

Logistical Foundations of China's Global Expansion: Threat or Opportunity for the Mediterranean Area?

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The Covid-19 health crisis, followed by the war between Russia and Ukraine, have highlighted the extent to which supply chains can be subject to external shocks that threaten the performance of global value chains. To cope with these disruptions and guarantee the continuity of logistical flows, China has embarked on an ambitious program to develop maritime and rail infrastructures, known as the One Belt, One Road project (or Belt and Road Initiative, BRI). This program aims to support China's strategy of global market expansion and transform the country into the world's leading power by 2049. The research note focuses on the specific case of the Mediterranean area, which has given rise to a massive investment strategy in ports under the BRI. There is a real threat that Chinese products will invade European markets, but it is possible to imagine that the BRI port facilities will also allow SMEs from the Mediterranean area to access these markets more easily. This research note proposes a reflection on the strategic issues of the BRI for the Mediterranean area in the coming years.

Keywords: global value chain, logistics, Mediterranean area, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), port facilities, supply chain management

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 health crisis, followed by the war between Russia and Ukraine, have highlighted the structural fragility of supply chains, whose functioning can be durably disrupted by external shocks of uncommon severity. A great deal of work has been devoted to the subject, starting with the first alarmist observation made by Haren and Simchi-Levi (2020). While it must be admitted that logistical vulnerabilities are undeniable, with the risk of seeing global value chains almost totally paralyzed (Verny, 2021), a more positive view can also be taken following the external shocks mentioned. More than ever, the importance of supply chains in the implementation of winning competitive strategies is underlined, largely based on the resilient behavior the companies are able to initiate (Mwangola, 2018). Indeed, some observers still thought that the routing of goods across the planet was a basic activity, with no management difficulties; in other words, a support activity with no real stakes, compared to financial, marketing or production decisions. The health and geopolitical crises we have been experiencing since 2020 are a good reminder that logistics is a key element of corporate strategy, as Heskett (1977) already noted.

As a new major economic power, China has fully understood the strategic importance of logistics over the past decade through the One Belt, One Road project (or Belt and Road Initiative, BRI). Its objective is to promote transcontinental connectivity between China, Asia, Africa and Europe with reference to five

main areas: policy coordination, construction of logistical infrastructure, development of unhindered trade, financial integration and strengthening of links between people. This can be referred to as a neo-mercantilist vision pursuing a globalization strategy led by the Chinese government (Yu, 2019), which favors State-owned enterprises and aims to generalize free trade zones similar to the China/ASEAN Free Trade Area, which came into effect in 2010. The construction of monumental logistical facilities is the dominant feature of what is now called the “new silk road”, in the historical filiation of the old silk roads (Paché, 2020a). While the BRI is the object of all attention, it remains to be seen whether it will have a positive or negative influence on the Mediterranean area. This is a central question, since the massive Chinese investments in ports on the shores of the Mediterranean bear witness to a genuine strategy of territorial expansion.

From a methodological point of view, this research note has a speculative dimension. As Martineau *et al.* (2001) point out, the speculative approach consists of *interpreting, arguing* and *telling*, i.e., drawing on a series of empirical data in order to propose an explanatory framework for an economic, political or social phenomenon. It is not about prescribing recommendations to improve a situation, but about understanding how this situation has specific characteristics. In other words, it is a question of a first comprehensive phase whose aim is to decode the meaning given by an actor to its action, in this case the reason for the BRI initiated by China. It then becomes possible to adopt a second explanatory phase allowing for the study of possible causalities, in this case the influence of the BRI on the dynamics of the Mediterranean area. The structure of the research note is based on these two phases: first, the strategic stakes associated with the BRI are presented, emphasizing both the economic and political dimensions of the project; second, a reflection is conducted on the place held by the Mediterranean area in the BRI, addressing especially the massive investments made by China in port facilities.

