

## THE NEW EURASIAN LAND BRIDGE: ELEMENTS TO THINK GEOPOLITICS AND CHINA — EUROPE COOPERATION

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### A NOVA PONTE TERRESTRE EURASIANA: ELEMENTOS PARA PENSAR A GEOPOLÍTICA E A COOPERAÇÃO CHINA - EUROPA

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#### Resumo

O Mundo assistiu nas últimas décadas a diversas transformações em múltiplos campos: social, científico e também político-económico. Acompanhando este movimento de mudança, as geopolíticas dos Estados também evoluíram conforme países, barreiras, cercas e fronteiras iam deixando de existir ou se adaptando aos eventos cada vez mais acelerados. Ao passo que a configuração espacial se alterava, atendendo as exigências impostas pelo curso da história, a disputa pelo poder, intrínseca nas relações territoriais, ganhavam novos atores e contornos que atualmente criaram um panorama geopolítico cada vez mais acirrado, porém, com uma operação modernizada, sem desvalorizar suas características históricas. Essa atividade geopolítica contemporânea consegue assumir diversas facetas, se adaptando facilmente em busca do seu objetivo, sendo flexível, agressiva, dura e parceira quando necessária. É justamente dotada de uma ação geopolítica sofisticada que os chineses nos últimos vinte anos construíram sua influência no cenário político mundial, e cada vez mais buscam estabelecer sua posição como uma nação com papel de liderança mundial. Neste texto analisamos alguns elementos que marcam essa atuação geopolítica chinesa, especificamente no continente europeu, e como elas estão espacialmente materializadas pelos países da região, abordando estritamente a importância da Nova Ponte Terrestre Euroasiática, um dos principais corredores que estão por trás das estratégias de Pequim na relação com os seus parceiros na contemporaneidade.

**Palavras chave:** China, Europa, Cooperação, Geopolítica, New Eurasian Land Bridge

#### Abstract

The world has seen in the past decades, numerous transformations in multiple fields: social, scientific and political-economic. Following up on this movement towards change, the geo-politics of states also evolved as countries, barriers, fences and boundaries were being demolished or adapted with increasingly accelerated events. As the spatial configuration was changing, meeting the requirements imposed by the course of history, the dispute for power, embedded in territorial relations, gained new agents and contours. They have consequently created an increasingly fiercer geopolitical landscape, but with modernised operations, without underestimating their historical characteristics. This contemporary geopolitical activity can take on many guises, adapting easily in pursuit of its goal, being flexible, aggressive, tough and cooperative when it is needed. It is precisely endowed with a sophisticated

geopolitical action on which the Chinese, in the last twenty years, have built their influence on the world political stage, and are increasingly seeking to establish their position as a nation with a global leadership role. In this article, we have analysed some of the elements featuring China's geopolitical performance, more specifically on the European continent, and how they are spatially materialised by the countries in the region, strictly addressing the importance of the New Eurasian Land Bridge, one of the main corridors behind Beijing's strategies in dealing with its partners in contemporaneity.

**keywords:** China, Europe, Cooperation, Geopolitics, New Eurasian Land Bridge

## 1. Introduction: Cooperation as geopolitics – a glance at Chinese tactics

In the contemporary international order, building power strategies takes on a new shape. Such strategies include different levels of leverage: territorial, diplomatic, economic, cultural, cybernetic, among others, going beyond domination and military supremacy. Geopolitics, accordingly, ought to be repositioned beyond the classical territorial-military power relationship, in which only the ratio between land, sea and air power were discussed. If we understand that geopolitics is, amongst other things, associated with the strategies taken by certain groups in order to set up their territorial domains (Lacoste, 2009), and if we examine our current conjuncture, we will notice new layers to the seizure of power. More subtle, but no less objective, forces are at work. For instance, in the field of international relations, above all from the liberal lineage of Joshep Nye (2010) a lot is said about Soft Power, which opposes Hard Power and is closely linked to the warlike exercise of military power. In turn, the Swiss geographer Claude Raffestin (1993) addresses the need to clarify that there is not a question of classifying power, but to observe the links of its practice. In this sense, what we conceive as soft power may be, at its core, much harder than it seems, such as for trade embargoes with potentially devastating effects on certain territorial areas.

