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The Belt and Road Initiative

China's path to global power?

PhD Thesis

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

With the ending of the Cold War, the world didn't only experience the end of history¹, in the sense of an ideological victory of democracy, but it became, due to the supremacy of the United States of America, a unipolar world. In this world, China has been crafting its economic rise, abandoning its Maoist and communist practices in favor of capitalism. And, as it was anticipated that „China's rise will bring the unipolar moment of the US to an end,"² the world has started to become bipolar or even multipolar, and history seems not to have ended with the fall of the USSR after all, considering that the new economic and ideological competitor of the US was going to be yet another nominally communist state.

Today, the geopolitical relationship between the US and China seems to be well described by the power transition theory, which postulates that the parity of power will lead to conflict, not a balance of power and peace. But, in such a scenario, China will face not only the US on its way to becoming a global power but, as John Ikenberry stated, "the entire Western-centered system, which is open, integrated and rule-based, with wide and deep political foundations."³ It was not for nothing that China pushed, through all these years, the idea of a "peaceful rise," which wouldn't overthrow the current international system, as China wants to be recognized as a great power and accepted at the top of international system and wants to change those elements of this system which are in contradiction with the nature of the Chinese political system and its geopolitical interests. The purpose and goal for China is to avoid a direct conflict with the hegemon, the US, which it perceives as being in decline.

But there are international relations experts, such as John Mearsheimer, who believe that China's rise will not be a peaceful one, because "China is likely to try to dominate Asia the way that the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere"⁴ and that "America is likely to behave towards China much the way it behaved towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War."⁵ On the other hand, John Ikenberry

¹ Fukuyama, F. (1989) „The End of History?," *The National Interest*, 16, Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

² Ikenberry, J. (2008) „The Rise of China and the Future of the West. Can the Liberal System Survive?," *Foreign Affairs*, Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2006) „China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History*, 105(690), p.162, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2006.105.690.160> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

⁵ Ibid., p.162

believes that China's rise will follow the pattern of a peaceful rise, because the current international system has the ability to accommodate new powers.⁶ The years that followed the two experts' predictions proved both of them correct, at least partially, China becoming more aggressive internationally but maintaining the discourse of a peaceful rise and, ultimately, of a peaceful transition, while war has been, at least for now, avoided. Yet, unlike the traditional model of the power transition theory, when the challenger challenges the hegemon, a conflict and a power transition between the US and China have already begun, taking the form of a trade war between the two states. Even if some voices claim that this war hasn't been won by any of the two powers,⁷ the trade war has set the US and China on the trajectory of a power transition, a trajectory started by the fear of the hegemon, in this case the US, towards the challenger, China. It is a trap mentioned by Graham Allison in his famous aphorism, the "Thucydides' trap"⁸ and its finality might be a war.

Thus, China emerges not only as a hegemon in Asia, but as a new pole of power within the international system. A rising China, a richer China, a military stronger China translates to a more assertive China globally. China's demands do not include only territories but also a more favorable position within the international system and the changing of those norms which disadvantage China, pose a threat to or target the Chinese political system, such as human rights or democratic values.

It is in this context that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) appeared on the international stage. Presented as a symbol of China's economic and comprehensive power, the BRI was seen as an instrument that could facilitate China's rise and the improvement of the Chinese state's image globally, as well as the expansion of its influence. From reinforcing China's status globally, through the loans it provides, to increasing and expanding the reach of its military power, through investing in different foreign military bases, to the increase of China's global influence, thanks to the thousands of proposed projects, all of these aspects have been related to the Belt and Road Initiative.

Whether it is perceived through the lens of an infrastructure project, a 1 trillion dollars plan, a new Marshall Plan, a debt trap or even as a new type of imperialism, the Belt and Road Initiative has always been questioned: is the BRI an attempt by China to obtain global power and, ultimately, dethrone the US from its position as a global hegemon?

⁶ Ikenberry, J. (2008) „The Rise of China and the Future of the West. Can the Liberal System Survive?,” *Foreign Affairs*, Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

⁷ Davis, B. and Wei, L. (2022) „Who Won the U.S.-China Trade War?,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Available at: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/who-won-the-u-s-china-trade-war-11653059611> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

⁸ Allison, G. (2017) „The Thucydides Trap”, *Foreign Policy*, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/09/the-thucydides-trap/> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

The positive answer to this question didn't only come from a few American experts specialized on China, but especially from American political leaders. Mike Pence, the former vice president of the US, put a lot of emphasis on the way China uses the BRI in order to establish its presence in the world's ports, initially for commercial reasons, only to later use them for military purposes.⁹ Pence didn't hesitate to express his negative views regarding the BRI, which he saw more as an initiative which constricts countries¹⁰ and sinks them into "a sea of debt."¹¹ According to Mike Pompeo, the former secretary of state during the Trump administration, "the Chinese effort to the Belt and Road activities are [sic] about using government power to achieve national security objectives."¹² It was also Pompeo who cataloged the BRI as an attempt from China to buy an empire through „predatory loans."¹³ Rex Tillerson, Pompeo's predecessor, also had quite a stern position towards China and the BRI. He considered that China was positioning itself as a new imperialist power¹⁴ in developing nations. Although „China offers the appearance of an attractive path to development, but in reality [is] trading short-term gains for long-term dependency."¹⁵