BRI: STRATEGIC STAKES

Although it is part of a broad project of geopolitical domination on a global scale, the BRI has an important logistical dimension. It consists of six land corridors and one maritime corridor including 68 countries, which represent 65% of the world’s GDP and 70% of the world’s population. While the main objective is to encourage international cooperation between the countries involved in the project, China is primarily seeking to support its exports of products and equipment and to control the supply chains associated with them. To this can be added the securing of oil and gas supplies to Central Asia, Southeast Asia and Pakistan by creating alternative land routes to the Strait of Malacca *via* the sea route. This last point is confirmed by the recent meta-analysis of Wang *et al.* (2021). For this, China has planned to release a colossal budget of 8,000 billion US dollars. As an example, a gigantic port, operational since 2017, has been built in Djibouti, for an amount of 580 million US dollars, entirely financed from loans granted by China. Beyond the size of the investments, which lead to the mention of a “pharaonic project”, it is essential to understand that BRI is a major lever for territorial conquest, for which logistics is a key element.

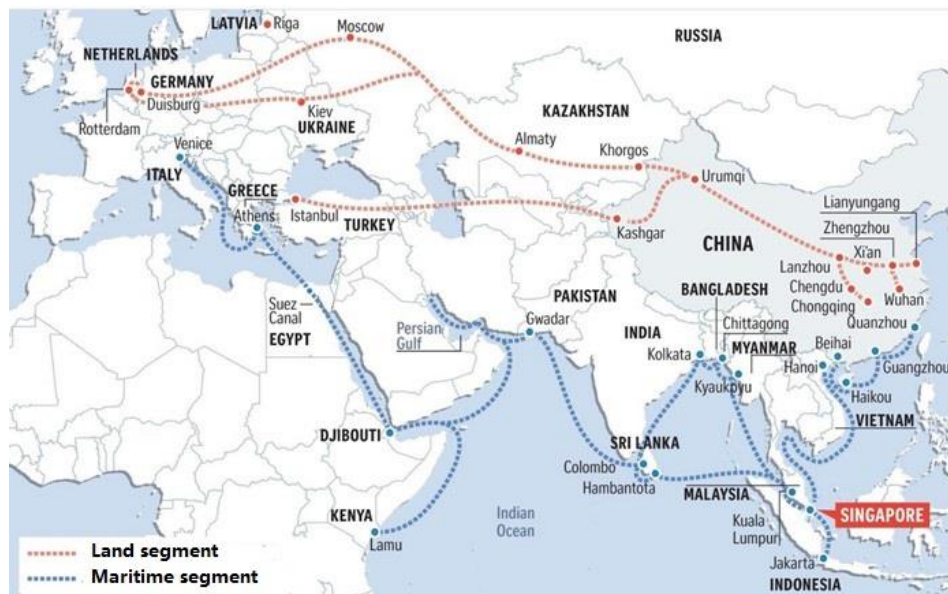
The Origins of a Pharaonic Project

The BRI is undoubtedly one of the most ambitious logistical infrastructure projects ever conceived in all of human history (Du, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2018), and it has already given rise to an abundant academic literature (Chen *et al.*, 2022; Panibratov *et al.*, 2022). The BRI was announced by President Xi Jinping during an official visit to Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, in September 2013. Clothed in the historical and dreamlike prestige of the desert, steppe, and caravanserai, the project is primarily a gigantic transportation infrastructure investment program. Indeed, the BRI is a direct allusion to the trade route which, from the first century to the Middle Ages, allowed the transport of goods, silks and other luxury products between China and Europe. The route of this axis of about 8,000 km connects the city of Chang’an (now Xi’an) in China to the city of Antioch in Syria. The expression silk road (*Seidenstraße*) itself was not coined until 1877 by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, while the Ancients did not use it (Chin, 2013). This expression was chosen in reference to the product most in demand by Europeans from the Asian continent: silk. In fact, the silk road is a complex network of caravan routes and paths that, from

the 6th century BC, connected the shores of the Mediterranean to the Chinese empire, being the main communication routes between the civilizations of the Near and Far East.