According to Agnew (2008), we are experiencing a new configuration of global power. We have seen the emergence of new strategies for the pursuit of territorial-based actions. A great example of this are the initiatives of a diplomatic nature involving cooperation strategies (Rocha, 2019) which despite proving to be contradictory (Mawdsley, 2015) have strong territorial impacts. One such case of contemporary cooperation and diplomacy with significant impacts on territorial areas includes China's actions in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Today, China is an important player in the international order. Its relevance has been built on internal modernisation strategies and further development policies rooted in the 1980s with improvements led by Deng Xiaoping (Ibañez, 2020). Furthermore, the revival of world capitalism has promoted the global shift in production, through the dynamics of economic-productive restructuring, in which China participates as a fundamental part of this geopolitics of capitalism.

Likewise, it cannot be ignored that it is in the post-Cold War context that China increases its capillarity, economic strength and diplomatic influence. This context is constituted from a new international order of "Uni-multipolar" hegemony (Dupas, 2008), endorsing a political-military role centred on the United States of America and, at the same time, establishing what Haesbaert (2013) understands as a scenario of the globalisation-fragmentation process. This has resulted in an economic multi-polarity centred on several poles of power, which may be led by the European Union, the United States and Japan, the 1990s triad of international capitalism, but also by the different regional centres of power driven by relevant regional economies. In this latter case, we can include what was called the BRICS in the 2000s. However, in the context of economic globalisation, it opens up the need to think about the dynamics of global interlocution and the demand for productive exchange between nations, taking into account their internal and external actions. Thus, in the current global political-economic situation, economic strategies are in tune with territorial strategies, revealing a new geopolitical dimension of the new global order of power. Not coincidentally, Foot (2008) highlights the Chinese diplomatic strategy is manifesting itself through global multilateralism to amplify its influence and power strategy in different regions of the world. There are several internal perspectives which see China as part of the global power dynamic. It would not be the sole world power, but it would establish a shared international order. To this end, it must amplify agreements, cooperation, and diplomatic relations in areas and strategic global agents. This makes it necessary to maintain the geo-economic guarantee of the natural and energy resources that serve to underpin its production model, as well as its economic and productive internationalization centred on capital flows and China-produced goods.

As such, geopolitics and cooperation come into line as strategies for consolidating China's international potential. This is why the partnership with Europe has become fundamental. It is important to recall that the establishment of agreements within Europe is due to this region being a major consumer centre and a connection to the Western world. This can be seen in the expansion of trade between Europe and China, chiefly in the so-called 16+1 format (China's cooperation models with Central and Eastern European countries). In addition, from a geostrategic point of view, Europe is part of the expanded integration of the BRI, embodied in the New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB). We shall present these two elements more precisely in the following topics.

## **2. The 16+1 Format: Central-Eastern Europe and its interlocutions with China**

The history of Chinese diplomatic actions and its rapprochement with the European countries requires interpretation of its historical and geopolitical singularities, particularly, the pathways which led to the consolidation of the current economic and political framework, both in China and in Europe.

As Morin (1987) sees it, it is necessary to demolish the image of a homogeneous European bloc. Barbosa (2013) understands that the construction of an image of "a Europe" as united and cohesive is

marked by internal hegemonic disputes and its affirmation as a power bloc has to do with the creation of an internal and external vision. For example, the process leading to Brexit, in which the United Kingdom exited the European Union (EU), as well as the constant challenges of Eastern European integration, most of which were under Russian influence and socialist governments during the Cold War until the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the dissolution of the USSR (1991), highlight the lack of internal unity and the challenges to be overcome.

Eastern Europe is a highly strategic part of the European continent, as it has a territorial connection to the Asian region and is the integrating route for different network systems. According to Claude Raffestin (1993), these networks are essential geopolitical elements for territorial system dominance, and besides the important circulation routes (roads and railways), they also contain the networks of natural gas coming from Caucasus to supply the European zone. According to Messias da Costa (2018), a vital geostrategic position is one of the big explanations for the Russian geopolitical advances in the region, as well as the EU's attempted expansion understood to be the civil arm of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). China underwent a socialist revolution under Mao Zedong in the twentieth century, and has subsequently embraced its process of economic openness with 1980s modernisation policies. However, the ballast of its historic alliances remains with the old countries who had been under the influence of Soviet socialism, hinting at a better alignment of these nations, the then so-called Eastern European, with the Chinese. Clearly, this does not mean that these countries are exclusively aligned to Beijing's interests. When they judge it convenient, they behave in a way that is antagonistic to Chinese preferences, pursuing their own interests and positioning themselves within a new geographical zone of influence. For instance, in 2020, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Macedonia and Kosovo, due to lobbying from the Trump administration, banned Chinese companies from bidding to supply 5G technology on their home telecoms networks<sup>1</sup>.

