The United States, India, Europe, and Japan are continuing to develop their military presence in the Indian Ocean and on Africa's eastern shores. Countries like the United States, France, and Great Britain are criticized for using piracy and terrorism as a pretext for interference in the Horn of Africa.<sup>8</sup> China recognizes the predominance of the United States and India in the Indian Ocean rim and their

- 5 See for instance this widely circulated research paper: Guli Azhati Tursun, "Trends and Characteristics of the East Turkestan terrorist Groups", *Contemporary International Relations*, No.1 (2014), pp. 56-62 (古丽阿扎提·吐尔逊:《“东突”恐怖势力个体特征及其发展趋势评析》, 载《现代国际关系》, 2004年第1期, 第56-62页)。Also: Xu Tao, "The Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Afghanistan and Its Impact on the Security Situation in Central Asia," *Contemporary International Relations*, No.12 (2013), pp. 34-39, 65 (许涛:《驻阿美军撤离对中亚安全形势的影响》, 载《现代国际关系》, 2013年第12期, 第34-39、65页); Fang Jinyang, "Trends of Political Islam in the Middle East," *Contemporary International Relations*, No.3 (2013), pp. 15-21 (方金英:《中东政治伊斯兰的发展趋势》, 载《现代国际关系》, 2013年第3期, 第15-21页)。
- 6 Zhang Wenmu, "How China Can Secure the Western Silk Road," *World Economics and Politics*, No.3 (2014), 3, pp. 19 (张文木:《丝绸之路与中国西域安全》, 载《世界经济与政治》, 2014年第3期, 第19页)。
- 7 Xu Tao, "The Withdrawal of U.S. Troops from Afghanistan and Its Impact on the Security Situation in Central Asia," p. 37. Also: Li Xiaolu, "The Impact of the Situation and Its Direction in Afghanistan on China," *Foreign Affairs Observer*, No.3 (2014), pp. 151-153 (李小鹿:《阿富汗局势的未来走向及其对中国的影响》, 载《外交观察》(第3辑), 2014年3月, 第151-153页)。
- 8 A very good discussion: Xiao Yuhua and Liu Hongwu, "A Discussion of the State of the Security Dilemmas in the Horn of Africa," *Contemporary International Relations*, No.2 (2013), pp. 32-39 (见肖玉华、刘鸿武:《非洲之角安全困局述评》, 载《现代国际关系》, 2013年第2期, 第32-39页)。

awareness that this could make China vulnerable in case of tensions in the Pacific.<sup>9</sup> This threat is not imminent, though, and China seems to be confident that it could counter at least Indian naval coercion by deterrence along the border. The perception is rather that the major powers are locked in a competition for status, trying to make their navies familiar with the region, and providing, as independently as possible, the security of their merchant ships. The United States also remains the military gatekeeper to the Persian Gulf, deploying the region's largest fleet and possessing strategic facilities throughout the region. Many Chinese observers describe America's power in the Middle East as in decline, hence the greater inclination of competitors like Russia to challenge it, but still consider that no power is ready to take over its position and that the United States is not likely to abandon entirely its strategic strongholds in the Gulf.<sup>10</sup> This all explains why Chinese officials put so much emphasis on the intermingling of non-traditional and traditional security threats: the former form a pretext for the major powers to act in function of the latter.

The development of the new Silk Road puts five important security trade-offs before China. First of all, the pursuit of commerce increases its vulnerability beyond its borders and beyond its immediate neighbourhood at a time when strategic tensions in the Pacific have been rapidly building up.<sup>11</sup> China's expanding security interests are, as it were, increasingly hard to reconcile with its traditional geopolitical map, which is centred in China and its immediate periphery. Second, it comes as a new challenge to China's traditional identity as a continental power and impels it to shift from land to sea, from shipload by shipload and container by container, into growing responsibilities. The leadership has already recognized this and the navy eagerly embraced its blue water role, but the maritime Silk Road could force it into a straddle between, on the one hand, the attempt to gear its blue water naval power towards deterrence in the Pacific as a more robust way to defend the mainland and its territorial claims in adjacent waters and, on the other, its duty to defend the shipping lanes west of the Strait of Malacca and even expeditionary warfare in countries along these trade routes. Thirdly, as I posited before in this journal, the securitization of economic interests renders problematic the traditional policy of non-interference.<sup>12</sup> Fourthly, the pursuit of domestic stability through an export-oriented industrialization policy causes new vulnerability and thus more security costs

9 For a discussion: Jonathan Holslag, "The Reluctant Pretender: China's Evolving Presence in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (June 2013), pp. 42-52.