As in the case of the original Silk Road, the BRI has two complementary segments, i.e., two “routes” rather than one: a land segment and a maritime segment (see Figure 1). However, it is common to refer to the “new silk road” for simplicity’s sake, as Ferdinand von Richthofen spoke of a single silk road. The BRI is based on the creation of a vast network of railroads, pipelines and highways, and the acquisition of ports, both to the West, through the former Soviet republics and Europe (especially in its Mediterranean part), and to the South, namely Pakistan, India and the rest of Southeast Asia. In addition to logistical facilities, China is planning to set up some 50 special economic zones, based on the Shenzhen zone launched in 1980. This is therefore a huge political project whose stated objective is to position China as the world’s leading power in 2049, on the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party’s arrival in power. For the moment, however, it is difficult to assess the economic impacts of the BRI for the various countries crossed by the land and sea routes. More precisely, the measurement of the positive –or negative– externalities of the project in terms of production, employment and well-being for the populations remains inconclusive, since the evaluation of the BRI should legitimately be multi-criteria in nature, combining economic impacts (growth, employment, investments, etc.), environmental impacts (energy consumption, CO₂ emissions) and the degree of openness of economies.

FIGURE 1
THE “NEW SILK ROAD”: LAND AND MARITIME SEGMENTS



Source: Paché (2020a).

It must be admitted that beyond a simple logistical dimension, which assimilates the “new silk road” to the formalization of several corridors (or spokes) on the hub-and-spokes model, developed since the 1960s by Federal Express (Paché, 2020b), the Chinese initiative aims to considerably extend the economic and political influence of the country. Some geopolitical specialists analyze the BRI, first and foremost, as a desire for power: “*The values and ideas that have come to be associated with the silk road provide a unique platform for China to exercise its geocultural advantage as a civilizational state as it seeks to accumulate power and influence by building connectivities and entanglements across multiple sectors*” (Winter, 2021, p. 1376). This position is widely taken up by the United States, as evidenced by President Trump’s recurring attacks before, during, and after the Covid-19 health crisis. For the latter, the “new silk road” is a political tool in the service of global markets in which China is the big winner, while some Asian leaders fear that

the BRI is a Trojan horse for the military expansion of their powerful neighbor. Even if President Biden is more moderate in his comments, especially with the attack on Ukraine by Russia at the end of February 2022, China remains an economic and political adversary whose hegemonic will is being fought, its massive presence at the heart of many global value chains being indisputable (Baldwin and Tomiura, 2020).

A Lever of Territorial Conquest

The BRI is a great success for Chinese diplomacy, a diplomacy that has finally been deemed quite “acceptable” by international public opinion since the war launched by President Putin in February 2022. More than 120 countries, representing three quarters of the world’s population, have signed cooperation projects, or have expressed their interest in doing so in the near future. Table 1 lists the countries involved in the maritime segment of the BRI; it highlights the sprawling development of a trade network, which requires the management of many risks (catastrophic oceanic climate, pollution to the marine environment, piracy, etc.) (Xue *et al.*, 2020). For example, a China/Pakistan economic corridor is already planned, with a set of projects linking China to the Pakistani port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea. Between 2013 and 2019, significant shares have been taken in 14 European ports, without taking into account the ports with which China has signed memorandums of understanding. Thus, it is possible to consider that the ports of Rotterdam, Antwerp and Le Havre, to name but a few, are in the service of a patient strategy of conquest over a horizon of several decades (Le Corre and Sepulchre, 2016). We will return to this point later, noting that ports in the Mediterranean, in at least four key countries, are particularly targeted to carry out a planned territorial expansion over the long term.

**TABLE 1
LIST OF COUNTRIES ALONGSIDE THE MARITIME SEGMENT OF BRI**

Area	Country
Africa	Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Kenya, Somalia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Tanzania
Europe	Germany, France, Italy, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Belgium, United Kingdom, Denmark, Ireland, Greece, Cyprus, Hungary, Malta, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, Finland, Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Bosnia, Hercegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, Macedonia
Oceania	Australia, New Zealand
South Asia	Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Maldives
South Pacific	Fiji, Cook Islands, Micronesia, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Papua New Guinea
Southeast Asia	Philippines, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam
West Asia	Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Yemen, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Syrian Arab Republic

Source: Xue *et al.* (2020).

