

The geostrategic choke points of Bosphorus and Dardanelles in the context of the New Silk Road

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Abstract

The modern realm of international business has grown to be more and more dependent on the international state of affairs, thus, geopolitics have become an indispensable tool for predicting and evaluating future risks or for identifying opportunities. Because the center of global economic power is slowly but surely shifting from the western countries to Asia, the geopolitical moves of Asian countries on „The Grand Chessboard” need to be studied and analyzed, especially the ones of the leading actor, China. Being the only pretender to overthrow the US from the position of the biggest world economy, China wants to establish new international economic relations, implicitly new trade routes, through which it can secure a supply line for the sale of its products. Thus, China proposes a New Silk Road which is dependent on a series of maritime choke points, amongst which are the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits or better known as the Turkish Straits. This paper studies the future geopolitical and economic implications for this choke point if the New Silk Road comes in existence. The study utilises maritime economic data and geopolitical theory in order to assess the future risks and opportunities that derive from the establishment of the New Silk Road. The analyze results, indicates that the Turkish choke point will change the geopolitics and economics of Eastern Europe. The importance of this is that the countries that are directly linked with the New Silk Road can maximize their advantages in the long run.

Keywords: geopolitics, geostrategy, choke points, Bosphorus, Dardanelles, Silk Road

JEL Classification: F17, F51, F53

Introduction

The importance of the original Silk Road (2nd century BC- 18th century CE) for Asia and Europe is undeniable. The network of trading routes, established by land and by sea, spanned from the east coast of China to the southern parts of Europe, connecting along the way southern Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant region and East Africa. For the greatest part it was the most lucrative trade route of Asia, facilitating business for all the actors participating in the trade. Thus, the security

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of the trading routes became of utmost importance and geopolitics started playing a more relevant role for the existence of the network. Different geographical locations started to present strategic advantages that could be easily exploited in order to negotiate better deals or different favors from geopolitical actors, thus, geostrategy was implied to determine how to deal with those areas of interest. The most important positions that needed to be secured were the choke points, land or maritime, which could destabilize the continuous flow of goods. One of those choke points is the pair of Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits that act like a gateway to and from the Black Sea. Given their geographical position and their geostrategic usage they represent a generator of wealth for the state that controls them.

This article will analyze the new geopolitical and economical utility of the pair of straits when and if the New Silk Road will be implemented. Firstly we will define the basic notions of geopolitics, geostrategy and geostrategic choke point and how they influence the economic environment in order to be able to give a fair prediction. In the second part, we will present the project of the New Silk Road and the implications that this might have on Europe. The study continues with maritime data to further establish the importance of the two straits and to offer a clearer picture of their position in the geopolitical and economic system of Eastern Europe.

By combining empirical data with geopolitical theory, the study uses a qualitative method to reach conclusions regarding the risks and opportunities that the choke point of Bosphorus and Dardanelles presents in the context of the New Silk Road.

1. General notions

In order to have a comprehensive understanding of the economical and geopolitical impact the New Silk Road will have, a few basic notions need to be defined.

Geopolitics is a term that is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as being „a study of the influence of such factors as geography, economics, and demography on the politics and especially the foreign policy of a state”. The Cambridge Dictionary define it as: „the study of the way a country’s size, position, etc. influences its power and its relationships with other countries”. Famous geopoliticians like Rudolph Kjellen, defined it as being „the theory of the state as a geographical organism or phenomenon in space”. Karl Houshofer „geopolitics is the new national science of the state,...a doctrine on the spatial determinism of all political processes, based on the broad foundations of geography, especially of

political geography". Having said all of this, it is safe to define geopolitics as being the science that studies the interactions between states on the given geographical territory.

Geostrategy is a concept used for the first time by the Italian general Giacomo Durando in the mid 1800s. It is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as „a branch of geopolitics that studies strategy". Because it is a concept that is not firmly grounded, different remarkable geopoliticians use slightly different definitions. Thus, we have Zbigniew Brzezinski defining it as „long term management of geopolitical interests", Hervé Coutau – Bégarie that defined as „the theoretical attempt to notice the simultaneous conduct of operations in combat theaters so far separated" or the Romanian geopolitician Silviu Neagu who states that „if geopolitics tells us what has to be won and conserved, geostrategy tells us if this is possible, how and with what".

