

THE ROLE OF AFRICA IN THE NEW MARITIME SILK ROAD

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Introduction

The OBOR (One Belt, One Road) Initiative, also known as the “New Silk Road”, was revealed in the second semester of 2013 by the Chinese President Xi Jinping. It is the most ambitious Chinese project towards the country’s international insertion. As highlighted by Yiwei (2016), this project presents itself as an alternative to the American way of conducting the process of globalization, which he sees as unsustainable.

Regardless of the official rhetoric, it is a fact that such initiative has the potential to establish a new order not only in Eurasia, but also in the entire international system. Despite the contradictions which divide the rhetoric from the practices, the intentions from the reality, it seems plausible to suggest that the Chinese insertion strategy differs from the strategy adopted by the United States. Beyond its willingness to shed light on such background issues, the present academic paper aims at understanding how the Chinese diplomacy has been trying to adjust its OBOR Initiative to its policy towards Africa. All in all, it intends to perceive how the re-emergence of Asia, with China in its center core, is shaping the systemic transition (Arrighi 2008, 17).

For this purpose, in the first section of the paper, the main elements of the Chinese international insertion, which is progressively getting more assertive, are presented. In the second one, there is an explanation on the features of the New Silk Road, as well as on the capabilities and objectives of its implementation. In the third part of the text, we revisit a few core aspects of the Chinese policy towards Africa, looking forward to understanding eventually which is the role of the continent within the new maritime Silk

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Road.

China: From National Reconstruction to Global Assertiveness

When the New China emerged, after the Revolution of 1949, it paved the way to a multifaceted and sinuous process of national reconstruction. The first generation of leaders, led by Mao Zedong, turned the country into an independent nation, resumed territorial integration and established the landmarks to base industries and infrastructure (transportation, communications and energy). The second generation, whose leader was Deng Xiaoping, shaped the Chinese economic reform in the mid-1970s, which opened the country to the world, resumed the process of accelerated growth, internalized technology, reduced the gap in terms of the developed countries and created a new institutional framework to the country. The third generation, under Jiang Zemin's administration (1993-2003), had to face two challenges: (i) resist the situation resulting from the collapse of the Soviet sphere of influence; (ii) and not only maintain the measures proposed by Deng, but also strengthen them.

From the twenty-first century onwards, along with Hu Jintao's fourth generation (2003-2013) and with Xi Jinping's fifth's (2013-present), the Chinese international projection acquired new shapes. As stated by Visentini (2011, 131), if the consolidation of the New China represented the recovery of the country's sovereignty and the establishment of the landmarks for the further national development, a "Brand New" China, after the Reforms, begins to transform the international order itself. The challenges faced by China are complicated, since the country has to deal not only with the contradictions of the Post-Cold War world, but also with the aging of the contemporary capitalism and its historical cores.

Alongside the process of national solidification, China started to exert a more important role within international organizations, as it is the example of the country's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and the more significant role it started to play within the IMF. Besides, Chinese leadership towards regional integration is also worth pointing out. According to Zhao (2013), Chinese diplomacy became more assertive over time, giving up on Deng's traditional low-profile foreign policy, especially when it comes to crucial matters of national interest, such as the country's presence in Africa and security issues involving the South China Sea. China has been building objective and subjective conditions in order to develop an active multilateral diplomacy, giving up on its supporting player condition to exert a leading figure and to take on great responsibilities (Tianquan 2012, 182).

Towards this direction, regional assertiveness and activism are preconditions to consolidate the Chinese role as a superpower. That is why conducting and leading the processes of regional integration is so important, be it towards the Pacific (ASEAN Plus Three and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, also called ASEAN+6) or towards Eurasia (Shanghai Cooperation Organization). The New Mainland and Maritime Silk Road (One Belt, One Road), let on by the Chinese government, intends to set the infrastructure and the political plea to integrate the entire region of Eurasia. In other words, the argument that China is rebuilding a “sinocentric” system is getting stronger (Pautasso 2011).

