ASIA PROGRAM

THE STRATEGIC CHALLENGES OF THE SILK ROADS

INTERVIEW WITH EMMANUEL LINCOT

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ALEXANDRE CORNET: **The New Silk Road has officially been revealed in 2013 by the president Xi Jinping. Can you tell us what the project is all about?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: The project is also known as "Yi dai yi lu" in Chinese, translated in English by "One Belt One Road" and even more precisely (2017) by "Belt Road Initiative" (BRI). It is a global project which aims for China at redeploying its foreign investments in infrastructure projects. The Chinese strategy has several goals. Without a doubt, the main basis of this strategy is to capture the world's resources, exploit them and secure their routing. Let us make no mistake: the new Silk Roads have a hegemonic purpose. As same as Great Britain in the past, a logic of counters fall into place by the creation of ports or various platforms with a civil or even military vocation, which therefore assure to China some logistics relays. This is the "String of Pearls", of which a non-negligible part of converging to the European Union (EU), first trading partner of China. This is also with the European Union that China looks forward to collaborate regarding sensitive technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI). Thereby, last year, President Xi Jinping's Davos appeal to focus on the free trade was indeed symbolic, all the more so Donald Trump has the vague desire to restrict the access of Chinese products to their market.

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **The first global exporting power, importing between 75 and 85% of its energy supplies, and presenting a loss-making agro-food balance of almost 34 billion euros, China is today in situation of heavy foreign reliance. Nevertheless, do you consider that the new Silk road project is only motivated by international economic goals?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: In China, the politics is serving the economic development. From this point of view, the choices initiated by Xi Jinping are more registered in the continuity of Deng Xiaoping's reform than in utopian projects once defended by Mao Zedong. A society project is working through the new Silk Road: giving back to China its rank of great international power. In this, the new Silk Roads constitute a project of an affirmation of power. Let's describe it as "neo-imperial" in the sense that China clearly wants to dismiss the humiliating parenthesis of this traumatizing century which, since the Opium Wars to the advent of the Communist regime, has been leading the country in a mortal decline. Hence, trying to reduce at best the energetic and agri-food dependence is also giving sense to the Chinese project of the new Silk Roads. Those last one thus aims at preventing China from any social upheaval related to food or energetic problems.

Parts of this political and geopolitical ambition, the new Silk Roads are all pathways towards Chinese households, at the service of the country economic security. To this end, China seeks to get closer from production areas in order to limits its risks of procurement as well to secure its flow. It is therefore not surprising that the OBOR/BRI project passes through territories richly endowed with natural resources (water, fossil raw materials, agricultural lands…), thereby forming a penetration axis (through Siberia, various intercontinental corridors in the Southwest Asia), thanks to the development of port infrastructures and logistics, bypassing the "dilemma of the Strait of Malacca".

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **Institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), created in 2001, already preceded from a long time the project of the new Silk Roads, particularly in Central Asia. Do you consider that Xi Jinping is the single parent of this project, and, if not, what would be the other sources of the BRI on the longer term?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: Actually, the Russians pretend to be the first who had wanted to set up the Silk Road's (terrestrial) rebirth. Initially, the Siberia Road's construction has been decreed by the Tsar Pierre le Grand (born in 1672, who reigned since the beginning of 1689 to his death in 1725), two months after the conclusion of the Nertchinsk Treaty, in November the 22nd of 1689. However, the construction works started only in 1730 and were completed toward the middle of the 19th century. The Siberia Road remained a vital artery connecting Siberia to Moscow and then to Europe since the last decades of the 19th century, and has then been replaced by the Trans-Siberian Railway, built between 1891 and 1916. The road was carrying Chinese products of Kiakhta (next to the Russo-Mongolian frontier) in Moscow, principally tea but also silk and other merchandizing. The trade grew from 6.000 tons of tea each year in 1860 to 70.000 tons in 1915. Hence, it was called the "tea road", where China has exported down to 65% of its total production. In winter, the path was being carried out by horse-drawn caravans of sleigh. The tea, which reached in Europe by Russia, was since then of better quality and a lot more expensive than the one that has been travelled by the sea from a long time.