As for the land segment of the BRI, the dynamism is at least as important. From 2013 to 2021, one million containers were transported by rail between China and the European Union (14,000 trains, an average of 38 convoys per day). Every year since 2007, China has built an average of 2,600 km of new rail infrastructure (compared to only 200 km in Europe) on which convoys travel at over 200 km/h. The land segment of the BRI allows for savings in the time needed to reach export ports; it is part of the plan to rebalance the Chinese economy initiated by the government in the 2000s in favor of inland cities such as Chongqing, Chengdu and Lanzhou, which are respectively located 1,400 km, 1,600 km and 1,700 km from Shanghai. These three cities, which are one of the pillars of Chinese growth, have every interest in developing rail transport in a country where the need to transport products increased sixfold between 1995

and 2018 (FIT, 2021). However, there is still a debate about the economic viability of rail in the BRI. The price charged to customers for transporting a container by rail is half the actual cost because of the large subsidies distributed by Chinese local authorities to shippers. But this is another weapon in the economic war that China wants to win by 2049 (and probably before).

In brief, if it seems irrelevant to underestimate the geopolitical stakes implied by the “new silk road”, it would also be irrelevant to make it the unique reason for its existence. Indeed, the BRI is a lever of conquest in the hands of China to develop new investment opportunities. For example, in 2015, 44% of Chinese overseas engineering projects were carried out in the countries listed in Table 1, and the figure had already reached 52% in 2016 (Ehteshami, 2017). This policy has two complementary objectives. On the one hand, it supports Chinese trade and allows it to secure its supplies of raw materials from developing countries, which are essential to its economy. On the other hand, it allows China to strengthen its lagging regions by connecting them to other areas in the west. Finally, the BRI represents a large-scale *soft power* that allows China to capture export markets, but also to stimulate domestic consumption. This last point is important to avoid falling into the “middle-income” trap: wages growth and quality of life improves as low-skilled manufacturing production increases, but then there is a fierce struggle to move into the production of high value-added goods and services. This is a major challenge for China, given the rise of low-cost countries such as Bangladesh which could take significant market share in low-end products.

MEDITERRANEAN LOGISTICS CONNECTION

The French historian Braudel (2001) has written a major academic reference on the Mediterranean based on a fresco covering ten millennia. He shows how Mediterranean societies have gradually achieved economic and cultural supremacy by mastering a hostile maritime and land space. Becoming, step by step, the cradle of great civilizations, the Mediterranean ended up forming a cosmopolitan culture despite the incessant rivalries between the countries located on its shores. The interest of Braudel’s (2001) work is to respond to current issues such as the organization of increasingly globalized exchanges, or the preservation of natural resources threatened by pollution and global warming. Moreover, Braudel (2001) emphasizes that the Mediterranean should not be reduced to a “reservoir for food”; it is also, and above all, a useful transport surface. Through its BRI, China is part of this long historical legacy, seeking, through the control of main logistical nodes in the Mediterranean, to open the doors to new markets that are essential to its economic growth.