H.R. McMaster, the former national security adviser from the Trump administration, saw the BRI, too, as a strategy for China to increase some nations' dependency on it, through the loans it offered. McMaster called this practice „economic clientelism"¹⁶ and he was referring to the idea that China, through the BRI, offers loans to various nations, for infrastructure development, gets them into debt and, once indebted, „the [Chinese Communist] Party forces their leaders to align with China's foreign policy agenda and the goal of displacing the influence of the United States and its key partners."¹⁷

⁹ Pence, M. (2019) „Remarks by Vice President Pence at the Frederic V. Malek Memorial Lecture," *US Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam*, Available at: <https://vn.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-vice-president-pence-at-the-frederic-v-malek-memorial-lecture/> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

¹⁰ Reuters (2018) „U.S. Vice President Pence Vows no End to Tariffs Until China Bows," *Reuters*, Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-apec-summit-usa-idUKKCN1NM04F> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

¹¹ Gomez, J. and Wright, S. (2018) „Pence, Xi Trade Barbs in Speeches at Pacific Summit", *AP News*, Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/politics-asia-pacific-business-ap-top-news-china-42060391ae0b4f4e9a657bfde50fd965> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

¹² Pompeo, M. (2019) „Remarks to Traveling Press by Secretary Pompeo," *US Embassy and Consulate in Russia*, Available at: <https://ru.usembassy.gov/remarks-to-traveling-press-by-secretary-of-state-pompeo/> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

¹³ Gehrke, J. (2018) „Pompeo: China is Buying an 'Empire'," *Washington Examiner*, Available at: <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/mike-pompeo-china-is-buying-an-empire> (Accessed 6 October 2021).

¹⁴ Dodwell, D. (2018) „Tillerson's Final Warning on Belt and Road Financing Only Proves China's Influence on the Rise," *South China Morning Post*, Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/business/global-economy/article/2138539/tillersons-final-warning-belt-and-road-financing-only-proves> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ McMaster, H. R. (2020) „How China Sees the World and How We Should See China," *The Atlantic*, Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/05/mcmaster-china-strategy/609088/> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

¹⁷ Ibid.

Matt Pottinger, the former deputy national security adviser under the Trump administration, perceived as well the BRI from a negative perspective, that of a “con.”¹⁸ And he stated that “when the con doesn’t induce acquiescence, the [Chinese Communist] Party often resorts to intimidation and repression.”¹⁹

With the changing of administrations and with the Biden administration coming to power, the aggressive speeches against the BRI have become less frequent, but the US perspective towards the Belt and Road Initiative didn’t change. The BRI continues to be perceived as China’s instrument for gaining global power, but the BRI name has rarely been used by American leaders in describing China’s global interests. In a public speech, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said that “China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to do it.”²⁰ Still, the US invested a lot of effort in creating a competitor for the BRI and having it embraced by the G7 powers. In 2021, at the G7 summit, the US launched the Build Back Better World (B3W), an initiative that wanted to rival the BRI in terms of infrastructure projects, spurred by the concern that China’s global influence is increasing due to the BRI, which generates infrastructure opportunities that the West had no alternative for. As the initiative has not been fully accepted by the G7 powers, the US launched, in 2022, the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). Together with the European initiative Global Gateway and the Japanese initiative Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment aims to become an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative.

Although these initiatives focus on the most visible part of the BRI, the infrastructure, in reality they have a geopolitical and containment role against the Chinese initiative. Since the BRI is perceived, as an instrument for China to achieve its geopolitical ambitions,²¹ the BRI has thus obtained, on top of its infrastructure and inter-connectivity status, a geopolitical status as well. Whether China is seen as using the BRI to achieve international hegemony through a vast program of economic integration,²² whether the BRI offers internal and external advantages to China through financial dependence, through

¹⁸ Pottinger, M. (2020) „Remarks by Deputy National Security Advisor Matt Pottinger to London-based Policy Exchange,” *The White House*, Available at: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-deputy-national-security-advisor-matt-pottinger-london-based-policy-exchange/> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Blinken, A. (2022) „The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China,” *The US Department of State*, Available at: <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/> (Accessed 10 June 2022).

²¹ Kliman, D., Doshi, R., Lee, K. and Cooper, Z. (2019) „Grading China’s Belt and Road,” *Center for a New American Security*, p. 1, Available at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/CNAS+Report_China+Belt+and+Road_final.pdf (Accessed 12 October 2021).