It is also appropriate not to forget the role played by the Russo-Asiatic Bank, then Russo-Chinese between 1895 and 1917, of which the initial capital was divided between the Russians (37,5%) and the French interests dominated by the Paris Bank and the Netherlands (Paribas ; 62,5%). In 1898, this bank has obtained the funding of the construction and exploitation, during 80 years, of the Tchita-Vladivoctok railway (Chinese Eastern Railway). This investment was strategic for Russia, which was then searching to develop its influence in the Siberian and Manchurian railway, and to put in place a financial arm in the region. The first branch opened in Shanghai in February 1896 became the second-biggest Chinese bank in 1902; before being a Russo-Chinese bank (Société Générale) from 1910 to 1917, and then in 1912 the 9th wealthiest bank of

Russia, having in its possession a hundred agencies in the country and 20 others at the international, being the first Russian bank in terms of deposits, the second in terms of capital, the third for *Lombard's rates.* Nationalized in 1917 by the Bolsheviks, it has gone bankrupt in 1926 (France has custody up to the three quarters of the bank's capital (share evaluated to 150 million francs at the time)), the interests of the Far East Bank been taken up by the New York Bank. Before Vladimir Poutine came to speak of "Greater Eurasia" from October 2011, the Kazakhstanis president Noursultan Nazarbayev had referred to the concept of "Eurasia" since a speech of spring 1994 at the "Lomonossov" University of States of Moscow.

Then along came the rise of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization which was initially known under the name of "The Shanghai's Club". Created five years after the collapse of the USSR, in 1996, this club was one of the first institutional creations of the Chinese diplomacy, before being renamed SCO in 2001. It was responding to 3 purposes: First, to secure the old soviet republics of Central Asia, newly independent, into a more stable Chinese's strategic area than the one offered by Russia, in order to develop market possibilities in the energetic domain. Then, it also aimed at investing in regions that the United States could covet in turn, especially after the 11 September attacks. This interest for the development of the Great West (Xinjiang included) has become, by the end of the last century, the cornerstone of President Jiang Zemin and of its Prime Minister Zhu Rongji. Surely, at the sight of the foregoing, Xi Jinping can't appropriate the origin of this project, but as part of a remarkable continuum initiated by his predecessors.

With a major difference, however: he embodies it more, and makes of it, or not, a connection's instrument of the infrastructures already existing, and the principal vector of its foreign policy, with considerable actions and financials means, thus getting in ahead of the Russian's, Kazakhstan's and even the Western's (TRACECA projects, since 1993…) previous initiatives and claims.

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **The New Silk Roads have officially been launched during a visit of the Chinese president to Kazakhstan. A strong symbol, which shows the importance that China attached to Central Asia, where it strongly invests since the collapse of USSR. Why it is that important for China to affirm its power in this area, and what are the main obstacles that Pekin could find in the deployment of the BRI?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: Kazakhstan's choice is not a coincidence. It's a neighbour of China, actually one of the most dynamic of Central Asia, and among the wealthiest. It is adjacent to the Xinjiang, formerly known as the "Chinese's Turkestan". This huge region constitutes the pivot axis of the continental Chinese strategy. It gives access not only to Central Asia and beyond toward Europe, but it also permits to reach in its southern part, the Kashmir and the *indianised* regions of the Himalayas, as well as the Pakistan's corridor. This last one could turn out to be vital in case of an embargo imposed by the United States and their allies to China. Worst-case scenario, but also possible one, that could result in the closure of the Malacca's Detroit to the Chinese tankers coming through Africa and the Middle East as a side effect. In sum, even if China does not have the will to abandon the maritime side of its project, it is forced by a true strategy of containment, refined by the Americans, Indians, Japanese and Australians.