Hence, it is clear that China has been proclaiming a rhetoric that aims at legitimizing its rise. Firstly, the concept of Peaceful Rise, forged by Zheng Bijan, a prominent member of the Communist Party of China, in 2002. This concept was also created as a response to the frequent assertions of “Chinese threat” or “Chinese breakdown”. However, the concept was rejected, among other reasons, because it would arouse mistrust among neighboring countries due to the notion of “rise”. According to (Tianquan 2012, 188), in 2007, a Report by the 17th Congress of the Communist Party of China adopted the idea of Peaceful Development and Harmonious World.

In 2004, the British writer Joshua Ramo introduced the notion of the Beijing Consensus. According to it, China has been performing an alternative path based not only on the recognition local development needs of each country, but also on the recognition of multilateralism and cooperation as a way to build a new world order (Arrighi 2008, 383). In spite of the fact that this concept was not forged by the Chinese elite, the Chinese model – characterized by intense State presence in development matters and based upon the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (1955) – is perceived as different and even divergent from the neoliberal supremacy enshrined in the Washington Consensus and from the widespread interventionism of the US.

Recently, the Chinese elite has been highlighting the idea of the “Chinese Dream”. This concept is conceived as the country’s rejuvenation, as well as the revitalization and renewal of its civilization, in order to promote transformation and to materialize development. The Chinese dream is intertwined with the “bicentenary agenda” (the creation of the CPC in 1921 and the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949), which establishes the baselines for the construction of a country and of a society modestly comfortable.

It is evident, therefore, that China is searching for concepts and frameworks capable of providing identity to the country’s foreign insertion. It does so as a reaction to concepts such as the “Chinese Threat”, arranging

alternative paths to the global governance patterns of the United States and its European allies. However, it not about a conceptual ‘dispute’; the Chinese journey itself has always been contrasted by the Western. As highlighted by Losurdo (2016), in China, the Welfare State is being built facing the challenges that only a continental-size country with more than 1.3 billion inhabitants, wide social mobility and enlargement of the middle class – not to mention the setback in regional inequalities – could face. On the other hand, in the West, while social and regional polarization arise, social rights are going through a process of dismantling. In this sense, development is imperative to the legitimacy of the regime, to national sovereignty and to the autonomous international insertion of this Asian country (Losurdo 2016, 343).

China’s New Silk Road policy and strategy

After being announced by Xi Jinping in 2013, the New Silk Road was given a document issued by the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), whose title was *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*². The document emphasizes that, more than two millenniums ago, peoples of Asia, Europe and Africa were integrated by the Silk Road. According to the Chinese government, the New Silk Road seeks for the following elements of cooperation: political coordination, facilities connectivity, unobstructed trade, financial integration and people exchange. In order to make it happen, the main objectives are to align and coordinate this countries’ development strategies; to create demand and job opportunities; and to promote trust, peace and prosperity. The plan explicits the availability of the Chinese government in handling higher responsibilities and obligations – according to its possibilities – and in promoting the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. As reported by the document, the New Route subdivides itself into the Economic Belt, linking China–Central Asia–Russia– Europe (Baltic states); and the Maritime Route, developed to sail from the Chinese coast to Europe, going across the South China Sea and across the Indian Ocean, by one route, and from the Chinese coast, across the South China Sea and towards the South Pacific by the other one (Figure 1).

2 See the original document on the official website of the Chinese government http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html.

Figure 1 - Economic Belt of the original Silk Road and of the New Maritime Silk Road



Source: Resource Reports.

The project of the New Silk Road is structured upon 6 corridors: (i) Economic Corridor China–Mongolia–Russia; (ii) New Eurasian Land Bridge; (iii) Economic Corridor China–Central Asia; (iv) Economic Corridor China–Indochinese Peninsula; and (v) Maritime Economic Corridor. Such integration process would involve around 65 countries and 63% percent of the global population of three continents (Asia, Europe and Africa). The main idea behind this endeavor is the rejuvenation and integration of Eurasia, a region once referred to as the World Island by Mackinder, involving several civilizations (Chinese, Arabic, Persian, Indian) and several religions (from Islam to Christianity), always avoiding the expansionist model and the colonialism adopted by the Western powers (Yiwei 2016, 187-188).