²² Cai, P. (2017) „Understanding China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, p. 5, Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/understanding-belt-and-road-initiative> (Accessed 12 October 2021).

access to ports with geo-strategic positions, through telecommunications or railway networks,²³ whether China seems to mobilize and use all the dimensions of power, through the BRI, to reach its goals, including coercion, threats, predatory loans, soft-power projection, contesting of rules and norms,²⁴ whether “the BRI is just one dimension of Chinese power and influence”²⁵ or “an imperial project in the rewards that China could reap as well as in the risks it faces”²⁶ or only an attempt to solve the geopolitical dilemmas caused by the strategic hybrid orientation of China – which wants to be both a continental and maritime power – but also an answer to the US pivot or its policy of the Asia-Pacific re-balance from 2011,²⁷ the BRI is still perceived by all these experts as having geopolitical elements.

Still, the BRI hasn’t proven, yet, its status as a geopolitical instrument, attributed by many Western experts. This label has been applied without an exhaustive analysis or research and more on the basis of the fears that the Western world perceives as coming from China and the Belt and Road Initiative, interpreted mainly from a geopolitical and economic perspective, through infrastructure. Therefore, the BRI hasn’t been analyzed in order to determine whether it helps or doesn’t help China’s rise, in the way in which this thesis aims to do.

At this moment, in the available literature, a clear connection between the BRI and the way in which it can influence China’s rise as a superpower hasn’t been demonstrated. Still, the BRI was attributed numerous definitions. If, for some, the BRI is mainly an infrastructure plan, for others, the BRI is the global manifestation of China’s intentions – military expansion, increase of global influence, control over some states, debt and exploitation – while, for other experts, the BRI is a form of globalization, an economic project, a win-win situation, a Chinese great plan, a different kind of Marshall Plan or even a moral and civilization project. Still, there are other experts who associate the BRI more with China’s general foreign policy than with a well-organized plan, which would help China’s rise to superpower status. All these definitions reveal a problem: the lack of a comprehensive analysis of the multiple aspects of the BRI, so that the initiative could be defined in a more accurate way, in conformity with its realities.

²³ Doshi, R. (2019) „The Superpower Learning Curve: Challenges to Chinese Economic Statecraft,” *Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, p. 6, Available at: https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Doshi_USCC%20Testimony_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 12 October 2021).

²⁴ de Swielande, T. S. and Vandamme, D. (2020) „The New Silk Roads: Defining China’s Grand Strategy” in Leandro, F. J. B. S. and Duarte, P. A. B. *The Belt and Road Initiative, An Old Archetype of a New Development Model*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 4.

²⁵ Hillman, J. H. (2020) *The Emperor's New Road: China and the Project of the Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, Capitolul 5, p.144 kindle.

²⁶ Ibid., Capitolul 1, p.30 kindle.

²⁷ Clarke, M. (2018) „The Belt and Road Initiative: Exploring Beijing’s Motivations and Challenges for its New Silk Road,” *Strategic Analysis*, 42 (2), p. 85, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2018.1439326> (Accessed 12 October 2021).

According to research conducted by the author, the BRI is essentially a branding strategy of China's foreign policy, originating not as a well-structured long-term plan of the Chinese government, but more as a vague definition of the idea of rebuilding the old Silk Road, with the intention to profit from the positive connotations of this historical reference. Although the infrastructure side has been the most visible, the BRI has had, since the beginning, several other elements, among which were financial relations, political relations, commercial relations or people-to-people relations. Although there has been a vague attempt to officially define the BRI, many of China's important external projects have been categorized as part of the BRI. Thus, the BRI has become an umbrella for China's overseas investments, including those that preceded the initiative. Moreover, with the extension of the BRI brand, when terms such as the Digital Silk Road, the Polar Silk Road, the Space Silk Road or the Air Silk Road have appeared, the image of the BRI has become even more vague and almost synonymous with China's foreign policy, because any type of Chinese external action or foreign policy turned out to be suitable for the BRI brand. All that China proposed on foreign affairs was becoming, in one way or another, part of the BRI umbrella.

Still, we can discuss about an evolution of the BRI and of the idea surrounding it, from a simple proposal mentioned throughout speeches by various Chinese political leaders, to BRI summits organized once every two years. This evolution only shows the brand or slogan nature of the initiative, in contrast to a concrete strategy, as it is often perceived.

The beginnings of the BRI are often connected to two speeches by Chinese President Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013, when he launched two ideas of economic corridors: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. They, through an exercise of imagination from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, will become the One Belt One Road Initiative and, later, in order to avoid the idea of a single road, the Belt and Road Initiative. Although many people have seen the BRI as a construct of Xi Jinping's power, the BRI brand is, according to the results of an analysis of Chinese leaders' speeches in Chapter 4, the creation of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its leaders being the first Chinese politicians to use the BRI name. Both Xi Jinping, the president of China, and Li Keqiang, the premier of China, have used this term much later than Wang Yi, the minister of foreign affairs. But the BRI has evolved not only as a concept, but also geographically. Initially, the BRI was proposed to strengthen China's relations with its neighbors, such as nations from Central Asia and ASEAN, then it was extended to Europe, becoming a Euro-Asian initiative – one which had connections to the historical routes of the Silk Road, with which it was associated. At the same time, as it extended to Europe, it also included Africa, and in 2018, the BRI reached Latin America. In a more abstract way, the BRI also extended later to the Arctic region, in space, and in fields such as digital and cyberspace, aviation or

healthcare. Thus, it ended up losing any concept of a geographical space of the initiative, becoming enlarged to include the whole world or even space, thus illustrating its vague nature.