In this new configuration of the "Great game", Mackinder's theories of "Heartland" have resurfaced, opposed to those of the "Rimland" dear to Mahan. They are, in fact, complementary to the strategic choices of the actual China. Even if the terrestrial axes seem to be more opened to the Chinese interests due to the very fact of its protective association with Russia, its interests are no less threatened by security problems like jihadist terrorism. Since the Islamic State's dissolution, in Mesopotamia, determinate fighters flow back, including the most radical ones, whom declared the "Holy War" to China. They are taking refuge to potentially crisis-generating regions like Baluchistan, Kashmir and, of course, Afghanistan. Ultimately, their instability could be harmful for the Chinese's interests. Added to this, one must count with the endemic fragility of Tajikistan and Kirgizstan as well as the demographic challenge that is facing Uzbekistan. All of these problems compromise seriously the future of this region.

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **The Russian Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Indian "Mausam's Project" aim at maintaining a strong influence of those two actors in regions targeted by the new Silk Roads. Do they represent, in your opinion, serious competitors to BRI, and what are, more largely, the Indian's and Russian's positions concerning the Chinese project?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: The Russian Eurasian Economic Union is, sometimes, associated to a vague rebirth of the Soviet's Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). The true difficulty for the Russians is that they don't have the financial means that the Chinese have. As a windfall economy, Russia may eventually be dangerously exposed to asymmetry in its reports with China, and so, be unable to resist much longer, in territorial depth, to the economics and energetic Chinese ambitions, from Russian Far East to the South and North West of the country.

India may be, on a longer term, considered like a true "challenger" by China. Its growth is already superior to the Chinese one. Even if enormous difficulties stay, and particularly in everything that concerns human development (education, health, access to drinking water…), India tries to create an alternative to the Chinese project thanks to a priority given to maritime axes linking Africa to the Pacific Ocean. India is geographically in the centre of exchanges. Sign of the times: the expression "Indo-pacific" is more and more used to talk about a space where India pretends to have an historical legitimacy, and not only through the "MAUSAM" project (also on transverse railways projects on which it can contribute: BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar), INSTC (International North-South Corridor)…).

A strategy to compete with the BRI is developing with the creation of an Indian base in the Seychelles, but also through a reconciliation initiated by New Delhi with the Sultanate of Oman and the Gulf monarchies at the West, as well as with Singapore and Vietnam at the East. What does it mean? We are entering an era where each state wants to sanctuarize beyond its frontiers a certain number of interests that, manifestly, aren't converging. The Indian strategy will mean, without a doubt that the country and its possible allies (the United States, Japan, Austria…) will have to implement a strong long-term vision, both technologically and financially. And this, to hope to be able to thwart the Chinese projects OBOR/BRI both in and among Indian Ocean Rim countries also adjacent to the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, and which have already taken one step ahead in the project, thus giving in this occasion to the "Initiative" of "Belt and Road", a far-reaching consequences signification to predict… Clearly, China has already widely anticipated this response strategy, since we can count about 104 OBOR awarded projects (at the end of 2017), present and future (since 2018) concerning the Indian Ocean Rim countries, a 28,8% of a total of the 361 OBOR projects taped up from now. It also means a distribution of the projects within 10 major countries of sensitive area, 30 of which in Pakistan (coastal regions of the country only), 17 in Indonesia, 13 in Tanzania, 11 in Bangladesh, 10 in Thailand, 9 in Kenya, 8 in Sri Lanka, 3 in Myanmar, 2 in Iran and 1 in India.