10 For a good overview: Liu Zhongmin, "2013 In the Middle East," *World Affairs*, No.2 (2014), pp. 42-44 (刘中民:《2013 年的中东》, 载《世界知识》, 2014 年第 2 期, 第 42-44 页). Also: Chen Jinwen and Niu Xinchun, "The Impact of the Moderation between the US and Iran on the Strategic Outlook of the Middle East," *Contemporary International Relations*, No.12 (2013), pp.26-33 (陈晋文、牛新春:《美伊缓和牵动中东战略格局》, 载《现代国际关系》, 2013 年第 12 期, 第 26-33 页); Tang Zhichao, "America's Middle East Strategy and the Shrinking of its Regional Political Influence," *Contemporary International Relations*, No.11 (2013), pp. 1-7 (唐志超:《美中东战略收缩及其地缘政治影响》, 载《现代国际关系》, 2013 年第 11 期, 第 1-7 页).

11 Zhang Wenmu, "How China Can Secure the Western Silk Road," p. 23.

12 Jonathan Holslag, "Embracing China's Global Security Ambitions," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2009), pp. 105-118.

abroad. It causes an inevitable mission creep of which the price will only become clear when serious incidents happen. Lastly, any attempt to tackle non-traditional security challenges outside of a country's borders will aggravate traditional security dilemmas and tensions with the other powers, whether this takes place in Central Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, or Africa. In the discomforting context of China's rise, any flag flying beyond its immediate neighbourhood can only be seen as a gesture of growing ambitions. All five trade-offs come together in one major concern: the perpetual risk of overreaching.

## 2. New Thinking, New Action?

That risk and the huge task of reconciling different security interests and approaches to enhance security have continued to incite a debate among experts. In *The Washington Quarterly*, Wang Yiwei boldly proposes a grand security concept, which insists that security must be a shared endeavour, that it must even follow the European example of sharing sovereignty, that it must be a matter of shared commitment, that it must coincide with the establishment of new organizations to protect global common goods, and that it must be beneficial to all parties.<sup>13</sup> These ideas can be situated in the large liberal school that has developed among China's students of international politics. In a recent book, *Creative Involvement: the Evolution of China's Global Role*, Wang Yizhou makes a similar call: "China should reconsider its diplomatic policy in adapting to changes at home and abroad," he urges, "It needs to provide more assistance and public goods that could benefit people, alongside a good environment, public health and peace." Ye Zicheng describes China's grand strategy essentially as the pursuit of sustainable development, the building of a harmonious society, a harmonious world, peaceful relations with the neighbours, and normal relations with the United States.<sup>14</sup> These are just a few voices in what has become a very lively and eclectic debate among proponents of a more cooperative and responsible foreign policy and an equally large group of political realists.<sup>15</sup>

13 Wang Yiwei, "Advancing a Grand Security Concept to Resolve the Asian Paradox," *People's Daily* (Overseas), October 11, 2013 (王义桅:《用大安全观化解亚洲悖论》,载《人民日报》(海外版),2013年10月11日)。

14 Ye Zicheng, *Inside China's Grand Strategy: The Perspective from the People's Republic*, Lexington, Kentucky: Kentucky University Press, 2010.

15 For instance: Yu Zhengliang, "On China's Grand Strategy," *Studies on Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping Theories*, No.5 (2012), pp. 95-101 (俞正樑:《关于中国大战略的思考》,载《毛泽东邓小平理论研究》,2012年第5期,第95-101页); Yuan Peng, "The New Era of China's Grand Strategy," *Contemporary International Relations*, No.5 (2013), pp. 1-9 (袁鹏:《新时期中国的大战略——对“十八大”报告的战略解读》,载《现代国际关系》,2013年第5期,第1-9页); Zhu Feng, "A 'Grand Strategy' is Required to Safeguard Core Interests," *Renmin*, September 17, 2012 (朱锋:《维护核心利益亟待外交“大战略”》,人民网,2012年9月17日), <http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2012/0917/c112851-19028389.html>; Men Honghua, "Rational Thinking on China's Grand Strategy," *Strategy and Management*, No.2 (2012), pp. 10-18 (门洪华:《关于中国大战略的理性思考》,载《战略与管理》,2012年第2期,第10-18页); Hu Angang and Yan Yilong, "Chinese Grand Strategy: The Conditions are Ready for General Planning," *Journal of Chinese Academy of Governance*, No.2 (2013), pp. 11-15 (胡鞍钢、鄢一龙:《中国大战略:统筹两个大局与天时地利人和》,载《国家行政学院学报》,2013年第2期,第11-15页)。