Still, the best-known aspect of the BRI is, without a doubt, its infrastructure dimension. And since the BRI has often been synonymous with Chinese overseas investments, an increased attention should be offered to those Chinese projects which have been in the headlines. From very well-known projects, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), to projects which have stained China's image, such as the Hambantota Port or the Montenegro Highway, to projects that have proved difficult to implement, such as the Budapest-Belgrade railway, to successful projects, such as the Mombasa-Nairobi railway, the Addis-Ababa-Djibouti railway or even to the first Chinese military base outside its borders, in Djibouti, all of these projects have contributed to shaping the image of the Belt and Road Initiative. Even if they are only a part of the BRI brand, they are the part which has played the greatest role in defining the idea of the Belt and Road in the collective mindset outside of China, therefore being necessary to carefully analyze them.

If we ignore the image deficit brought on the Belt and Road Initiative by the Hambantota Port and the narrative of a debt trap created around this project, we can say that most of these projects have had a happy ending, eventually being implemented by China. There have been cases of BRI projects which have not been implemented or have been renegotiated, such as the Kyaukphyu Port in Myanmar.

The Hambantota moment has been a defining one for the image of the BRI, being the moment when, internationally, the image of the initiative started to degrade and gained negative connotations. Until then, according to the author's research, it could have been said that the BRI had been more of a construct of Western media which, enticed by the idea of remaking the old Silk Road and its mythical aura, presented the BRI in a positive tone, that of a project which will help construct infrastructure in Asia and Africa, increasing the well-being of the people in BRI states. But, starting with 2017-2018, Western experts started to draw attention to the risks and negative consequences of the BRI, painting a less idyllic image of the initiative. From accusations of debt issues, to workforce abuses, to not respecting environmental standards, all these problems have started to stain the BRI image and transform it into an initiative ostracized internationally. It is also the time when the US and the EU began proposing numerous initiatives, in an attempt to create a higher standards infrastructure initiative. The BRI therefore transforms, in the Western perspective, from the Chinese initiative that could help the developing world through infrastructure investments, to the initiative which aims to dominate this developing world through dishonest loans and projects, in order to facilitate an increase in China's influence and pave the way towards its hegemony.

Because there are very few studies that analyze the way in which the BRI has influenced the international stage, China's rise and its relations with different states, it is necessary to further study these aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative. The importance of BRI research also comes from the need to better understand the nature and purposes of the Belt and Road Initiative. As the Chinese government hasn't defined the initiative, leaving it vague and open to interpretations, the expert community has come up with its own definitions, but without trying to answer, through analytical research, questions such as "What is the BRI?" or "What is the purpose of the BRI?." The current literature largely omitted these questions and assumed its own definitions and visions about the BRI. Therefore, the BRI has not only become an umbrella for all the Chinese projects and investments, along with China's foreign policy, but also accumulated numerous definitions. The multitude of these definitions made the BRI an even more vague initiative, even more open to interpretations and mistaken labels.

Up to now, the BRI has not had a universally accepted definition, which would reflect completely the ideas behind it. Firstly, the BRI was an improvised construct, and secondly, views of the initiative have evolved according to the lenses through which the Western world looked at the BRI – initially, as a beneficial initiative and later as a malign one. Additionally, some of these definitions have been influenced by preconceptions about China and Chinese culture. The most frequent preconception refers to the fact that the BRI could be a long-term strategy of China, a perspective which stems from the idea that the Chinese government crafts its foreign affairs strategies over a long-term period, sometimes of decades. If this is true for internal policies, externally, China has a less structured approach, which is not very meticulously constructed.

This thesis analyzes the main definitions attributed to the BRI and then the multitude of aspects and realities that fall under the BRI name, in an attempt to find the best definition to categorize the Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, the current thesis offers a theoretical framework for the Belt and Road Initiative, in order to better define its purpose. For this, several theories have been used, such as the power transition theory, but also Chinese theories, such as moral realism, in an attempt to see which of these best define the BRI. Also, in order to see which theory best describes the Belt and Road Initiative, several Western theories and concepts have been analyzed, such as the power transition theory, the balance of power theory, the complex interdependence theory and concepts such as soft, hard and smart power. If, initially, in the 2016-2017 period, this research was based on the idea that the BRI is a smart power strategy, which combines, in a balanced way, soft power (cultural power) with hard power (economic power) to create a Chinese strategy which will develop the image of China as a great power, in the end, the Western theory which best explains the evolution of the BRI is the one of the power transition. Despite this, even the power transition theory has its limits in creating a theoretical framework for the BRI, limits

which are reduced by the Chinese theory of moral realism. This theory takes the form of the power transition theory, but it is conditioned by Confucian morality. Therefore, slogans such as “peaceful rise,” “harmonious world,” “the community of common destiny” represent moral elements of a realist Chinese vision of international relations. The BRI has precisely this purpose of supporting the morality of China’s global actions. The narrative promoted by the Chinese government, with the help of the BRI, is that China’s rise changes the world in a beneficial way for everybody and especially for developing states.