Heading for Port Facilities

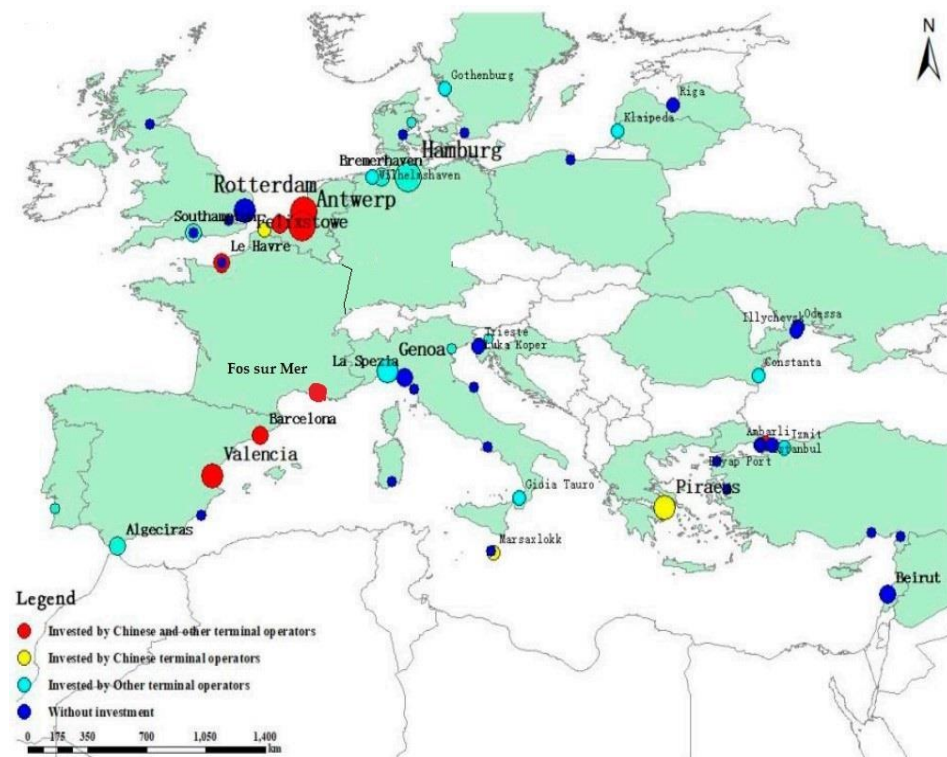
The “new silk road”, as highlighted earlier, consists of several corridors within which there are a series of hubs, including ports. Figure 2 indicates that the Mediterranean area has given rise to very significant port investments (Wang *et al.*, 2019). The most famous, or high-profile, investment in Europe was the finalization of Cosco’s takeover of the Port of Piraeus in 2016, which was started in 2008, when Greece was going through a severe debt crisis (Karlis and Polemis, 2018). As Wang *et al.* (2019) point out, this is not an isolated case, quite the contrary, as many other Mediterranean ports are involved. In particular, it is possible to cite the Maltese ports of Valletta and Marsaxlokk, whose privileged position in the Mediterranean allows them to play the role of maritime hub by playing on multiple connectivities (to Europe in the north, and to Africa in the south). Thus, no surprise that Malta was one of the first European countries to sign, in November 2018, a memorandum of understanding with China. To Figure 2, which retains only the European part of the Mediterranean, one must add the port of Tanger-Med in Morocco, in which Cosco has also taken stakes. The Mediterranean Sea is in fact the meeting point of three continents, linked to the Atlantic Ocean by Gibraltar, to the Black Sea by the Bosphorus and to the Indian Ocean by the Suez Canal. It is therefore an eminently strategic sea, and it is logical that the Chinese presence in port facilities there has become significant over time (Chaziza, 2018). The four main countries involved are the following:

- *In Greece.* As mentioned, the port of Piraeus is historically the first Chinese entry point to the European Union and is the major hub for products arriving from the Red Sea and destined for Europe. In addition, Cosco is seeking to develop rail links to northern Europe via Macedonia,

Serbia and Hungary from Athens. This project is part of the strategy to penetrate Europe through the Balkans by relying on so-called “weak” States.