The new challenges also sustain the debate at the political level and certainly contributed to the decision of the leadership to establish a national security commission. President Xi explained that the commission would primarily attempt to work towards a two-fold security (双安全, *shuang anquan*), “combining the safeguarding of national sovereignty, security, and development interests, with internal political security and social stability.”<sup>16</sup> In the wake of the first session of the commission in April 2014, the leadership also gave hints of a new overall national security concept (总体国家安全观, *zongti guojia anquan guan*) that would focus on both traditional security and non-traditional security and be founded on 11 pillars: political security, homeland security, military security, economic security, cultural security, social security, IT security, information security, ecological security, resource security, and nuclear safety.<sup>17</sup> At the inaugural conference of China’s presidency of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building (CICA), President Xi elaborated further on China’s new security thinking. Xi confirmed that the world was still stuck in a Cold War mentality and zero-sum thinking, and called on the CICA members to turn their diverse security interests towards a project of common security, to avoid one country’s pursuit of security causing insecurity with others, to steer clear of any monopolization of security affairs, to work towards security without exclusive alliances, and to be comprehensive in tackling traditional and non-traditional threats.<sup>18</sup> Xi summarized it as, “Common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable.”

Yet, it is hard to discover any innovation in such strategizing. All parts and pillars have been identified before, except perhaps Xi’s stress on cultural security, the urging for a frank dialogue on security matters, and the renewed fondness of great power coordination. To understand this lack of change, it is useful to look briefly back at previous stages of security thinking. Regarding the definition of security, the five generations of leaders – headed by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping respectively – consistently emphasized four great aspirations: domestic stability, sovereignty, regime stability, and the recovery of lost territory. Jiang Zemin’s generation explicitly added to this the interest with an open economy to keep China’s growth on track. Hu Jintao complemented this with more emphasis on overseas security interests, which he included in the People’s Liberation Army’s historical missions. As regards the scope of China’s security, all five generations found that security is decided mostly at home and on the border. At the end of Mao

16 “The Central National Security Commission and the Country’s Overall Security Concept: A Comprehensive Review,” *Xinhua*, April 17, 2014 (《全方位解读“中央国家安全委员会”和“总体国家安全观”》，新华网，2014年4月17日），[http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-04/17/c\\_126397122.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-04/17/c_126397122.htm).

17 Xi Jinping, “Adhere to the Country’s Overall Security Concept and the Road to National Security with Chinese Characteristics,” *Xinhua*, April 15, 2014 (习近平：《坚持总体国家安全观 走中国特色国家安全道路》，新华网，2014年4月15日），[http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-04/15/c\\_1110253910.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-04/15/c_1110253910.htm).

18 Xi Jinping, “Actively Develop an Asian Security Concept to Create a New Situation for Security Cooperation,” Speech at CICA Summit, May 21, 2014 (习近平：《积极树立亚洲安全观 共创安全合作新局面》，在亚洲相互协作与信任措施会议第四次峰会上的讲话，2014年5月21日），[http://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa\\_chn/zyxw\\_602251/t1158070.shtml](http://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1158070.shtml).

Zedong's era, the realm of nuclear power and the ocean were added. Deng Xiaoping added Asian regional stability more explicitly, Jiang the global market, and Hu the global environment. In terms of means to achieve security, the five generations agreed on communist-cum-nationalist ideology, wealth, domestic stability, military power, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Under Mao, this was complemented with superpower hedging and ideological revolution. Deng shifted to good-neighbour policy, shelving territorial disputes, adding the one-country-two-systems proposal, and the cultivation of economic interdependence. Jiang added to this a renewed emphasis on membership of multilateral organizations and international cooperation on non-traditional security threats. Under Hu, *membership of* multilateral organizations was replaced by *participation in* these multilateral organizations. His generation added to the array of means a more pronounced cultivation of its partners' expectations of economic benefits from China's rise, the promise of a harmonious world, and the promise to assume greater international responsibilities.