This thesis also analyzes the way in which the BRI has or hasn’t helped China’s rise to superpower status. According to the research conducted for this thesis, the Belt and Road Initiative has had a contribution to China’s rise, but more at a discourse level, that of a story and a brand. Regarding Chinese investments in BRI states, for example, between 2013 and 2020, the average level of investments is maintained at 100 billion dollars annually, except for the years of the pandemic (2020-2021), which have halved the value of annual Chinese investments, compared to the previous years.²⁸ This, along with other reasons, is why we can state that the Chinese investments in the so-called BRI states would have taken place even in the absence of the BRI brand, which is just an umbrella for Chinese overseas investments. The current thesis analyzes the multiple dimensions of China’s rise and the BRI’s impact on them.

1.2 Methodology

This thesis focuses on the analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative in order to find a definition that would best encompass the ideas generally transmitted by this initiative. From an infrastructure project, to a debt trap, from a new Marshall Plan to a simple foreign policy initiative, all these definitions have been attributed to the BRI, offering it a wide range of descriptions which have made the initiative vague, confused and susceptible to change.

To define the BRI this thesis focuses on two main research questions: “What is the Belt and Road Initiative?” and “How does the Belt and Road Initiative influence China’s rise?.” Additionally, there are several other secondary questions, such as “What theories best describe the Belt and Road Initiative: Western theories or Chinese theories?,” “How is the Belt and Road Initiative perceived?” or “How does the Belt and Road Initiative influence the international system?.”

The thesis combines several methodological approaches in its nine chapters, but all of them are part of the qualitative methodology. To better understand how the BRI is perceived internationally, among

²⁸ Statista (n.d.), „Chinese Investments in Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from 2013 to 2021,” *Statista*, Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1274991/china-total-investment-in-belt-and-road-countries/> (Accessed 6 May 2022).

Chinese and Western experts, the document analysis method was applied. This technique involved the analysis of books, academic articles, reports and other writings, to identify certain BRI definitions, and it was used mainly in chapter 3. The document analysis method has also allowed the creation of a theoretical framework which could then be applied to the Belt and Road Initiative. This method was combined in chapters 5 and 6 with the analysis of concepts and theories, in order to illustrate which theory best fits the BRI and which school of thought best explains it: the Western or the Chinese one? Additionally, some chapters, such as chapters 6, 7, 8, include case studies, in order to monograph a certain topic connected to the subject analyzed in the respective chapters.

In order to answer the main research question of this thesis, specifically “What is the Belt and Road Initiative?”, the interview method was used. As part of this, 41 researchers specialized on China have been interviewed: 17 from China, 13 from Europe and 11 from the US. The interviews were conducted over a period of three years, between 2019-2022 and consisted of face-to-face interviews or online interviews, based on the same set of questions.

The face-to-face interviews took place in Beijing and Shanghai in 2019, having been made possible through a research scholarship to China, awarded to the author as a part of her PhD studies. The scholarship period, which involved field research, lasted for 9 months, and was based at Peking University, in Beijing. Over this period the author not only conducted research interviews about the Belt and Road Initiative, but also participated in seminars, forums and events related to the BRI, where she interacted with various Chinese experts and approached the Belt and Road Initiative in these discussions, trying to gauge the Chinese perspectives regarding the initiative.

The interviews with the Western researchers were conducted between 2020-2022, through email. Both the Chinese researchers as well as the ones from Europe and the US had to answer 4-5 questions about the BRI and China’s foreign policy, with a greater focus on the first two questions, which were unchanged for both the Chinese and Western researchers. The following questions were addressed:

- What does the BRI mean, in your opinion?
- What is the aim of the BRI?
- Is the BRI a well-planned pillar of China’s strategy to become a superpower or an improvised idea that evolved into something larger because of internal political dynamics in China?
- Why do you think that Western powers, such as the US and the EU, have lately been perceiving the BRI as a threatening strategy for them?
- Do you believe that the BRI is threatening towards the international order and should be treated as such? If so, why?

The purpose of these interviews was to enable some answers for the research questions of this thesis, particularly in order to find out how the Belt and Road Initiative is perceived among the experts specialized on China. These answers helped the author to formulate her own definitions of the BRI. Because the perspectives were different, three categories of experts were identified, which were divided according to their region: China, Europe and the US. The results of these interviews are presented in chapter 4 of this thesis, together with the results of the speech analysis method. This method was used to analyze over 200 speeches of the most important Chinese leaders, from the period 2013-2016, in order to identify how the Belt and Road concept appeared and how certain ideas took form around it.