- *In France.* The China Merchants Port group, the other Chinese giant in port engineering, has taken control of 49% of the capital of Terminal Link, a subsidiary of the CMA-CGM group, the operator of the container terminals in Marseille, Malta-Marsaxlokk, Tanger-Med and Casablanca. China Merchants Port has also had a 25% stake in Eurofos, the port of Fos-sur-Mer, since 2018.
- *In Spain.* Cosco has taken control of 51% of the capital of the Spanish company Noatum Ports, managing the ports of Bilbao and Valencia. Valencia is a key element of Cosco’s international network of port terminals on Spain’s Mediterranean coast. In Barcelona, Hutchinson Ports Holding (HPH) has become the sole shareholder of the Barcelona Europe South Terminal (BEST).
- *In Italy.* In 2016, Cosco, allied with the port of Qingdao, has taken control of 49.9% of the capital of the port of Vado Ligure (Savona), the main refrigerated terminal in the Mediterranean, and in 2019, China strengthened its presence in the ports of Trieste and Genoa. The choice of Trieste is particularly strategic because its prime location at the northern end of the Adriatic Sea provides a link to the landlocked Balkan countries.

FIGURE 2
A SIGNIFICANT CHINESE PRESENCE IN MEDITERRANEAN PORTS



Source: Wang et al. (2019).

However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the geopolitical and economic context could constitute a significant obstacle to the linking of part of the Mediterranean area to the “new silk road”. This geographical area remains unstable, regularly crossed by popular upheavals not conducive to encouraging foreign investment from China in order to develop trade. We will mention here the famous “Arab Spring”, the outcome of which in terms of the establishment of more democratic political systems has probably not

been what was hoped for in Europe (Amour, 2018). In addition, unemployment rates remain high, especially among the under-30-years, reducing the purchasing power of potential consumers of Chinese products, even at low prices. This is particularly true of some of the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean that are most invested in the BRI, such as Morocco, and there is no doubt that the consequences of the Covid-19 health crisis, followed by the war between Russia and Ukraine, are likely to make the situation worse. China could thus be caught in a vice: on the one hand, the country can hardly refuse to grant payment facilities to partners in difficulty, without further damaging its image on the international scene; on the other hand, granting extended payment terms or even debt forgiveness could prove very costly.

For Better or for Worse?

It is also important to emphasize the resistance that the BRI could encounter in terms of environmental damage. A project of this magnitude is bound to have an ecological impact that will be felt more particularly in the countries around the Mediterranean. In addition to the explosion of maritime traffic, with all that this implies in terms of pollution of the marine environment and energy consumption, many researchers point to the risk of proliferation of invasive species. There is no shortage of examples in this area: Asian hornet, red weevil, blue crab, etc. In his recent research, Seebens (2019) identified a potential 14 hot spots of biological invasions falling along the corridors of the maritime segment of the BRI. The risks of invasion can explicitly harm the ecological balance and the endemic fauna and flora of the countries of the Mediterranean basin, knowing that the Mediterranean Sea is already one of the most polluted seas in the world. Approximately 230,000 tons of plastic waste are dumped there every year, mainly due to poor waste management by some countries along the coast. Without significant intervention and a strong political will, this pollution will continue to increase until it reaches 500,000 tons of plastic waste by 2040 (Boucher and Billard, 2020). The BRI risks to weaken between more the ecosystems and as such, it will be more and more source of tension with numerous activist NGO.

This should not obscure the fact that the Mediterranean area has significant development potential thanks to efficient maritime links, even if land transport connectivity is still limited compared to that of northern Europe (Dial *et al.*, 2021). The policy objective is explicitly to reduce the fragmentation of different markets, which at present tend to overlap rather than intermingle. It is true that, over time, trade integration within the Mediterranean area has progressed, both in terms of product trade and the construction of regional value chains. However, many challenges remain, particularly for the countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean, linked to the complexity of processing the various contractual agreements, the lack of an adequate regulatory framework for trade in services and, above all, insufficient logistical infrastructure to support companies in their territorial expansion strategy (OECD, 2021). Chinese investments could profoundly change the situation, as Tourret (2019) points out in his well-argued analysis. The author insists that the BRI is not reduced to simple plots on the world map, but rather forms a complex network of interconnected hubs that constitute solid gateways to new consumer markets from which the Mediterranean region could benefit.

