

Geopolitics of the “Belt and Road Initiative”*

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Levente Horváth:

A kínai geopolitikai gondolkodás

(Chinese Geopolitical Thought)

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The main aim of the book is to provide insight into Chinese geopolitical thought and examine Chinese international cooperation from a Chinese perspective, compared to the Western understanding of it so far. In addition, it describes in detail China’s “*Belt and Road Initiative*”, about which no comprehensive book, doctoral thesis or study has been written in Hungarian so far, while press reports on the Chinese initiative appear almost daily. It also raises the question of the roots of Chinese geopolitical thought. Hence, how do the teachings of ancient Chinese strategists and sages (Sun Tzu, Kuan Tzu, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Meng Tzu, etc.) and the duality of yin and yang, one of the foundations of Chinese culture, affect China’s foreign policy? Is the “*Belt and Road Initiative*” a new kind of colonialism?

Levente Horváth starts his introduction with an intriguing question: *Why is it that the world press is full of news that portrays China in a negative light?* After a thought-provoking introduction, the author outlines how, following the Cold War, the United States remained the only superpower, creating a unipolar world order in which the United States put its own principles in the foreground. Over the past two decades, however, new economic regions and centres of power of global importance have emerged, and China has become one of the most promising of these, with the prospect of becoming another superpower by challenging the United States’ hegemony. The author examines the path of China’s development in this new international context, analysing the Chinese “*Belt and Road Initiative*” and related Chinese geopolitical thought with geostrategic innovation, no longer from the perspective of Western states, but from the perspective of an Eastern society with a 5000-year-old culture based on Confucian teachings.

* The papers in this issue contain the views of the authors which are not necessarily the same as the official views of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank.

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Following the introduction, the work first describes *the historical background of the “Belt and Road Initiative” and then its announcement and its pillars*. Prior to the expansion of Europe in the 19th century, China had its own vision of a central role in the world order, in which it saw itself as the sole sovereign government of the whole world. This was a kind of universal hierarchy, as opposed to the balance of sovereign states competing with each other that was common in the West. It was the *Silk Roads* that brought a change in China’s foreign policy, with the development of the Silk Roads on land and sea, and the establishment of closer trade and diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries. The overland Silk Road was mainly used for trade, while the maritime Silk Road was used for diplomatic relations as well as trade. After the decline of the overland Silk Road, China closed itself off from the outside world. Regardless of its isolation, China has always played an important role in the world economy, accounting for 25–30 per cent of world GDP until the mid-19th century, when the economy began to decline with the unequal contracts of foreigners and the spread of opium. The next time the Silk Road came to the fore again was in 2013, when current Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke about the Silk Road Economic Belt concept during his official visit to Kazakhstan on 7 September. One month later, on 3 October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping outlined the Maritime Silk Road concept during his official visit to Indonesia. As a result, on 28 March 2015, the document *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* was released at the Boao Forum International Platform in China, officially launching the global “One Belt, One Road” initiative.

Chinese politics today is still influenced by 5,000 years of Chinese culture, and it seems that China’s top state leaders are constantly studying the works of great Chinese philosophers and strategists. Thus, the author of the book devotes a special chapter to the ancient Silk Road, which inspired the Chinese leadership to create the New Silk Road.

The next long chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the development of Chinese geopolitics, from ancient China to present day. Many people question whether or not the “Belt and Road Initiative” is a geopolitical ambition. According to Horváth, in order to understand this, it is necessary to look at it from a geopolitical perspective, but then we often make the mistake of reading about great European and American thinkers, their works and ideas in geopolitical studies, while we have little information about Chinese geopolitical thought, mainly due to the lack of knowledge of the Chinese language. The chapter seeks to answer questions such as how this evolved in China in parallel with the emergence and development of Western geopolitical thought. In China, with its five thousand years of culture, how has political geography and geopolitical thinking been approached? The chapter details China’s geopolitical roots through the military strategists and great sages and philosophers of different eras, and then the sprouts of Chinese geopolitics, up

to the modern era, examining geopolitics as a discipline in the country. The author then highlights the differences between Chinese and Western geopolitics, and finally helps interpret the “Belt and Road Initiative” from a geopolitical perspective.

Building on the previous chapters, the following section presents the “Belt and Road Initiative” from an economic, structural and financial perspective. After an overview of the immediate economic background of the initiative, the author highlights the problem of examining the name from a Western perspective, and through this the scope of the project is presented. Following the launch of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, Western researchers tried to explain the potential of the Chinese initiative by using different maps and one land and one sea route to show that the Chinese initiative would follow the route they had indicated. There were some who, in addition to explaining the route, also drew conclusions – wrongly – that some countries were being left out of Chinese cooperation because the roads did not touch them. The differences between Eastern and Western cultures then come to the surface again, as the West tries to understand Chinese strategies, concepts and initiatives with its own thinking, but this is mostly incorrect. The author points out that, this time too, the Chinese side has adapted, understanding that the use of the word “one” is problematic in Western thinking, and so the English name *One Belt, One Road* was shortened to *Belt and Road* hoping that this would make it clearer to the world, and especially to the West, that it is a whole network system, not a specific route. To support this, the author presents the six main directions of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, the types of silk roads and the economic corridors starting from China.

A prerequisite for increasing trade between countries is that they have adequate infrastructure, but to build an infrastructure network, developing countries need huge amounts of money, which they cannot always provide themselves. For this reason, the author considers it important to discuss the financial background of the “Belt and Road Initiative”. The financial infrastructure supporting the initiative is constantly evolving. In order to promote the development and infrastructure development of the countries along the “Belt and Road Initiative” across Eurasia, China has initiated the establishment of several investment funds and financial institutions to finance projects in the region, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund.

The “Belt and Road Initiative” has become the determinant strategy of China’s foreign policy and foreign economy, which is based on China’s multilateral and bilateral cooperations. The final chapter provides an overview of China’s international relations in the context of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, which the author guides the reader through via a case study, using the example of the China–CEE cooperation. China’s mutual relations with the United States, Russia, India, Japan, the European Union and Hungary are then discussed in the context

of international reactions to the “Belt and Road Initiative”. Finally, the results of the past seven years of the “Belt and Road Initiative” are presented to give an up-to-date picture of the state of play of the Chinese initiative.

With regard to the above, *“Chinese geopolitical thought”* by Levente Horváth is a topical and gap-filling work in the Hungarian literature, not only in the context of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, but also in terms of a better knowledge and understanding of the Chinese geopolitical thinking. The book is easy to understand for everyone, making it a useful reading not only for researchers, professionals and policymakers interested in Asia and China, but also for those who wish to broaden their horizons and become familiar with the Eastern/Chinese perspective in addition to the Western one.