At the current juncture, there have been a series of Chinese onslaughts seeking to spark a rapprochement with Europe. While there is disagreement on some precepts, China's diplomacy works from a pragmatic perspective and has succeeded in building trade dynamics with Europe. In turn, the European Union is pursuing policies that allow for such approximation while trying not to lose domestic geopolitical spaces, especially at a time of consolidation and expansion within the EU, more particularly towards Eastern Europe.

The European Parliament's document entitled "*China, the 16+1 format and EU*"<sup>2</sup> shows how strategic this group of sixteen Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC's) is, plus China. This format includes European countries facing divergent development prospects, as eleven of these sixteen

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<sup>1</sup> Trump Turning More Countries in Europe Against Huawei. Foreign Policy. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/27/trump-europe-huawei-china-us-competition-geopolitics-5g-slovakia/> Accessed on 11 Sept. 2021

<sup>2</sup> Document available at: [China, the 16+1 cooperation format and the EU - Think Tank \(europa.eu\)](https://www.europa.europa.eu/press-communication/infocus/2020/10/20201027_china_16plus1_cooperation_format_and_the_eu_en/) - Accessed on 10 Sept. 2021.

countries are already members of the European Union. According to said statement, the rapprochement of this group of nations towards cooperation has been taking place since 2012 and is part of the Chinese geopolitical agenda, which is driven by two objectives: the first, to develop a "bridge" between the Sino-European markets; and the second one is geostrategic, linking this approach to the BRI's expansion corridors (Grieger, 2017, 1-2).

Against this background, the interlocutions within the 16+1 group are instituted in a fairly varied way. Even though a bloc cooperation dynamic has been mentioned, for Grieger (2017), that approach is strengthened at a multilateral-bilateral level. At times, individual agreements are made favouring specific dimensions and demands for each European country in the bloc. We must recall, as Hobsbawm (1996) points out, that the transition from socialist economies to market capitalism led to successive economic crises and structural problems at several levels in Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, some countries have managed to better establish their economic transition more smoothly than others. This is evident, for example, in the different share of these countries in the EU as a whole.

Furthermore, one needs to remember that the balance of regional power and diplomatic proactivity inside the European space is in constant dispute. In the 16+1 format document, Grieger (2017, 4) arranges a ranking table listing the countries by level of participation in integration tiers with China.

Table I - Table of cooperation intensity level of the 16+1 format and relationship with the European Union

Cooperation intensity in the 16+1 format	Country	Position towards the EU
Active participants ('champions', 'leaders')	Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Serbia	All are euro-sceptic and all are China's strategic partners
Ambitious partners	Bulgaria, Latvia, FYR Macedonia, Romania and Slovenia	Most are euro-optimists/euro-moderates (Bulgaria is euro-sceptic)
Followers	Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania and Slovakia	Euro-optimists/euro-moderates
Laggards	Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro	Euro-optimists/euro-moderates

Source: I. M. Oehler-Şincai, [The 16+1 Process: Correlations between the EU Dependency/Attitude Matrix and the Cooperation Intensity with China](#), 2017.

In the document endorsed by the European Parliamentary Research Service, the level of rapprochement with China is arranged with greater emphasis for those who are considered to be more

sceptical towards the EU, and those with less participation include more Euro-optimistic countries. This level of interaction is reflected in the trade flow of goods between them as seen in figure 1.