If anything, these consecutive security concepts are mostly a reflection of how insecure China feels itself. Even if the latest new security concept was not very innovative, the interest of China in CICA itself has been considered a revelation. For decades, the platform failed to make itself relevant and now the Chinese government has announced that it will strengthen its secretariat and make it a catalyst of regional security cooperation. With regards to the need to secure the new Silk Road, CICA offers several advantages. It has members all along the Silk Road: from Kazakhstan to Turkey and from Thailand to Iraq and Egypt. What platform could better bridge the security interests in the Pacific and the western quarters of Eurafasia? CICA also limits the role of the United States and Japan to observers and only counts a few members of ASEAN. As a platform CICA remains underdeveloped and that could give China the chance to mould it to its advantage during its chairmanship in the next two years. But India is opposed to enlarging CICA's role, if only for Pakistan's presence, and Russia too sees its responsibility confined to confidence building. Even Chinese spectators are sceptical that there is a great future ahead. It is therefore unlikely to be a new platform to propagate China's so-called new security thinking. This instantly leads to another observation: China has not only failed to develop in terms of its security concepts, but also in terms of cooperation, leaving a huge gap between its frequent ambitious statements and conference diplomacy on the one hand and its performing in terms of practical synergy on the other.

It is not only CICA where Chinese security concepts have failed to take root – and where its security interests along the Silk Road have failed to advance. Even within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), one of its flagships and often even touted as a new NATO, progress remains limited.<sup>19</sup> While the organization is able to

19 Zhao Huasheng, "China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Assessment and Prospects," *Foreign Affairs Observer*, No.4 (2012), pp. 102-106 (赵华胜:《中国与上海合作组织:评估与展望》,载《外交观察》(第二辑),2012年,第102-106页)。



stage dramatic military exercises, to organize pompous summits, and to run dozens of specialized dialogues, its Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure is marred by reluctance to share information, initiatives on infrastructure and trade delayed by frustration over Chinese migration and dumping practices, initiatives on environment failing to gain the slightest credibility as a result of China's depletion of shared rivers, and its agenda in general being constrained by the strategic distrust of Russia and Kazakhstan towards China's long-term ambitions and distrust of other members among themselves. Talks on the future of Afghanistan have gone nowhere. Security cooperation along the Central Asian section of the new Silk Road remains selective and mostly bilateral. That also goes for the South-Eastern branch. China has carried out over 18 joint patrols on the Mekong River with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand to combat organized crime, but goes on to challenge the economic development in the Golden Triangle by damming rivers and swamping neighbouring markets with cheap industrial goods. In terms of ecological and economic security, which President Xi referred to as two of the eleven pillars, there is thus still a long way to go.

This is not different along the Maritime Silk Road. Consider the problem of piracy in the Gulf of Aden. China is present with a naval task force, it has eagerly reached out to other navies, and it provided support to the African Union's mission in Somalia, but it refused to participate in the joint patrolling of a delimited corridor and to switch to the most common communication system. Moreover, there remained a startling gap between the calls of the Chinese government on the international community to address the underlying causes of piracy and the fact that Chinese trawlers often illegally deplete the region's fish stocks or that its economic cooperation with east African countries still hardly creates benefits outside the raw materials sector. On the banks of the Red Sea, China only played a limited role in mediating between the two Sudans and it refused to take a position on the developments in Egypt. Moving into the Mediterranean, it did pretend to accept more responsibility in the Syrian crisis and in the conflict between Israel and Palestine. In both cases it came up with a four-point plan, but a careful read of these plans reveals that they do not do much more than proposing stakeholders to kindly refer to the United Nations for solutions. Fence sitting also characterizes China's attitude towards Iran and Iraq. Like the whole international community, China was lucky with the electoral turn in Tehran, which led to progress in the negotiations about its nuclear programme, but besides verbal support for the negotiations, China's contribution remained limited. In Iraq, China has reached out to the three main political alliances, revealed plans to open a consulate in Erbil, Kurdistan, yet refused to assume any role to encourage the political transition of the country. Hedging is what marks China's behaviour in the Middle East, a pragmatic policy to keep its political options open between countries and within countries. In private, Chinese officials avow that most of the Eurafasian interface hardly figures on the leadership's radar screen and that attention has only increased temporarily after incidents like these in Sudan, Libya, Syria, and so forth. Said one Chinese diplomat:

“When it comes to Africa, we are on routine diplomacy, when it comes to the Middle East it is no exception.”<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Dilemmas

This is unlikely to change. In fact, China's problems in advancing a truly innovative security concept and showcasing this paradigm shift in its diplomatic practice reveals some more fundamental dilemmas that result from China's rise. First of all, its four great aspirations stand in the way of any concept of international harmony. Even if China desires peace, it understandably seeks to shape the conditions of the peace, conditions that on their turn inevitably compromise the position, the interests, and the privileges of other countries. This starts with the quest for prosperity. Decades ago, China set itself the ambition of becoming a high-income country. Only a rich society, the reasoning went, could be a stable society, a society with the wherewithal to reduce its dependence on the knowhow and capital of other countries, and a society with enough resources to defend itself. China has become by far the most successful developing country in terms of working towards that goal, but it did so at the expense of others. I explain these effects in more detail elsewhere, but its ambitious industrial policies have diverted opportunities away from other developing countries, impelled many into unequal trade partnerships, and pushed them into a role of commodity supplier.<sup>21</sup> There is no evidence that this is about to change, certainly not because the promised rebalancing from export and investment to domestic consumption remains far away and because China is determined to win what it considers the new contest for industrial power. But its idea of ecological security is also at loggerheads with policies to divert water from rivers like the Mekong, the Irrawaddy, the Ili, and the Irtysh. Even if there might be no clear legal arguments to criticize China for it, the impact on the environment and economy of several neighbouring countries is significant. Equally, so are the illegal fishing practices and the illegal logging that have spread all over Eurafasia. Often the government has no direct involvement in it and even vows to stop it, but there are no indications that it cracks down on these practices as it proved to be able to crack down on other problems. Hence, the first dilemma exists between China's quest for prosperity and the assertion that it can only work towards more security if it allows others equally to improve their security – economically, socially, and environmentally.

That brings up a second dilemma: the consequence of China's economic aspirations is that it must sooner or later become by far the largest world economy – especially because India cannot match China's success – and therefore also by far hold the largest financial resources to spend on defence. Arguing in such case that it would

20 Conversation with Chinese official, Brussels, April 30, 2014.

21 Jonathan Holslag, “Open Doors and Unequal Partnerships. Examining China's Economic Ambitions in Asia,” Paper forthcoming.

not use all these resources, or use them peacefully, would be about as reassuring as a country with large stockpiles of enriched uranium arguing that it only seeks to be a civilian nuclear power. This is particularly so because there is also a third dilemma at work: that between the aspiration to unify Taiwan, the islands in the South China Sea, a large part of the East China Sea, and parts of the disputed border with India – and peaceful development. Even if one assumes that China has a strong historical case for its claims and even if it chooses just to expand its influence over disputed areas without annexing them *manumilitare*, for instance by putting oil rigs in place, it will always be seen as threatening and belligerent by others. Although China might try to look as innovative as it can in its security policies; without relinquishing its territorial claims it will be to no avail. As China is unlikely to do so, tensions will continue to build up, exacerbate strategic distrust, prompt countries to protect their overseas security interests independently, and, as a result, thwart any chance of meaningful security cooperation along the new Silk Road. In truth, there will never be security along China's new Silk Road if it cannot solve the pressing Pacific security dilemma.

A fourth dilemma emanates from China's guiding diplomatic principles. China is probably righting some of its critique of other powers' reckless intervention; but it is using non-interference, gradualism, local stakeholders' ownership, and silent diplomacy as a pretext for an often-opportunistic combination of diplomatic inaction and economic profiteering. Chinese officials often assume that even if their country is a large investor in troubled states, it cannot use that position to extract concessions in complicated matters. "Diplomacy does not work this way," a diplomat explained, "Even if we consider economic pressure, how would that play out when different parties already lost their nerve and frequently have other candidates to do business with? We rather chose to adjust and not to make the situation more complicated."<sup>22</sup> Leaving aside the question whether or not such an argument is warranted, it continues to cause tensions with other powers and certainly depletes China of the responsibility to think about how it can make its presence in different countries contribute to durable development and security. Leaving aside the question of whether this makes China a less constructive actor than other powers, it certainly does not challenge it to be more constructive than other powers.