The Chinese strategy of the New Silk Road seems a fair project, since it is based upon the exploitation of the main capacities available to the Asian country. The first one is the Chinese productive capacity, which includes an enormous base industry: steel production is a clear example, as China completed 2014 with a production of almost 823 million tons, against 110,7 from Japan and 88,3 from the United States³. The second one

3 See Valor's news "Produção global de aço cresce 1,2% no mundo e cai 0,7% no Brasil" on:

is the country's giant port infrastructure, owing 7 out of 10 of the world's biggest⁴ ports and 21 out of the 100 world's biggest construction companies (only 8 of them are Japanese and 7 American)⁵. Last but not least, China has been mobilizing its financial capacities to boost the integration conceived by the New Silk Road. It is worth mentioning the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS' New Development Bank, the establishment of a financial institution owned by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Silk Road Fund, and the Chinese banks themselves. In other words, such financial capacity works not only as a way to leverage the country's international insertion, but also as a tool to pressure the emergence of a new financial and geo-economic architecture in a global scale.

In this sense, the New Silk Road enunciates three fundamental goals of the Chinese government, namely its economic capacity, its foreign policy strategies and its financial reserves. These three goals may intertwine with the shaping of a new financial and geo-economic architecture. Firstly, the Chinese government has been pointing out, since the 2008 financial crisis, the necessity to overcome its vulnerabilities of an economy anchored upon the dollar and pressured to make its own currency part of IMF's currency basket – as it started to happen in 2016, when the yuan began to represent 10,92% of such basket, behind the dollar (41,7%) and the euro (30,9%), and ahead of the pound (8,1%) and the yen (8,3%)⁶. Secondly, there is the BRICS' initiative that created the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserves Agreement in the 6th Summit of the group, in July 2014⁷. Thirdly, China widened its role as global infrastructure financier through China Development Bank (CDB) and Exim Bank, both established in 1994 as State development banks. Fourthly, there is the growth in foreign direct investments and contracts in China⁸ – what explains the fast-track enlargement of the number of Chinese companies in the Fortune's list of the

<http://www.valor.com.br/empresas/3873604/producao-global-de-aco-cresce-12-no-mundo-e-cai-07-no-brasil>.

4 See the ranking on the website World Shipping Council: <http://www.worldshipping.org/about-the-industry/global-trade/top-50-world-container-ports>.

5 See the ranking of the world's biggest construction companies: http://www.enr.com/toplists/2015_Top_250_International_Contractors1.

6 See Estadão's news: "Entrada do yuan na cesta do FMI ocorrerá em outubro de 2016" on: <http://br.china-embassy.org/por/szxw/t1250761.htm>

7 See note published by the Chinese Embassy in Brazil "Chinese Premier asks the U.S. to approve reform of IMF's quotas", March the 31st 2015, available on: <http://br.china-embassy.org/por/szxw/t1250761.htm>

8 See detailed research on: <http://www.heritage.org/research/projects/china-global-investment-tracker-interactive-map>.

500 greatest companies in the world to 106 in 2015⁹. Fifthly, the government created an international payment system (China International Payment System – CIPS) in October 2015¹⁰, an alternative to the Western dominant SWIFT (Society for the Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication). Hence, the Chinese government works towards the global de-dollarization and the internationalization of its own currency, the yuan, looking forward to enlarge its autonomy towards the financial market centered in the U.S. and in the European Union. All in all, the dialectic between power and capital has been shaping the contemporary international system and, therefore, it is worth understanding how the American hegemony has been built from Bretton Woods onwards and considering the signs which point towards the fact that significant changes are occurring in the international sphere (Pautasso 2015).

And what could turn the OBOR initiative into a feasible project? In the first place, it must be kept in mind that the answer does not involve complex institutional arrangements of integration, which premises huge concessions and consensus. Secondly, its feasibility is being driven by a single, almost irrefutable objective: the interest of the countries in infrastructure. Thirdly, once confirmed the feasibility of the project – coming from the capacities available to China (base industry, engineering, financing, etc.) –, trade flows get consolidated, allowing the exercise of its economic gravitational power. At last, the economic power generates the legitimacy needed to explore the political power, which may progressively displace the American hegemony by integrating Eurasia.