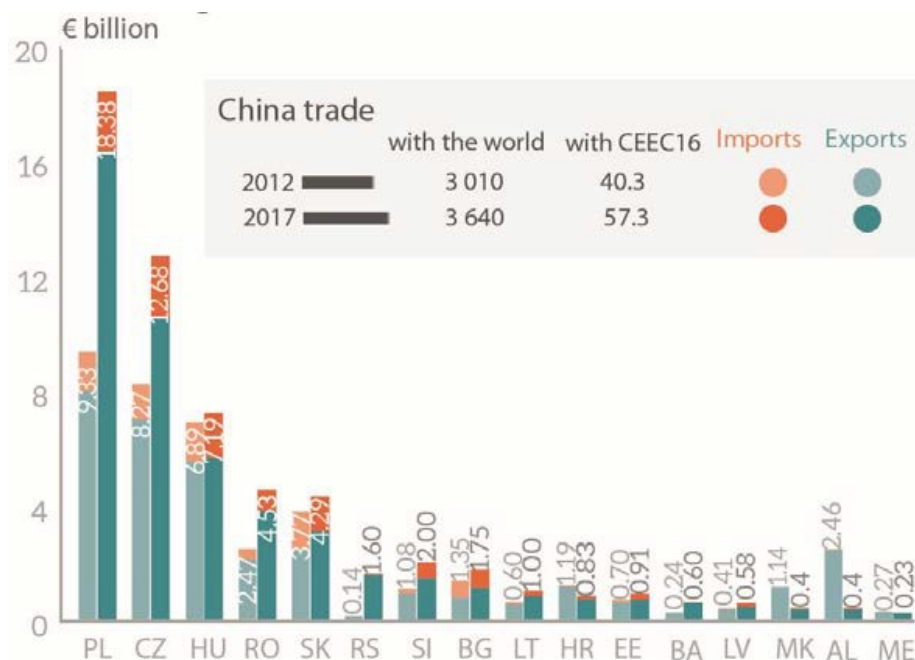


Figure 1 – China-CEEC goods trade chart between 2012 and 2017.

Source: European Commission, Eurostat; Greinger (2017, 5)

According to the data shown in figure 1, Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary are the top three trading partners, and they are also precisely the closest traders to China and strongly EU-sceptical. These three partners are deemed as being strategic and together they represent more than half of the operations in the bloc. Through such data, we can still see that the level of rapprochement towards the EU ends up influencing the drop in trade volume and goods with the Chinese.

Finally, it is necessary to take a broad look at these ties, since the diplomatic values conceived by the European Union, which are essentially liberal democratic, bring critical tones to the economic and political practices running into the local and economic power dynamics of Central and Eastern European countries. In turn, China with its Win-Win diplomacy, which reiterates horizontality and political non-interference, gains space in this geopolitical and diplomatic chessboard. In addition to taking advantage of affiliations and socio-economic experiences linked to socialism, it has set up territorial policies to expand its actions via BRI's materialisation through NELB.

### 3. The New Eurasian Land Bridge

The New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB) was officially opened in December 1992 from the railway connection, firstly, between cities located on China's coast and inland, and later connecting them to Eurasian countries, more specifically to Kazakhstan (Shu, 1997). It is currently one of six economic corridors composing the key transport network to BRI. Its length is approximately of 10,900 km, starting in Lianyungang and Rizhao on the Chinese coast and ending at Rotterdam Port in the Netherlands and the Belgian port of Antwerp, two of the busiest ports in the European bloc in 2019, respectively. Connecting the Pacific to the Atlantic, the railway network (main route) used by this corridor is also territorially materialised in five countries: Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland (through which it effectively enters the EU sphere of influence) and continues to Germany, Holland, Belgium, where it is fed by secondary lines, reaching Spain and France.

If in the past this corridor operated below what had been expected of it (Shu, 1997), in the 21st century, this panorama has changed significantly. In 2020, approximately 12,400 trips were made through the NELB, a 50% increase from the previous year. In the first two months of 2021, it was expected nearly 55 freight trains would cross Asian and European continents using this route, China's state-run Xinhua news agency had reported<sup>3</sup>. However, appreciation for the NELB has not happened overnight or in a few years. More than a simple network of connections and transport between countries and continents, with the purpose of China's economic development, throughout time, the NELB has represented a part of China's global geopolitical strategy, and several factors have contributed to its progressive prominence.

The first factor worthy of note is the strong mercantile relationship discussed in previous pages: both China and the European Union (EU) are currently major trade partners. With China's entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, both parties have become closer, solidifying and deepening their economic links over the years.

Over the past twenty years, the EU and Beijing have endeavoured to maintain a pragmatic and diplomatic relationship. By building a trade cooperation agenda, several agreements have been signed aiming at the development of a fair and transparent trade area, ensuring security for European investors in China and vice-versa. The success of this relationship would ultimately be reflected in the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), proposed in 2013 to allow greater access to their respective markets for companies from both sides, approved by the European Commission in 2020. Nevertheless, up until August 2021, the European Parliament had not ratified it.