#### 4. At the Other End of the Silk Road

It is often said that Europe and China are geopolitically so far apart, in contrast to the United States, that they do not have many security issues in common. This is not true. It is geographically inaccurate. From Shanghai, San Francisco is still 500 kilometres farther away than Paris. The distance between the northernmost and the southernmost part of Europe is larger than the distance between western China and

22 Conversation with Chinese official, Brussels, November 13, 2012.

the eastern shores of the Black Sea. It is also geopolitically inaccurate. As much as the Pacific emerges as an arena for security competition between China and the United States, the wedge of hardship looms as a giant security black hole, an area from which all sorts of non-traditional and traditional threats will arise if it continues to be stuck in underdevelopment and political fragmentation. In other words, the geopolitical imperative for China and Europe to embrace security as a central element of their relationships is powerful and compelling. What should help to bend this into cooperation is the fact that Europe does not have tens of thousands of soldiers and dozens of warships deployed right up to China's long and vulnerable seafront. At the discourse level, that is foreign policy on paper, one also discerns several commonalities: the emphasis on multilateralism, on socioeconomic development, and so forth.

But cooperation in practice remains disappointing. In fact, the whole Sino-European partnership continues to be one of technocratic routine rather than strategic vision. Yes, they do have an annual strategic dialogue between the Chinese State Councillor in charge of foreign affairs and the European Union's representatives for external affairs, a kind of would-be foreign minister. Chinese officers from time to time visit the European Military Staff, a modest team of officers that monitors some of Europe's modest military operations. Both sides have also identified a large number of common security priorities, ranging from non-proliferation, over the Middle East, to cyber security. In fact, when President Xi Jinping called on Brussels for a meeting with European leaders in 2014, he himself highlighted security and defence as one of the "four future bridges of cooperation" and the Chinese government also insisted that it came at the top of the joint agenda for cooperation for the next six years. But that is about it. The number of common security priorities that have been turned into practical cooperation has been negligible. On Africa, a key issue, nothing has happened, despite over seven years of dialogue. On the Middle East there is sporadic consultation but not much more. One can hardly consider the recent few exchanges between European and Chinese warships in the Gulf of Aden to be an indication of improvement. China also seems to continue to insist that the arms embargo, imposed after the Tiananmen Crisis, must be lifted before there can be any meaningful cooperation. It often tells that cooperation is also dependent upon the invitation of local actors, such as the Arab League or the African Union, an invitation that is often impossible to imagine given the internal disagreements within these organizations. In addition, Chinese officials and experts confide in private that Europe is just too feeble in terms of hard power and too dependent on the United States to be a credible partner.

Despite the geopolitical imperative and despite various political statements, we should thus not expect Europe and China to get closer on security issues. This is even more so because of the four important dilemmas or contradictions in China's security thinking that I have previously laid out. As a result of these contradictions, Europe faces three uncertainties. It grapples with uncertainty about how the tensions in the Pacific will develop, about how China will seek to defend its interests along the new

Silk Road, and about how the tensions in the Pacific will affect China's behaviour in the common Eurafasian interface. That in its turn apparently brings about two more strategic choices: between still trying to work with China along the Silk Road and balancing as well as prioritizing the huge challenges in the wedge of hardship and Europe's immediate neighbourhood and responding to calls to join the United States in its rebalancing to the Pacific. These choices are not mutually exclusive, though. The approach for Europe could be one of making itself indispensable in its own extended neighbourhood, from, say, Gibraltar to the Gulf of Aden and from the Baltic to the Sahel, places where China will continue to be vulnerable, and use that position to weigh more robustly on the new Pacific power politics. Only by making itself indispensable in its backyard will Europe be able to make itself useful to protect the security of its citizens, to use its capabilities most effectively, to advance its own norms, to be recognized as an international actor, and, in the end, to have a good position to coax China into meaningful cooperation and to deter it whenever necessary.

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