The limits of the research for the conducted interviews were the lack of answers from the experts specialized on China. In order to receive the 41 answers, approximately 150 emails have been sent, resulting in a reply rate of only about 25%. In addition to the 41 answers, there have also been replies where the contacted experts either refused to answer the research questions, for one reason or another, or they only offered instead materials they had already published, regarding the BRI.

The analysis of the BRI was conducted in 9 chapters, the first chapter being an introductory one, which includes a short discussion of the BRI and its role in China's rise. The chapter also includes the methodology section, which presents the main methods used for this thesis.

Chapter 2 discusses the evolution of the Silk Road throughout history and how the ideas and the spirit of the old Silk Road have been translated into various projects and foreign policies strategies in the Eurasian region, which culminated in the Belt and Road Initiative eventually becoming the strongest and most impactful proposal for a New Silk Road.

Chapter 3 presents a literature review of the BRI, with the goal of finding a definition of the Belt and Road Initiative and of understanding the perspectives from which it is viewed. Within this review two perspectives have been identified: the Chinese perspective and the Western perspective.

Chapter 4 aims to answer the main research question: "What is the BRI?." In order to define what the BRI is, the speeches of the most important Chinese leaders have also been analyzed. The chapter also includes an analysis of the interviews conducted with the experts. At the end of the chapter, the BRI is defined from the perspective of the author and based on the research conducted regarding the characteristics of the BRI.

Chapter 5 describes both Western and Chinese theories and concepts of international relations, such as the power transition theory or the moral realism theory, to provide a theoretical framework for the BRI.

Chapter 6 analyzes the theories presented in chapter 5, in order to discover which of them best fits with the Belt and Road Initiative and which of them can best explain this initiative. A case study about China's rise is also presented in this chapter.

Chapter 7 analyzes the main Chinese projects in Asia, Africa and Europe, to illustrate that the BRI is a label offered to all Chinese investments outside its borders, but also to examine the impact or the success of these projects. This chapter includes a case study on railway diplomacy.

Chapter 8 analyzes the BRI and how it connects to China's rise, as well as initiatives proposed by other great powers as a response to the BRI, in an attempt to create a competitor for the Chinese initiative. This chapter also presents a case study about Romania's position in the China-US conflict.

Chapter 9 consists of the conclusions of this thesis.

Chapter 9

General Conclusions

The Dynasty in power was Han (202 BCE-220 AD) and the man who initiated the Silk Road adventure was Zhang Qian, a Chinese emissary sent on an expedition to a nomad tribe, the Yuezhi, and kidnapped by an enemy tribe, the Xiongnu. The adventures of Zhang Qian, but especially the knowledge he acquired about Central Asia, would set the foundation for the idea of the Silk Road. Still, the name of the Silk Road would be recorded only centuries later. In the 1870s, the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen patented the term "Silk Roads"²⁹ (*Seidenstrassen*) – silk being the most important merchandise traded on this commercial route – which later became the "Silk Road."

Fast forward to the present day, the Silk Road became a concept used by Asia-Pacific governments in order to brand regional initiatives, which promoted greater cooperation between countries, for mutual benefits. But nobody used the idea of the Silk Road better than China. Legitimated by history as the starting point of the old Silk Road, China managed to revive the idea of the Silk Road in the collective conscience, through what will later be called the Belt and Road Initiative.

²⁹ Hoshmand, A. R. (2019) „Eurasian Connection via the Silk Road: The Spread of Islam” in Islam N. (ed.) *Silk Road to Belt Road Reinventing the Past and Shaping the Future*. Singapore: Springer Nature, p. 95.

Taking into account its political, economic, financial, commercial, social or infrastructure aspects, the Belt and Road will become not just the name of the Chinese initiative that aimed to reestablish the idea of the Silk Road, but a rhetorical instrument of Chinese foreign policy. Despite this, it took a while for the BRI name to begin to figure prominently in the political speeches of Chinese leaders, the initiative being initially presented using two other names: Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The two names would form the basis of the latter contraction of its name to One Belt One Road, with the acronym OBOR. OBOR, which was for a few years synonymous with the idea of a New Silk Road, appeared only around 2015 in Xi Jinping's and Li Keqiang's speeches. Nevertheless, OBOR, which later became the BRI, appeared more frequently in the terminology used by Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his team. This only shows that the BRI was not a construct created by Xi, from top to bottom, but a framework created by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, based on the favorable reaction to the ideas promoted by Xi Jinping in his speeches in Kazakhstan and Indonesia. These 2013 speeches put forward the vague vision of remaking the Silk Road, without a concrete plan or a roadmap. The analysis of approximately 200 speeches of Chinese leaders shows that the BRI was not a long-term strategy, nor a well-structured plan of the supreme leader Xi Jinping, but more of a creation of the Western media, whose positive reaction to the idea of rebuilding the Silk Road determined the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to adapt and build upon the ideas launched by Xi Jinping in his two speeches. The BRI is as much a Western construct as it is a Chinese one.

