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OBOR and Chinese Soft Power

Abstract

One Belt, One Road project can be seen not only as a geopolitical plan for Chinese business expansion, but also as a way to project the Chinese soft power. The later is also a way to prepare foreign markets for the heavy Chinese presence in the near future. What is more the Chinese soft power, as *prima facie* non-ideological one, can be more appealing for emerging markets, especially in African. In the same time the new race for the Africa has started and American as well as European soft powers will clash with Chinese. Near future will show which one performed better and prepared markets for business expansion.

The article investigate problem of connection between OBOR and soft power. The main thesis of the article is that Chinese soft power is ideological one and connected with so called Chinese dream. The later is an alternative for the European and American dreams, which dominated the western hemisphere.

Keywords: OBOR, One Road One Belt, soft power, Chinese dream, PRC, China

Introduction

The aim of the article¹ is to present the On Road One Belt (OBOR) initiative as a tool for Chinese foreign policy. However, it is not about economic expansion, but about the use of OBOR for expansion using Chinese soft power. The basic thesis of the article is that the OBOR initiative is part of a wider plan of Chinese expansion, which will be possible thanks to the use of Chinese soft power.

For the purpose of the analysis, the work was divided into three parts. The first one is devoted to a short presentation of what the OBOR initiative is and which countries will find themselves in the field of Chinese foreign policy related to this. It is a descriptive part, however, allowing to find out about the possibilities and scope of possible use of Chinese soft power. The second part is the analysis of what is Chinese soft power. At this point, a comparative analysis of Chinese, European and American resources was made. There are references to the problem of globalization as a tool for expansion in the international environment using soft power. The last part is a development of the analysis regarding soft power, in which the problem of confronting the ideal of American Dream, European Dream and Chinese Dream was taken. These three different visions proposed to participants of social and especially economic life become an element of ideological struggle carried out on the international stage in the 21st century.

In the last part, the most important topics concerning the analyzed areas were collected. The summary also includes

¹ The original version of the articles is a paper given at the conference *Euroasia 2.0 Clash or Cooperation* organized by Warsaw University and Sichuan University

a reference to the thesis put forward in the introduction. It should be mentioned, however, that this work is introductory in nature. The findings made during the study are not yet sufficient material for making hard conclusions about Chinese soft power. Problems require further analysis, in particular conducted at the interface between political philosophy and international relations.

OBOR

One Belt One Road (OBOR), otherwise known as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a historical reference to the Silk Road that has been connecting Europe and Asia for hundreds of years. From the point of view of theory, it is an attempt to shift the center of gravity from the so-called Rimland² back to the so-called World Island. China, from the point of view of theory, is trying to take the initiative in the so-called Heartland³ understood today as the Eurasian area. The 21st century and the “new race for Africa” caused OBOR to also affect countries on the east coast of Africa. Thus, China is trying to get the initiative on the traditionally perceived Heartland expanded to Africa.

The strategic goal of PRC is so-called reversal of routes. Throughout the twentieth century, the main commercial roads were sea routes. More specifically, the sea routes leading east and west from Eurasia. The implementation of the

² N. Spykeman, *America's Strategy in World Politics*, London-New York 2007. See also: R. Kuźniar, *Polityka i siła. Studia strategiczne – zarys problematyki*, Warszawa 2016, p. 69.

³ H. J. Mackinder, *The Geographical Pivot of History*, “The Geographical Journal” 1904, vol. 23, no. 4. See also: S. Otok, *Geografia polityczna*, Warszawa 2006, p. 13-14.

OBOR initiative aims to overcome this trend. What is more, it aims to restore the routes that historically formed during the period of antiquity and the Middle Ages and allowed China to expand. The expansion is not only economic, but also informal influences, which today we call soft power.

From the point of view of international relations and economics, the OBOR initiative is a strategic and infrastructural project. It is rarely referred to as an ideological project, or focused on the expansion of Chinese soft power. This, however, will be the subject of further consideration, here we recall the most important economic features of OBOR.

The Chinese initiative involves the creation of New Maritime Silk Road connecting the east and south coasts of Asia, the east coast of Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. The Chinese government calls the initiative “to improve regional connectivity and embrace a brighter future”.⁴ In addition to the sea connection, the implementation of the Belt is planned. This is to be divided into six corridors. These Belt legs are designed to connect most of the Eurasian area with the PRC. Through this, economic expansion is enabled, and China’s political behind it. The realization is planned: China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor, China-Indochina Corridor, China-Bangladesh-India-Corridor, China-Pakistan Corridor, China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor and New Eurasian Landbridge.