The amount of these 104 OBOR projects may be estimated to, just over, 420 billions of dollars, a 21,6% of the total of the nearly 1 940 billion dollars invested in the 361 passed, present and future sensed OBOR projects up until now. More precisely, 84 OBOR projects concerning these Ocean Indian Rim countries, a 32, 8% out of a total of 256 ongoing or future OBOR projects since 2018, picked up until now. The cost of these 84 OBOR projects, related to the Ocean Indian Rim countries, may be estimated to just over 410 billion dollars, so a 22, 8% of the 1800 billion total dollars about these 256 current or future OBOR projects. It therefore shows a very strong predictable acceleration of the Chinese OBOR projects starting in 2018 and in the future (compared to the projects completed at the end of 2017, cf below) on this highly sensitive area of the world, both in number of projects and in estimated value. Among those 84 OBOR projects concerning the Indian Ocean Rim countries, 22 concern Pakistan (coastal regions of the country only), 15 Indonesia, 11 Tanzania, 10 Bangladesh, 10 Thailand, 7 Kenya, 3 Myanmar, 3 Sri Lanka, 2 Iran and 1 India. Not to mention the OBOR projects completed at the end of 2017 in this same region of the Indian Ocean, because we were able to numbered 20 OBOR projects, so a 19% of a total of 105 completed OBOR projects at that time. The amount of these OBOR projects, concerning the Ocean Indian Rim countries, may be estimated to 10 billion dollar so a 7, 3% of the 137 billion dollars total about the 105 completed OBOR projects. On those 20 OBOR projects concerning the Ocean Indian rim countries, 8 were about Pakistan (coastal regions of the country only), 5 about Sri Lanka, 2 about Indonesia, 2 about Tanzania, 2 about Kenya and 1 about Bangladesh.

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **One of the keywords of the Silk Road's project is "win-win". It has been promised by Beijing to the partner countries. Do you think that this promise is sincere?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: The example of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka shows us well that the answer is no. The Chinese bidding-war has caused a crisis, forcing the Sri Lankan partners to be unable to honour their debts. A compromise – which was probably searched by the Chinese side, since the beginning of the negotiations – has forced the Sri Lankan to give away the port for 99 years of concession. A certain number of specialists, on the basis of the theories of Joseph Nye, see there the perfect illustration of what they call the "Sharp power"; an insidious strategy that Chinese and Russian would have in common, which uses a very wide range of means of coercion aimed to neutralize the opponent. This shall not prevent us from cooperate and negotiate with China. However, it has to be measured and accompanied with a continued vigilance. It is high time that our companies systematically resort to economic intelligence and benefit from the support of financial mechanisms much more adapted (at the level of the export guaranties…) to the objectives launched by China and its cross-cutting projects, namely to avoid setbacks, or even an irreversible marginalization. In the future, and actually way before 2049, one of the major stakes could be the right to really use (hyper) connected networks of the future, in Eurasia and Africa, for now set up and founded only by China. Another major issue, which is (already) looming at Beijing's partners underneath, might be the struggle to impose legal, financial, technical, and technological standards".

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **According to the Vice-Chairman of the Boao Forum for Asia's Boards of Directors, Zeng Peiyan, the BRI "is not a geopolitical tool". What do you think of this affirmation?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: Affirm it with that much of strength reveals obviously the contrary. Whatever, in this case, what himself thinks about that. His speech was addressed to Westerners, many of whom are caring a lot more for their personal interests than for the one of their country. Nothing very new to this: each defeat is preceded by a resignation of the mind. Let's hope that our elite will have the intelligence of understanding that the

Chinese's challenge prompts us to a moral, institutional, operational rearmament and to the building of a true global counter-strategy, much before 2049. This could be possible, but only on the basis that wanting to negotiate, when it's still time on the French and European levels, doesn't significate surrender or lose face, with regards to the cross-cutting Chinese projects (OBOR/BRI) of this magnitude, on any grounds.

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **According to a report of the European Parliament, "the new Chinese leaders see in the emergence of the RPC an irreversible phenomenon that can be explain by the transition from a "careful diplomacy" to a "proactive diplomacy". Do you share this finding, and if need be, to which extent the BRI symbolizes, for you, the deployment of a new form of diplomacy from Pekin?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: Everything depends on how the European parliament's interprets it. Is it to legitimate the impotence of Europe in its serious lack of coordination? Or a way to record an inevitable act, but which was already observable since the end of the 80s? This reading of events – the transition from a "careful diplomacy" to a "proactive diplomacy" – seems to me, to be paradoxically too much culture-based, because too much European-centred in the understanding of the things, and of the Chinese diplomacy more precisely. What really characterizes Chinese diplomacy is actually more the "In the same time" that Emmanuel Macron has made so popular. And this "In the same time" never stopped to be applied. With more modest means, less visible, so since the beginning of the reforms, but never without ever dissociating the observable facts from the means available to hold dominion over the reality and the course of events.