And precisely because the BRI was not initially a long-term initiative but more of a slogan which fitted well in Chinese leaders' speeches, it was vaguely defined by China and turned into something of a myth by the international media and experts, as well as Chinese ones. When it comes to defining the BRI, there is a major difference between the Western vision and the Chinese vision. In China, the BRI is a grand initiative, proposed by China to the world, a Chinese vision of globalization, a new model of global governance, an instrument that helps create a community of common destiny for mankind, a marker of the new political and economic power of the Chinese government, a win-win model of cooperation and an initiative which contributes to the fulfilling of the Chinese Dream and which holds, within itself, the spirit of the Silk Road. Additionally, the BRI is perceived either as an economic and infrastructure initiative or as a facilitator for the internalization of Chinese companies and export China's overcapacity.

On the other side of the Pacific the perspectives change, the BRI taking on a negative view, because it is perceived as an instrument used by China to control states and gain global power. But even if it is perceived as a debt trap, a new type of colonialism or an imperialistic policy, there are still experts with more moderate views, which see the BRI either as an economic initiative or one focused on infrastructure or even as a type of slogan or an umbrella for China's foreign policy.

The picture among the Chinese and Western experts has slightly changed over the period of the research for this thesis. In China, according to the interviews conducted for this research, the experts still see the BRI through the ideas of an instrument of globalization or global governance, through the concepts of win-win, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation or the community of common destiny, as well as an economic strategy or a grand plan of China.

When it comes to the Western perspective, according to the research for this thesis, it is slightly different on both sides of the Atlantic. More precisely, the European researchers interviewed perceive the BRI mainly as foreign policy concept, followed by the idea of a geopolitical or geo-economic strategy and even as an infrastructure project.

In the US the experts specialized on China talked about the BRI as an infrastructure project, a global strategy to obtain influence, a new type of globalization or an umbrella for various Chinese investments.

And even if the BRI has accumulated all these definitions, they manage to present only partially or in a fragmented way the idea of the BRI. Essentially there hasn't been a universally accepted definition for the BRI, which would fully describe the ideas promoted by the BRI and the geographical, conceptual or rhetorical dimensions that it wants to encompass. So far, the BRI has been analyzed through the perspective of the impact that it might have on US-China relations, the international stage and the world order, on Africa, the environment, etc. What is lacking is an analysis that would try to answer the questions "what is the BRI?," as existing analyses start from an existing definition, which was generally the interpretation of the authors, formed not through rigorous research of the question, but only through contemporary observations. As a result, numerous definitions of the BRI have appeared, which show a lack of consensus and unity.

A definition that encompasses and describes more clearly the characteristics of the BRI, reached through the research conducted for this thesis, is that of the BRI as a branding strategy for the China's foreign policy and Chinese overseas investments. Not only do Chinese leaders and officials obsessively use the BRI name in their speeches, but the BRI has initially been, as mentioned above, an ad-hoc construct of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thus, the BRI has become an instrument of China's foreign policy, losing any geographical localization, as initially it targeted China's neighborhood, later being extended to Eurasia and Africa and then Latin America and the Arctic. But the BRI's expansion would happen not only at a geographical level but also at a conceptual level, as a brand. The BRI has therefore become a Silk Road with branches in fields such as medicine, air travel, space, digital and cyberspace or even cultural and people-to-people relations. And the story of the BRI would not stop here, as Chinese companies, institutions and organizations would adopt this brand in order to promote their

investments and projects overseas. All these elements would fit under the BRI umbrella and have turned the BRI into a slogan with hints of a branding strategy.

The facts that the BRI has never been institutionalized and that China's new foreign strategies and policies were connected by the government to the BRI and to the idea of remaking the Silk Road represent additional arguments to support the conclusion that the Belt and Road Initiative is only a branding strategy for China's foreign policy.

The BRI is a PR exercise through which China wanted to obtain soft power gains by using a political slogan but also investments, which represent a component of China's hard power. This was the reason why, in the first years of the initiative's existence, I described the BRI as a smart power strategy,³⁰ which could have had the ability to combine the hard power of economic investments with the soft power of cultural appeal, in order to create what Joseph Nye Jr. called smart power (the perfect combination between these two types powers). But, as the BRI proved later, and as Nye himself has said,³¹ the Belt and Road Initiative failed to find the perfect formula for combining the two types of power in order to generate smart power. The BRI can no longer be described by international relations concepts such as smart power, but still, there are Western theories, as well as Chinese ones, that can create a theoretical framework for the initiative. These are mainly the power transition theory and theory of moral realism.