Africa in the context of the Chinese foreign policy

The collapse of the soviet socialism has had a much more significant impact to international relations and to the international society than it is usually credited. The neoliberal offensive and the American expansionism, shown by a unilateral and interventionist foreign policy, may be its most apparent facets. However, its developments are perceived in the contemporary scenario still. When it comes to China and the African continent, the situation is not much different.

In Africa, even though the cessation of the conventional conflicts led by the superpowers (USA and USSR) have had a positive outcome, the end of the Cold War has at the very least changed the political orientation of

9 See China Daily “More Chinese firms in Fortune 500” on: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2016-07/20/content_26161051.htm.

10 See Russia Today “China launches global yuan payment system” on: <https://www.rt.com/business/318103-china-payment-system-yuan/>.

progressive governments which emerged from national liberation struggles. The neoliberal adjustments have disarticulated the recent-born African states, leading, eventually, to economic and institutional setbacks. The outcome was a marginalization of the continent in the field of international relations whilst identity conflicts, misery and epidemics took over (Visentini 2010, 155).

To China, the repression faced at Tiananmen Square has granted the maintenance of the regime and of Deng's reforms, whilst the rest of the socialist countries were in the process of disintegration, diving into a decade of regression due to neoliberal shock therapies. Still, the approach with Africa was a crucial part of the Chinese strategy, not only as a way to break the siege, but also as a path to universalize its foreign policy and widen the economic synergy which had been feeding its economic dynamism.

From the mid-nineties onwards, the mutual efforts between China and African nations has increased. Chinese trade with the African continent surpassed US\$174 billion in 2014. Around 4.2% of Chinese exports have Africa as destiny and around 4.8% of the country's imports come from this very same continent¹¹. In 2009, Chinese-African trade – which, in 1992, comprehended only 1.3 billion – had already overcome the transacted amount between the U.S. and the African continent. The growth in trade flow taxes, however, is a result of a multi-approach interaction which has been institutionalized behind the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).

FOCAC was formally established in 2000 and comprehends China and 50 other African nations. The Ministerial Conference occurs every three years and aims at intensifying China-Africa cooperation, using several other forums which deal with agriculture, science and technology, law, finance, culture, reflection groups, youth, NGOs, women debate, media and local governance, etc. Throughout this period, a great amount of documents have been signed, with a special note to Addis Ababa Action Agenda (2004-2006), whose goals were to increase assistance to African countries and to provide them tax-free exports to China when coming from least developed African nations. Every new summit, the Forum develops a new Action Plan – to be implemented in the subsequent period (Action Plan towards Cooperation-Beijing China-Africa 2007-2009; Sharm el-Sheikh Action Plan 2010-2012; Beijing Cooperation Action Plan 2013-2015). Moreover, the Chinese government has been extending billionaire credit lines to several sectors of the African economy¹². In other words, FOCAC strengthens the bilateral relations of China with African countries, achieving natural resources, new markets and investment opportunities, while cultivating African states' commitment to China within International Organizations (Lopes, Daniele and Javier 2013).

Such institutionalization of Chinese-African relations boosts several

11 See Chinese trade statistics. The source is the Observatory of Economic Complexity, available on: <http://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/chn/#Destinations>.

12 See further details on FOCAC'S website: <http://www.focac.org/eng/ltda/tljj/t933522.htm>.

other initiatives. Firstly, it has increased Chinese international aid in Africa, providing professional training, technical cooperation, humanitarian aid, etc. Secondly, the continent's infrastructural development has shown substantial progress behind the construction of public buildings, power generation plants, highways, schools, agriculture development sites, hospitals, etc. Thirdly, Chinese foreign direct investment has stimulated Special Economic Zones and Free Trade Zones in several African countries, compensating for the unemployment generated by Chinese exports. As highlighted by Visentini (2014), such features are the very expression of South-South Cooperation and are contributing to the creation of a meridional geopolitical scenario based upon the spirit of the Bandung Conference. In other words, Bandung, the Non-Aligned Movement and the G-77 have established the foundation basis of South-South relations, as well as its organization around common principles, values and ideas (Pereira and Medeiros 2015).