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **Driven by his "Chinese dream", Xi Jinping has affirmed during the 19th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that the party was "more confident and capable than ever to realize the objective of the national reborn". What do we learn from the project of the Silk Roads, on the Chinese leader elite views of the country nowadays?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: This is a risky bet. Let's supposed that this project encounter insurmountable obstacles: non-recovery of the debt, security problems, confrontation with the United States… Will the regimen resist to this failure? On the contrary, if this project succeeds, the world order in the way that Europeans first, Americans later, have defined it would definitely be changed.

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **It could be argued that through the BRI, China wished to export its governance model, "post-occidental and post-democratic" in the rest of**

the world. What do you think of this analysis, and if so, does Europe seem able, for you, to continue to promote its own model while facing China in third countries?

EMMANUEL LINCOT: The Chinese challenge lies in its capacity, since approximately half a century, to show that economic development is not incompatible with the maintain of a dictatorial regimen. This regime can not only put to its credit the fact that the majority of the Chinese population has get out of poverty, but also that it has succeed to grant education for most part of it and has given back dignity to it, although it was the suffering. The Chinese society is, in addition, in peace and has turned its back to the democratic spirit, inspired in the past by the Tiananmen protesters (1989). "Work, Family, Nation" could be the cardinal values of the social contract linking today the leader elite to an opinion now complex free towards the West and the rest of the world. What is really harmful is European ignorance on the real Chinese evolution. However, the project of the new Silk Roads might be a sting and provoke a necessary awakening for an often divided Europe, as illustrated by the reinforced cooperation between China and 16 East European countries and the Balkans put in place as part of the "Partnership 16+1".

This European start is eventually essential, all the more so the actual and future Chinese regime, if it wants its OBOR/BRI projects to be successful despite all the defects, unfortunate intentions or dire predictions loaned in Occident, doesn't have any interest, even ideologically, to "kill the golden goose" (inside and outside the frontiers). And, by consequences, just like its current economic internal mutation, installs skillfully its new worldwide power posture in the future international order. Concretely, it can mean that Xi Jinping's China (and the next, until 2049 at least) may have had (if it doesn't already have) the "millennium" wisdom to learn from the soviets experience, in order to survive and to succeed in its big projects. Between 1917 and 1991, the soviets had spent their ideological time "killing the golden goose", at the cost of tens of millions of deaths and that, not only for nothing, but also for the construction of a "Soviet sphere of influence" which, in the facts, has finally and officially disappeared on December the 25th of 1991…

Through such a perspective to the reasoning, somewhat novel, facing an actual Chinese's experience of the same type, the success of the OBOR/BRI project could maybe prove to be, ultimately, like the demonstration of a human will of positive survive. Even by passing through an "ideologically heretic gentrification" of the Chinese people, by the way consenting to this gentrification, or by an "Orwellian" level, certainly… Because a communist party, even from China, unlike the USSR one, can't eternally allow itself to "make too many jokes" ideologically with the daily destiny of 1,4 billion Chinese to "grow", even "modestly", all of this in a country that still knows what is mass misery and which disposes of a long, written memory…

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **China aims at building a "digital Silk road" towards Europe. For you, does this opportunity represent an occasion for the Europeans to emancipate themselves from the American numeric trusteeship?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: This is an opportunity and a risk at the same time. We must avoid falling under another form of hegemony and alienation. The problem for Europe is, first, to reunites the funds which will permit to negotiate on level playing field with China. We are far from this. Problems are, meanwhile, ethical: wherever juridical barriers stop us to go further into the research, China doesn't seem to have any limits, as we can see by its choices of governance and by the recourse of artificial intelligence, particularly, in the control of the Xinjiang populations. Finally, cooperation in the digital domain means university cooperation. However, what has struck me is that there is only a few of French PhD students in Chinese laboratory. There is, also, no world-class Franco-Chinese scientific revue or MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) binational. In order to federate all of our efforts and validate our ideas, we need to create both to the regional and European level, information outlets and nominate sources people that could thus increase our efficiency.