In this thesis, in order to determine which theory fits better with the Belt and Road Initiative, I've analyzed Western theories such as the power transition theory, the balance of power theory, the complex interdependence theory and concepts such as soft power and hard power, but also Chinese theories like *tianxia*, moral realism and relationality. Even though none of the Chinese and Western theories of international relations fit perfectly with the characteristics of the Belt and Road Initiative, each theory manages to explain at least one aspect of the BRI. If *tianxia* promotes the idea of a global, peaceful and universal order, which can be found in the BRI narrative, the relationality theory invokes notions such as relations and community, also an important aspect of the BRI, whereas the theory of moral realism analyzes the moral actions of a great power on the international stage, an aspect expressed by the BRI, which also aims to be an instrument through which China can claim to help developing nations and share with the world the fruits of China's rise, illustrating its peaceful nature through the image of the Silk Road.

³⁰ Brînză, A. (2016) „How China Has Gone from Panda Diplomacy to New Silk Road Smart Power,” *South China Morning Post*, Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2023656/how-china-has-gone-panda-diplomacy-new-silk-road-smart-power> (Accessed 19 June 2022).

³¹ Based on the author's discussions with professor Joseph Nye Jr.

On the other hand, the complex interdependence theory presents the way in which the economic, political and social ties, working hand in hand with globalization, can create a state of interdependence that would facilitate China's path towards a superpower status but, as analyzed, could also raise suspicions regarding the BRI and could create an aura of negative around it. The ideas of soft power and hard power could also offer a partial theoretical explanation of the BRI, but the power transition theory seems to be the most complex Western theory to explain the BRI and the future of the international order. Although, at a rhetorical level, China talks about its desire to achieve a form of balance of power internationally, based on multilateralism and a new type of great power relations, in reality, China aims towards a power transition, an idea reinforced by its large investments in military power, by its actions in the South China Sea and around Taiwan and by the international initiatives it has launched, such as the BRI, the AIIB, the 16+1/14+1 and others.

As the theory of moral realism is based on the power transition theory, but seen through the lens of a moral filter, both theories essentially speak about how the rise of a challenger can generate a change of the *status quo* at the international level, which can lead to a military, economic or cold war. As the fear of China's economic and technological rise has led the Trump administration to begin what has been described as a New Cold War, by taking actions meant to contain or limit the growth of Chinese power, we can state that the power transition between the two powers has already begun. Therefore, the question left to answer now isn't if or when, but how: how will the power transition climax between the two countries manifest? Will it be peaceful, similar to the Great Britain-US model, or will it be violent, similar to the Germany-Entente model, or even a cold war such as the one between the US and the USSR? Even if, for the moment, a cold war between the two great powers seems the most likely scenario, it can always slide towards any of the two extremes mentioned before, a peaceful or a violent transition.

Even if both theories, the power transition theory and the theory of moral realism, can define the BRI, the analysis has demonstrated that moral realism prevails against the traditional power transition theory. Firstly, because it describes an international environment ruled by realism, but with Chinese characteristics, and secondly, because China has always integrated Confucian concepts such as *datong*, *xiaokang*, *tianxia* in the discourse of its rise. Therefore, seen from a Chinese perspective, China's rise is undoubtedly peaceful and it is a rise based on and created around the idea of peace. Thus, taking all these aspects into account, we can say that moral realism is a much more suitable theoretical tool to define the Belt and Road Initiative.

Even if the BRI hasn't been officially explained or defined, one characteristic systematically stood out among the other labels given to the initiative: infrastructure project. The BRI received this label because infrastructure and investments made by Chinese companies in infrastructure projects have been

the initiative's most visible aspect. The BRI has thus excelled in economic investments and projects in Asia, Africa and even Europe. But, although not all of them enjoyed real success, some of them, such as the Hambantota Port and the Montenegro Highway becoming the Achilles' heel for the BRI, there have also been projects such as the Mombasa-Nairobi, Addis Ababa-Djibouti, Budapest-Belgrade or Jakarta-Bandung railways which gave the BRI an image of strength, feared by Western states and entities such as the US, the European Union and Japan. All of them launched, in response to the Belt and Road Initiative, their own initiatives. Whether we talk about the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Build Back Better World (B3W) or the newer Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), or about the Global Gateway, all these initiatives appeared as a response to China and its BRI, promising at the same time the vision of initiatives that focus on quality, high standards and environmental protection.

Even if some experts perceive the BRI as an infrastructure project, there are many others who see the BRI as China's tool to gain global supremacy. The BRI was supposed to facilitate China's rise and to help pave its path towards superpower status. Yet, as shown in this thesis, the BRI doesn't have the ability to shape the historical course of China's rise, as it is more of a branding strategy than a well-developed, long-term strategy geopolitical plan. The BRI is a branding exercise, one that could have helped China's rise had it been better thought out and structured by the Chinese government as a long-term strategy. In contrast, the BRI has been a project of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which aimed to dress up in a beautiful and attractive way all the slogans and actions promoted by the Chinese government overseas. And since the "Chinese Dream" or "the community of common destiny" or "the great rejuvenation of the nation" had the flavor of communist slogans, the idea of rebuilding a Silk Road was the winning ticket of the public relations campaign of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The BRI remains therefore only a relatively successful marketing campaign for China, only a branding strategy, but without being able to accelerate China's rise or the strengthening of the various dimensions of its power.