For the implementation of the OBOR initiative, among others, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), whose members are almost all countries involved in the Chinese project. On the European continent, members are still not post-Soviet republics or Balkan states. Nevertheless, AIIB

⁴ *Chinese unveils actions plan on Belt and Road Initiative*, http://english.gov.cn/news/top_news/2015/03/28/content_281475079055789.htm [10.09/2018]

operates in most of the Eurasian area. It brings together a total of 87 members. Even the United Nations view AIIB as an important element in supporting infrastructure capital investments. Nothing, however, happens without a proper remuneration. In the case of the implementation of the OBOR initiative and the functioning of AIIB, it is susceptibility to Chinese soft power.

Chinese soft power

Chinese soft power is an element often undervalued in the so-called western world. Europeans and Americans are used primarily to perceive soft power as a tool in the hands of Anglo-Saxons (globalization, mcdonaldization, usage of English worldwide), French (republican ideas, usage of the French number in the world). Soft power is also attributed to the US and the European Union as a whole. In the latter case, we are talking about a certain lifestyle and an ideological package which is pushed through by the European institutions - sometimes against the will of individual Member States.

Soft power relies on the success of the abroad by persuasion rather than force. Nowadays China is steadily increasing its support for cultural exchanges, sending students abroad and starting Chinese-language programs abroad. This is particularly evident in Indochina, where, for example, in Malaysia, schools with Chinese language lectures are created. Chinese language has already become a language of business and great international policy in the area of Southeast Asia. It is what English is in the Euro-Atlantic zone. In 2005, China's education ministry announced a new initiative to boost Chinese-language teaching in American universities and language institutes around the world.

Additionally, PRC invests in establishing Confucius Institutes that are key to foreign policy in world countries. They are a network of non-profit organizations whose aim is to propagate Chinese language and Chinese culture. The first institute was founded in Uzbekistan. Currently, institutes exist in the whole world, in countries such as: USA, Germany, Great Britain, France, Poland, Thailand and Singapore. They are present in countries that are to be covered by the OBOR initiative or have a position of a superpower (at least regional). In addition to the promotion of Chinese language and Chinese culture, the Confucius Institutes become agents of influence. Thus, despite the status of a non-profit cultural organization, they actively work for the state and its political goals. They should therefore be treated as political institutions using Chinese soft power.

Analyzing what is Chinese soft power, you can point to its several special features. Unlike soft American power and especially European power, it can be seen as free from ideology. As an attempt at first and foremost economic expansion, without imposing ideological solutions.

The offers to enter the orbit of Chinese domination in the absence (*pirma facie*) of imposed ideology may be the greatest asset of the PRC. European investments and structural assistance of the European Union in Africa are always connected with the obligation to adopt an ideological package. It is associated with the promotion of human rights and social-liberal values that have dominated the European Union. Investments and slow getting into Chinese influence are not connected with the obligation to introduce legal institutions based, for example, on the ideology of gender. There is also no need to introduce solutions resulting from political philosophy regarding human rights. For African countries, the Chinese presence may seem more desirable.

A similar situation applies to Latin America. This traditional field of soft power expansion and the US sphere of influence also becomes the focus of the PRC. As in the case of Africa, Latin America can see Chinese people with their apparent lack of ideology in political and business contacts as more attractive partners than Americans.

This apparent futility of Chinese soft power is probably the strongest feature in dealing with Africa and Latin America. However, this is an apparent feature. In fact, the Chinese are guided in their actions by a specific ideology and set of values flowing above all from the Confucian philosophy and tradition of communist thought in the Mao edition. Receiving Chinese soft power as nonideological is the same mistake as the perception by West European intellectuals of the Cold War of Marxism-Leninism as pure science. The power of the PRC stems from the fact that the lack of experience in contact with the socialist state and its methods of action causes the helplessness of those who are subjected to the projection of Chinese soft power.

An additional important element of Chinese soft power is the so-called Chinese Dream. It is the concept of an individual in society. A vision of a man who is becoming a competition for American Dream and European Dream. A vision that can be particularly attractive to Asian countries. A vision that can also find fertile ground in European countries that have been in the area of ideological emptiness through secularization and a departure from Christian values. Chinese Dream proposes to rediscover a man in the community and give life a deeper meaning than American consumerism or a European approach to the protection of the state.