It is evident, therefore, that China's African policy is driven by its self-interest and its own political and strategic considerations. However, it is extremely different from the Western rhetoric which constantly characterizes it as "Chinese imperialism". Although the earnings, the benefits and the capacities are indeed asymmetric, Chinese relations with African countries do not involve territorial control, military interventionism, interference on economic management, ethnocentrism on political organizations, imposition of cultural patterns, etc. – which are clear facets of nineteenth and twentieth century imperialism.

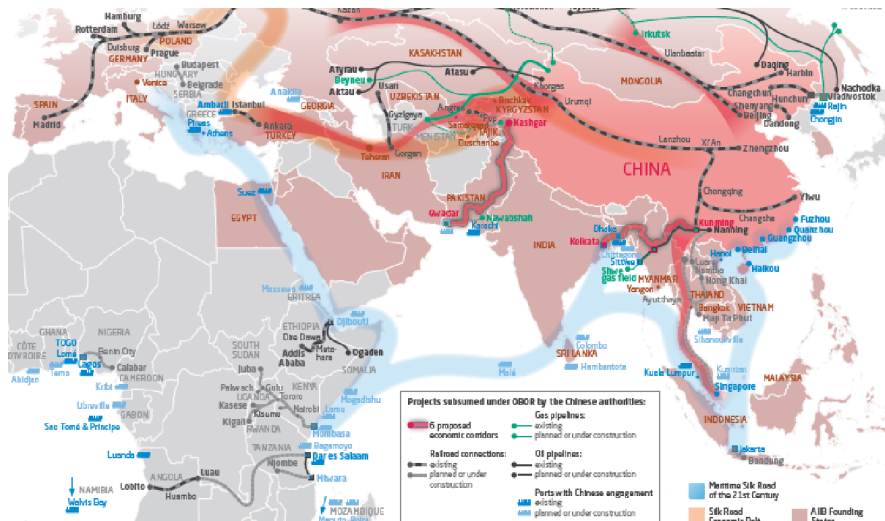
Africa and the New Maritime Silk Road

Persuasively, China is combining its rhetoric and capabilities to put forth the OBOR Initiative. According to Yiwei (2016, 15-60), the New Maritime Silk Road throws out the path previously adopted by Western powers – which promoted expansion, conflict and colonization –, choosing in favor of a new maritime civilization, in which there is the integration of men and seas, harmonious coexistence and sustainable development.

For this purpose, China aims at establishing ties between the main markets of the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa. The New Maritime Silk Road is dedicated to consolidate port infrastructure in order to strengthen commercial and energetic corridors that go through the South China Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, encompassing Peninsulas such as Indochina, Hindustan, Arabia and the Horn of Africa. It is a way of increasing Chinese presence in the face of the existing chokepoints of the region, such as the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb, between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Ormuz, between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, and the Strait of Malacca, between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea.

Regarding the African continent, Northeast Africa and the Horn of Africa are the other pole of the maritime connection provided by the OBOR Initiative. The position of countries such as Egypt, Djibouti and Kenya reveals the role of the Horn of Africa as the other pole of the New Maritime Silk Road. This region may potentialize Chinese policies towards Africa (Figure 2). Furthermore, much of the Chinese experience behind the New Silk Road, based upon infrastructure buildup as a way to boost new fluxes and partnerships, has been shaped through Sino-African relations.

Figure 2: Africa and the New Maritime Silk Road



Source: Mercator Institute for China's Studies

Therefore, Egypt is particularly crucial for the New Maritime Silk Road, since the Suez Canal is the main transit spot between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. When visiting this African country in January 2016, Xi Jinping encouraged Chinese companies to take part in big projects in the country, such as the development of the New Suez Canal and the construction of a new administrative capital outside Cairo¹³.