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<sup>3</sup> Xinhua Headlines: 28 years on, China-Europe land bridge forging stronger ties. Xinhua News Agency. Available at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/08/c\\_139730532.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/08/c_139730532.htm) - Accessed 31 Aug. 2021



So the question we ask is: what is going on within the NELB? Firstly, we must point out that the trade flow of goods between Europeans and Chinese, despite having a negative balance, has not stopped growing, at least since 2018. Secondly, the trade profile between these actors is diversified: Europeans mainly export machinery, automobile parts and chemical products to China, while they import industrial and consumer goods, building materials, machinery and textiles (clothing) from China.



Figure 2 - The Main Route of the New Eurasian Land Bridge.

Source: Prepared by authors, based on China (2020); Jakubowski (2020)

Table II - EU-China trade flow of goods (2018-2020)

Year	EU imports	EU Exports	Scales
2018	€ 342 billion	€ 188 billion	€ -154 billion
2019	€ 363 billion	€ 198 billion	€ -164 billion
2020	€ 383 billion	€ 202 billion	€ -180 billion

Source: China. European Commission. Available on: <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/china/> - Accessed on 31 Aug. 2021



The second factor responsible for NELB's prominence in recent years is its cost-effectiveness. It has the skills to adequately meet the needs of network flows at the very territorial core, and it is economically viable. The means of transport used on this route, the locomotives, are constantly being modernised. In the 1990s, when the NELB project was initiated, the Chinese railway infrastructure (tracks, locomotives, tracking system) was shaky (Shu, 1997), albeit as of the 2000s, the Chinese territorial integration along with its neighbouring countries has become one of the main objectives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), being this topic constantly present in the latest Five-Year Plans (FYP).

The railway system is a central element for Chinese development and defence, and therefore, since the end of the 20th century, Beijing has massively invested, both internally and externally, in the development of this infrastructure model. As of today, according to the China State Railway Group, at the end of the thirteenth five-year plan (2016-2020), the Chinese railway network had a total length of just over 146,000 km, of which 37,900 km were meant for high-speed trains<sup>4</sup>. The group has also announced their aim to reach the 200,000 km railway line mark connecting the whole of China before the year 2035<sup>5</sup>. This entire system is in communication with each other, fostering not only a great connection between the Chinese, but also with the World.

In addition to the inward investments, China has assisted in the construction of dry ports and the development of infrastructure in key and strategic cities to support NELB's operations, as in the case of Khorgos dry port, in Kazakhstan, the Great Stone Industrial Park, a special economic zone, and the Kolyadichi Terminal, both near Minsk, the capital of Belarus. Still in Europe, in Poland (member of the 16+1 platform and main entrance of the NELB into the EU zone), the main Chinese investments in 2020 were aimed at logistic infrastructures, according to studies carried out by the Polish Economic Institute<sup>6</sup>.

In other Central-Eastern European countries not on the main route of the Eurasian land bridge, although their territories can serve as feeder and/or secondary routes, Chinese companies are also investing and operating in the transportation and logistics sector. In Serbia, for example, the Chinese have supported the ongoing development of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway line (a key part for the running of The Land-Sea Express, another transport corridor designed to promote a fast connection to Piraeus Port, owned by China COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited and one of the twenty busiest EU ports, in 2019), besides investments in domestic roads (Dimitrijević, 2018). The same was true for the Western Balkan Six (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia),

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<sup>4</sup> Operating results of China State Railway Group in 2020 better than expected amid the epidemic. Global Times. Available on: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1211729.shtml> - Accessed on 31 Aug. 2021

<sup>5</sup> China plans to expand railway network to 200,000 km before 2035. Reuters. Available on: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-economy-infrastructure-railways-idUSKCN2590M4> - Accessed on 31 Aug. 2021

<sup>6</sup> Poland among China's main EU investment sites. Euractiv. Available at: [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/poland-among-chinas-main-eu-investment-sites/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/poland-among-chinas-main-eu-investment-sites/) - Accessed 11 Sep. 2021

which have received an estimated US\$2.4 billion in investment and a further US\$6.8 billion in loans for building logistics systems<sup>7</sup>.

Despite some technical difficulties such as the difference in the sizes of the track gauges through which the locomotives run from China to Holland and Belgium, the railways can still retain an economic advantage over their main competitors: the ships and the aeroplanes. Promfet (2021) says that historically sea transport has always had an advantage over rail in trade between Europe and Asia, however, this scenario is beginning to change with the freight trains chartered by European companies running factories in China.