American, European and Chinese Dream

Chinese Dream⁵ as a term was popularized after 2013. It describes a set of personal and national ethos and ideals in China and the Government of China. The term is used today by both journalists and members of the Chinese government, and even social activists to describe the role and position of the individual in the new Chinese society.⁶ In addition, it is used to describe the goals that are set before the Chinese people.

The assumptions of Chinese Dream are based on the ethos of work combined with a balanced lifestyle, sustainable development, and national renewal. It is a vision that grows from two roots. On the one hand, from Chinese socialism, which develops in a direction different from European socialism, or so-called American progressivism. On the other hand, the Confucian tradition, which puts man within the community, but also in the right place in its hierarchy. Such a basis of Chinese Dream makes it different from European or American.

By juxtaposing the Chinese Dream with the American Dream, there are clear differences in the approach to the individual and the place of the individual in the community. The American ideal is based on individualism, competitiveness and elitism in a liberal way. In the long run it may lead to the alienation of an individual in society. The self-dependent

⁵ See more: H Wang, *The Chinese Dream: The Rise of the World's Largest Middle Class and What It Means to You*, Best Seller Publishing, 2010.

⁶ *The Chinese Dream infuses Socialism with Chinese characteristics with New Energy*, <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/the-chinese-dream-infuses-socialism-with-chinese-characteristics-with-new-energy/> [10.09.2018]

unit faces a hostile and competitive environment composed of the same entities. Success is to become better (usually richer than others). The paradox of the American Dream is that its fulfillment will become at the same time an exclusion from the community and a symbol of the aspirations of it. Exclusion consists in removing from the race for material success. This materialistic perspective is also something very characteristic of the American Dream. The implementation of the superior purpose is connected only with matter. There is no place for transcendence here. No space for a deeper community. Even more, lack of recognition for the community as a co-responsible for the success of the individual. The Americans believe that they owe nothing to the community. It is worth recalling that the basic community is a family that shapes a person from its very early age and provides traits that then largely determine success.

In this juxtaposition, Chinese Dream falls anti-individualistically. What the law of work ethos and achieve personal success just like in the American ideal and here is present. On the other hand, the Confucian root does not allow detaching a man from the community and its place in it. This in turn is a supporting element alongside the material psychological development of man. Chinese Dream does not imply alienation. On the contrary, it assumes achieving successes within the community. What should be emphasized, not a formal association, but a real community. Sustainable development can not only mean the development of the individual at the expense of the community, or material at the psychological expense.

Comparing the Chinese ideal with the European Dream, we see a weakening of the position of the individual as capable of achieving independent success. In contrast to the

American ideal, the European ideal comes from social liberal assumptions. It is the welfare state that is to provide individuals with safe development. The key words here are the state and security. The European Dream is based on the assumptions of a strong state that carries out various social functions. An individual does not have to work for what he receives. A wide redistribution means that you do not have to get the necessary things to develop. This largely kills the work ethos. On the other hand, social security means that the life of the masses becomes easier and safer. Indicators of good life have favored Europe over the years compared to the USA. The problem is that the European way also kills communities. This state, a formal association, is to replace the concentric community. Units cease to be responsible one after another. This is one of the paradoxes of the social state and redistribution. In a situation where the state provides social care, people remove the obligation to help others. As a result, empathy disappears. People are moving away from each other. The basic communities and family change into what it should be - a nuclear family appears instead of the former community of many generations. In this specific way, as in the case of the American ideal, the egalitarian societies of Europe become a collection of isolated individuals.

In comparison with Chinese Dream, the European ideal is anti-community. The Chinese ideal is based on building community and supporting the ethos of work. The specific Chinese socialism, unlike the European one, did not renounce the work ethos and did not introduce in its place the need to build broad redistribution systems. The lack of redistribution, however, causes the need to look for support in the community. The state does not take responsibility from individuals for the communities in which they live. Although

this thinking stems from far eastern ideals of collectivism, they can also find a fertile ground in Europe, which is starting to look for an alternative to the social liberal social order built continuously since the end of the Second World War.

Summary

The OBOR initiative becomes not only a transmission belt for PRC investments. It also becomes a tool for projection of Chinese soft power. The latter, due to its (apparently) non-ideological character, may prove to be particularly attractive for entities in Africa (so far exposed to the European soft power) and Latin America (hitherto exposed to the American soft power).

An especially interesting element of the Chinese soft power is the proposal contained in Chinese Dream. This ideal of life based on the ethos of work and individual success, and at the same time maintaining the relationship with the community may turn out to be attractive in the future not only for the Asian countries, but also for the crisis-laden European values.

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