Djibouti's case is no different, strategically located between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. In spite of its small size, the country is very important in the framework of the New Maritime Silk Road, sheltering the first Chinese ultramarine naval base – where the United States already

13 See Shannon Tiezzi's article on The Diplomat "Xi's Visit Cements Egypt's Place on the 'Belt and Road' on: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/xis-visit-cements-egypts-place-on-the-belt-and-road/>.

have the Pentagon's African Command (AFRICOM), used for CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) drone operations. The alleged goal of the Chinese government is to deploy facilities able to provide logistic support to efforts against piracy, humanitarian assistance and peace maintenance. Although China insists on denying the term "military base", it is clear the willingness of the country in building a Marine capable of operating in worldwide global waters – supported by its first air carrier, the so-called "Liaoning"¹⁴.

In the same way, in Kenya, the Chinese government has settled a deal in order to build the Port of Lamu. The objective is to integrate South Sudan and Ethiopia through other infrastructure operations, including roadways, railways, airports, oil refineries and fiber optic cables. Hence, the emerging oil and gas industries from East Africa shall be integrated with Asian markets dynamics¹⁵. This region is also connected to Chinese interests in Sudan.

In this sense, it is possible to observe that the OBOR Initiative will knot together a set of great goals of the Chinese government – which have been already described in previous studies (Pautasso 2012). Firstly, it will, in the domestic arena, deepen national territorial integration with the establishment of a continental economy, since Eastern China develops the maritime "wing" of the Route; Western China, the mainland "wing", connecting more than 10 Chinese provinces. Secondly, it will also deepen regional integration, further strengthening the conditions towards the creation of a Sinocentric system. Thirdly, the universalization of Chinese foreign policy, marked by a significant presence in Africa, will become a field test for Sino-American disputes, which reveals conflicting development models in the current era.

All in all, the New Silk Road is clearly a Chinese strategy towards (i) Eurasian integration, (ii) the consolidation of a new Sinocentric system, and (iii) the establishment of foundation basis for China to consolidate itself as a global superpower. It is, at the same time, both a strategy and a rhetoric to legitimize China's emergence in different patterns from those announced by the U.S. in the post-Cold War period.

Final Considerations

History itself (and history of international relations, for obvious

¹⁴ See Sputnik Brazil "China construirá sua 1ª base naval ultramarina perto de base dos EUA no Djibouti" on: <http://br.sputniknews.com/mundo/20151127/2900669/china-base-baval-ultramarina-eua-djibouti.html>.

¹⁵ See Estadão's news: "Grupo chinês firma acordo para construir porto do Quênia" on: <http://economia.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,grupo-chines-firma-acordo-para-construir-porto-do-quenia,1537830>.

reasons) is a contradictory process. The understanding and the reading of such contradictions, the forces in dispute, is obfuscated by its involvement with the contemporary era. During the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world witnessed the rebirth of Africa, the strengthening of popular governments in Latin America and the international projection of emerging countries – later reunited under the BRICS acronym. There was the rehearsal of South-South cooperation movements and the recapture of the processes initiated with the decolonization of global periphery and with the emergence of the Third World and its movements under the sign of the Conference of Bandung. The 2008 crisis, by its turn, has reinstated neoconservative forces, which were already strengthened by the collapse of the USSR and by the advent of neoliberalism, led by the United States of America.

In this sense, Chinese modernization experience and the construction of integration and development processes, articulated under the New Silk Road, represent, without a doubt, not just a project, but also one of the forces in an international relations field marked by crossroads. If the ambitious project of integrating Asia, Europe and Africa manages to afford an alternative to capitalism's central poles and to the Consensus of Washington, China will be able to exert a fundamental leading role in the twenty-first century. Africa, paradoxically, takes on a decisive role: from marginalized continent, it may turn itself into the new frontier of the experiences of development and South-South cooperation. The inclusion of the African continent within the New Silk Road also represents the opportunity to globally shape the initiative and, at the same time, China's role itself in the new global power setting.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Africa's role in the construction of the New Maritime Silk Road. This is just one of the vectors of the ambitious Chinese integration project in Asia, Europe and Africa, launched in 2013 under the title OBOR Initiative (One Belt, One Road). By overcoming the challenges of national reconstruction, China is becoming more assertive and shaping its global integration strategy. In this sense, the New Silk Road aggregates the main objectives of China's diplomacy in the twenty-first century, elevating Africa to a springboard condition in order for the project to become global.

KEYWORDS

China; New Maritime Silk Road; Africa.

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