As the movement of goods by rail between the two continents progressively became more and more widespread, new services and destinations were also offered. Moreover, Promfet further suggests that the railway modal's favouring over the others was caused by the considerable rise in the price of air freight in the years around 2010, whilst the maritime modal was slowed down, seeking to reduce pollution and fuel consumption. In other words, trains are faster than ships and cheaper than planes.

According to Nazarbayev (2019), a journey on NELB lasts in about 18-20 days, whereas the German company DHL says it takes 10-12 days; meanwhile the same journey would last approximately between 35-45 days by sea. Air travel, which would be the fastest of all (a 12-hour flight between the two continents), is more expensive and has a much more limited space than a locomotive pulling several containers. The importance of this connection channel can be seen, for example, through the recent pandemic of COVID- 19, when the railway line was used to export 9.39 million basic medical supplies to the European continent<sup>8</sup>.

The third and final contributing factor to the growth of the NELB is its central role in the Chinese foreign policy. This corridor, just like the others included in BRI, is essentially developed to enable the Chinese to put into practice their geopolitical strategy of cooperation. The Chinese aim to become an indispensable player on the international political scene is embodied through cooperation and its multiple bi- or multilateral agreements made over recent years with several global players (countries and international organisations), through policy banks (Bank of China, China Development Bank, Export-Import Bank of China) and Chinese companies (China Road and Bridge Corporation, China Communications Construction Company, China Railway International and China Communications Construction Company are a few).

These corridors are also responsible for the development and expansion of Chinese geopolitical zones of influence. Despite the strong commercial link and pragmatic relationship between Europeans and Chinese, their discourses and geopolitical zones of influence are quite distinct. Not surprisingly, the

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<sup>7</sup> China's investments in the Western Balkans. Strategic Comments. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/citedby/10.1080/13567888.2020.1868206?scroll=top&needAccess=true> – Accessed 12 Aug. 2021

<sup>8</sup>BRI delivers growth and protection amid pandemic. Global Times. Available on: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1215314.shtml> - Accessed 31 Aug. 2021

Chinese have come closer and have a better relationship within a sphere built on a political discourse only slightly different from the central stakeholders of the European bloc. While the EU (the major decision-making nations in the bloc) is closer to an axis of power linked to Western bodies like NATO, for instance, the Chinese have their own outlook for action and geopolitical exploration of new areas, in this specific case, as demarked by the aforementioned China, the 16+1 format and EU.

Rather than just a simple project to link China and the European bloc, this NELB is not just a project to link China and the European bloc. It is a bold project to connect distant areas from Asia to the rest of the world, and the European continent is part of this platform. Through these intricate networks, Beijing's geopolitical influence can successively increase with investments, acquisition and/or construction of new infrastructures and partnerships between European and Chinese companies, leading to a rapprochement that creates space for the ascendancy of the Chinese geopolitical discourse, marked by action towards the other and benevolence towards other countries (Ming, 2020).

#### **4. Conclusion**

Clearly, there is a need for greater observation of China's strategies. Bear in mind that their actions must be interpreted not only in the light of a Western gaze, but rather, to understand them, we need to think of the bells and whistles of auspiciousness and their interpretation of global hegemony. Far from systemic domination of the global web, Rosemere Foot argues, China seeks governance on the basis of multilateralism, therefore in a logic linked to other global powers. There is no doubt that the United States and the European Union are important actors in the Global Order. However, the systematic incorporation of the European area into China's geopolitical and geoeconomics dynamics, by expanding the BRI (here addressed through the NELB) and through the activities of its policy banks, reveals the intention to expand its diplomatic and economic activities towards the West.

As regards the geopolitics of the European area itself, the 16+1 cooperation format has brought new institutional arrangements and challenges to consolidate and unite the European Bloc. These are mainly the ability to effectively incorporate central and eastern countries into the European Union and overcome the symbolic and diplomatic barriers hindering the political integration of these countries into the so-called "Western Europe". Likewise, the importance of international cooperation as a strategy for geopolitical expansion is closely associated with the tangible transformations of territories, materialised in networks of circulation. These networks, as far as they are concerned, can bring new economic dynamism and political relevance to Eastern European countries, still understood by some as a geographical spatial heritage of the Cold War discourse.

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