

THE BELT AND ROAD: THE BALKAN PERSPECTIVE
Political and Security Aspects

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Foreword

Approximately until the turn of the new milenium (apparently viewed from the perspective of the Christian West), to most of the contemporaries, China seemed to be the leading country of the Third World at best. Only the more informed saw a “rising force” in it, and almost none a potential “super power”. This was not surprising given that during the 19th and 20th centuries China passed through the probably most dramatic period of its thousand-year long existence: internal wars and rebellion, neocolonial status and foreign occupation made the first-rate pre-modern world force become its own modern pale shadow on the verge of disappearance. However, a reversal ensued with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (1949). A rapid and controversial development of this country, achieved with extraordinary efforts and great sacrifice, has made it possible for the world’s first country by number of population and the fourth largest to transform into the second economic force on the planet only a few decades later, after an economic and political opening to the world (in the early 80’s).

Further development in this direction was announced in September 2013. When the Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a new big business initiative and an investment venture called “One Belt One Road” or “New Silk Road”. It is about revitalizing the old (even ancient) land belt and creating a new sea route that gets China closer to Europe (and vice versa). It is a project unprecedented in a modern world economy that embraces more than 60 states with nearly 4.5 billion people! The Collection of Works that is before you is the result of the pioneering effort of a group of authors to provide the academic and professional public in Serbia and the region with a broader insight into this megaproject and especially to present its importance for the Balkan countries. More precisely, the papers from which the Collection was made analyze various aspects of cooperation between the People’s Republic of China and 16 Central and Eastern European countries, whose realization was defined by the so-called “16 + 1” framework.

The “16 + 1” cooperation encompasses a larger number of multilateral agreements and the implementation mechanisms provided for by those

agreements. At the same time it can be interpreted as the greatest achievement of contemporary Chinese diplomacy, but also as one of its most serious long-term challenges. The initiative to start this cooperation came from the Chinese side, and soon became widely accepted with great interest and enthusiasm in Central and Eastern Europe. Since then, the efforts to implement the “16 + 1” plan have been ongoing, and the joint summits are being held regularly. This contributes not only to the greater rapprochement of the People’s Republic of China and its “16 + 1” partners but also to a better understanding and development of cooperation among the Central European and Eastern European countries.

Just a few years after the launch of the “16 + 1” initiative, we are witnessing its flashy evolution from an attractive idea to institutionalized international reality. This framework of cooperation already has specific institutional mechanisms such as regular annual summits, meetings of the leaders of these countries at the prime ministerial level, regular meetings of the economic and trade forum, as well as preparatory activities preceding the summits - national coordinators’ meetings.

From the Chinese perspective, the 16 countries mentioned, and especially those that have recently become members of the European Union, can play the role of a bridge between the giant China market and the rich EU market. For Central and Eastern European countries, China is a trusted partner whose impressive and stable economic growth opens up the possibility for fertile and thriving economic cooperation. That is why these countries, affected by the recent global economic crisis, turn to China as an important partner, but also as a friend that can help them regain their economic stability and advance together on the road to a certain, safer and more prosperous future.

In this regard, the purpose of this thematic collection is to gather the leading domestic and foreign researchers from different academic disciplines so as to collect their experience and research findings with respect to security, that is to say, political and/or economic aspects of the “New Silk Road”, with special reference to its Balkan route. That is why, academics and experts from China and Serbia, as well as Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia and Slovenia participated in the writing and preparation of this Collection of Works.

It is our intention to lay the basis for further ongoing interdisciplinary discussion within which domestic and foreign experts would discuss the most important (geo)political issues, security challenges and threats, specific economic and other topics relating to the New Silk Road i.e. the “16 + 1” cooperation.