However, it is essential to understand that the Mediterranean area remains and will remain for a long time dependent on the strength of the BRI corridor to which it is linked. Figure 1 shows that the “new silk road”, in its maritime segment, passes through the Horn of Africa, goes up the Red Sea and then leads to the Suez Canal. Yet, this trade route is particularly vulnerable in that it involves highly sensitive, if not profoundly unstable, geopolitical areas (Otshudi Shotsha *et al.*, 2018). The Horn of Africa, which essentially includes Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya, sees the bulk of maritime traffic between the Far East and Europe. Recurrent food crises, particularly in Somalia, lead to acts of piracy to ensure the subsistence of populations; attacks on ships and looting thus threaten maritime transport, and even the kidnapping of seafarers to obtain ransom. In order to protect its logistical investments, China is constantly making diplomatic efforts to convince international organizations to ensure their protection. The supply risks remain very present and threaten the Mediterranean area with being “sidelined” from the “new silk road”, which could have dramatic economic consequences in the future. From this point of view, the withdrawal

of the European naval force *Atalanta* in March 2022 –set up in 2008 by the European Union to stop acts of piracy committed against commercial ships sailing off the coast of Somalia– is particularly worrying.

CONCLUSION

This research note focuses on the place of the Mediterranean area in the construction of the “new silk road”. Such an angle of attack is particularly relevant insofar as China’s economic presence has been significant for several years in this part of the world. Diplomatic concretization takes the form of strategic and operational collaborations for which close relationship is formalized in economic matters –with the acquisition of shares in many Mediterranean ports– but also in cultural, security and technological matters. Thus, dozens of memoranda of understanding have already been signed, not to mention promises to carry out major infrastructure projects. In such a context, if the BRI is finally causing a lot of ink to flow in Europe, with the fear of consumer markets even more flooded with Chinese products, it is forgetting that the modernity of the logistical facilities put in place over the past decade is also a facilitator of trade for Mediterranean countries wishing to conquer the markets of northern Europe, especially with their agricultural products. As a famous proverb says, it all depends on whether you look at the glass as half empty or half full.

While many European politicians advocate de-globalization based on reshoring in the framework of proximity supply chains, Giovannetti and Vivoli (2021) note that reshoring is not “the right solution”, while adding that nearshoring could be an opportunity for the Mediterranean area. Beyond a simple game of semantics, this is a fundamental debate on the future of global value chains, which have been the basis of triumphant neo-liberalism for several decades. Once the external shocks of Covid-19 and the war between Russia and Ukraine have been overcome, it is likely that globalization will slowly resume its forward march, particularly with inflationary phenomena that will lead consumers to seek low prices. For European companies, global sourcing from low-cost countries will then be an imperative necessity in order to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage, even if the trust of decision-makers in market mechanisms has been partly eroded. In this (likely) return to “business as usual” perspective, it is important to see the BRI as an opportunity rather than a threat, provided that strong local partnerships are built. This *International BRI* scenario, as Schulhof *et al.* (2022) call it, would mean an ability to overcome the pandemic shock, and then the shock of the Ukraine-Russia war, which is not won.

The main advice is to encourage shippers in the Mediterranean area to get involved in long-term relationships with the port authorities associated with the BRI, including through strategic partnerships. In the past, studying the port of Fos-sur-Mer in France, Broda’s (1977) unpublished doctoral dissertation highlighted how local firms voluntarily turned away from the port, located a few kilometers away, to use a distant port to ship their products (with recourse to long-distance road transport for pre-carriage operations). In other words, for decades it was possible to talk about a total disconnection between ports and their hinterland, which was finally logical with a globalized vision of supply chains. This situation can seriously harm regional competitiveness and even make it more difficult for local SMEs to access international markets. The BRI could help to counteract the disconnection between port and hinterland by offering an infrastructural system that integrates the latest logistical innovations, including information technology, at the service of local SMEs. For companies in the Mediterranean area, this is a real opportunity to improve the performance of their supply chains, and it would be very harmful not to seize the business opportunities that arise.

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