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **Since 2013, China and the European Union work on an ambitious investment agreement. While both of the partners have agreed on the scope of the agreement in 2016, it, however, seems paralysed since then. What are, for you, the reasons which can explain this blocking, and can we hope for new progress in the years to come?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: The European Union doesn't want to give an inch to China without reciprocity anymore. In December 2016, despite the discontent of the latter, the EU didn't officially recognize to China the market economy status. But unlike USA, it didn't refuse it either, having adopted a new easier method of determination of antidumping as well as anti-subvention measures in case the norms of market economy are not respected. Hence, China isn't specifically targeted, even if 94 rights of antidumping and anti-subvention concern Chinese products, on a stock of actual cases amounting to 144. Similarly, the Union has deleted the limitation of the sanction's costs it applied in case of proved dumping. The European Union also wants to obtain the reciprocity in the market's opening. However, the EU-China investment agreement, still being negotiated, is totally stopped because of a Chinese unwillingness. Hence the warning sent by the Commission which proposed a directive on the control of foreign investments in strategic sectors, like a system that already exists in a dozen states, including France. During the ministerial conference of the World Trade Organization held in Buenos Aires, from the 10th to the 13th of December 2017, the EU has convinced the USA and Japan to sign a declaration denouncing the obstacles to the Chinese market access.

On a proposal by Emmanuel Macron, the Commission has also thought to put in place a "prosecutor of the European trade" in charge of the verification of the compliance with the rules by the third countries, and which would have a sanctioning power. We might as well say that the ridgeline between confrontation and cooperation is thin between China and the European Union, which can also explain, in part, the still current absence (until summer of 2018?) of an European position on the Chinese OBOR/BRI project.

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **In January 2018, China has published its first polar road map. It mentioned its project of a new "Polar Silk Road", which would complement the shipping route going through the Indian Ocean and Africa. Does this polar road seem credible for you, facing the South alternative which currently concentrates Chinese maritime efforts? What are the principal challenges of a Chinese presence in Arctic?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: Here again, this for China an opportunity approach, which is taking into account essential elements: the global warming making it possible to use the North roads, the parliamentary elections in Greenland which will bring its inhabitants to their complete sovereignty vis-à-vis Denmark, the signature of a free trade agreement with Island which ensure to China a privileged position which is giving it access to essential resources. A strategic intelligence, because coherent in its diversity of application: this is China. The choice of this polar Silk Road is naturally credible, even if Russia tries and is likely to try, in the future, to "monopolize" to its profit the territorial availabilities. Chinese strategic positioning operates through a geopolitical wrap at global level.

ALEXANDRE CORNET: **Facing the new Silk Roads project, the Europeans leaders seem divided on the attitude to adopt. What could you recommend them to do?**

EMMANUEL LINCOT: Reverse the order of priorities and the decision-making steps is what to do. The European leaders, alone, can't do anything. A long work of awareness has to come from the French and Europeans cities and regions first. And this could be achieved through a coordinated mobilization between the central institutional administration framework and the missions abroad, but also through operators and motivated companies, associative frameworks, Chambers of commerce and industry (CCI), or municipal and regional councils dedicated to the new Silk Roads project. The *Open Bretagne Chine 2018* is from this point of view a pilot initiative which should be duplicated in other regions, French regions at this stage. Why not nominate representatives in this sense? We often wait too much out of our leaders and embassies only. These latter are saturated or prudent. We have to, therefore, equally privileged other relay: the civil society ones. It is what I call the participative democracy serving the real diplomacy.

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