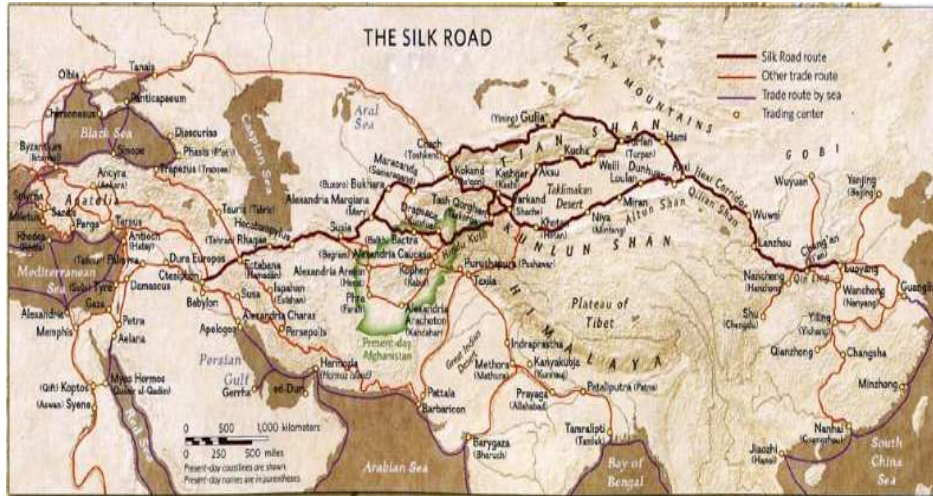
The geostrategic choke point is a concept that is not firmly anchored in the scientific literature, thus, its definitions have different variations, but in general, it refers to „a geographical area with strategically-military valences, whose possession gives control over communication routes of any kind within a significant geographic region."

2. The Silk Road

Trading routes were established by trading caravans that used the shortest safe route in order to fulfill their obligations to their business partners. Long term usage of these routes has generated prosperity and long lasting business ties along the way. The most lucrative network of trading routes in history was the Silk Road, which was constituted of a series of land and water routes that stretched from the eastern trading centers of China to the southern part of Europe, connecting along the way: the south of Asia, the Persian and Levant regions, the Arabian Peninsula and the east of Africa. This network of trading routes was in place from the 2nd century BCE up until the fall of the Safavid Empire in the 18th century CE. This network was comprised of three main land routes and a number of sea routes that reach as far as the south of Europe.

In 2013, the President of China, Xi Jinping, announced his most ambitious project up to date, a project that will demonstrate China's geopolitical and economic power in its neighboring countries and the whole of Asia. This project was called One Belt, One Road (OBOR) or more commonly known as the New Silk Road.

Figure 1. Map of the Silk Road



Source: <https://safari.ro/silk-road/>

Many have argued that this is just a way of asserting the geopolitical power of China in the new century, but, if seen only through this type of lenses, its economical reasoning becomes void and null. The total investments are estimated at 900 billion dollars from the Chinese Government.

Figure 2. Map of the New Silk Road proposed by President Xi Jinping



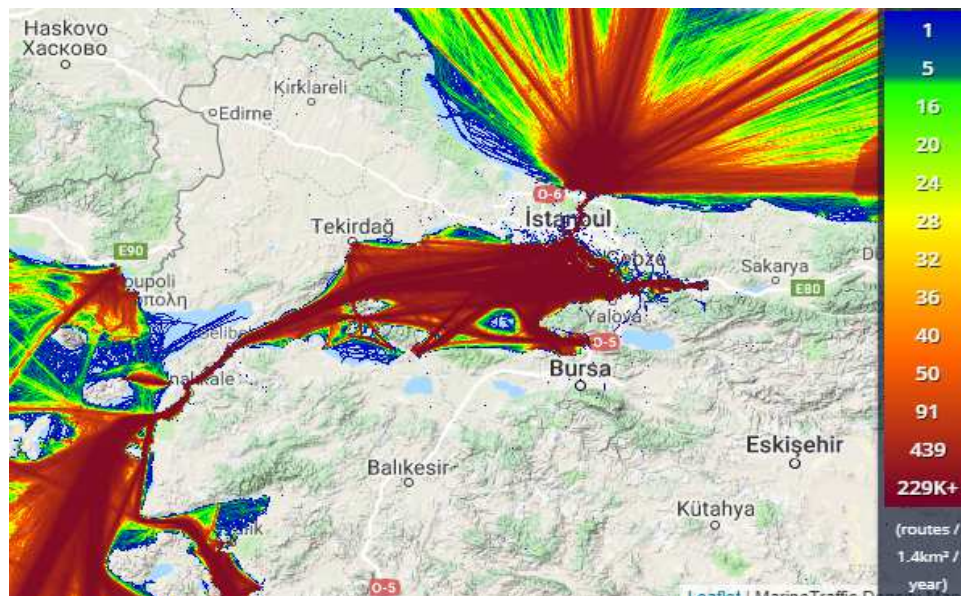
Source: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/understanding-belt-and-road-initiative>

This new network of trading routes, represent a way in which China expands its economic ties in all Asia and in Europe. The main gateway of entering in Europe will be Turkey through the Bosphorus Strait by land rout, shifting the main maritime trading route in the port of Venice. In this context, the choke point of Bosphorus and Dardanelles lose a part of their geostrategic relevance in the maritime sphere and gain a more important role in land transport. Thus it is of vital importance to understand the geostrategic and economic value of the choke point in today's geopolitical environment.

3. Data regarding maritime use of Bosphorus and Dardanelles

This is one of the most important choke points in Europe. The importance of this pair of straits was proven time and time again. For the moment, this choke point functions under the rules of the Montreux Treaty of 1936 and it still retains the same geopolitical importance it once did. This two straits connect the Black Sea to the Planetary Ocean, thus the maritime traffic is one of the biggest in the world. The density of the ship traffic through the straits, proves the importance that this region has for the world economy.

Figure 3. Maritime traffic density through the Turkish Straits

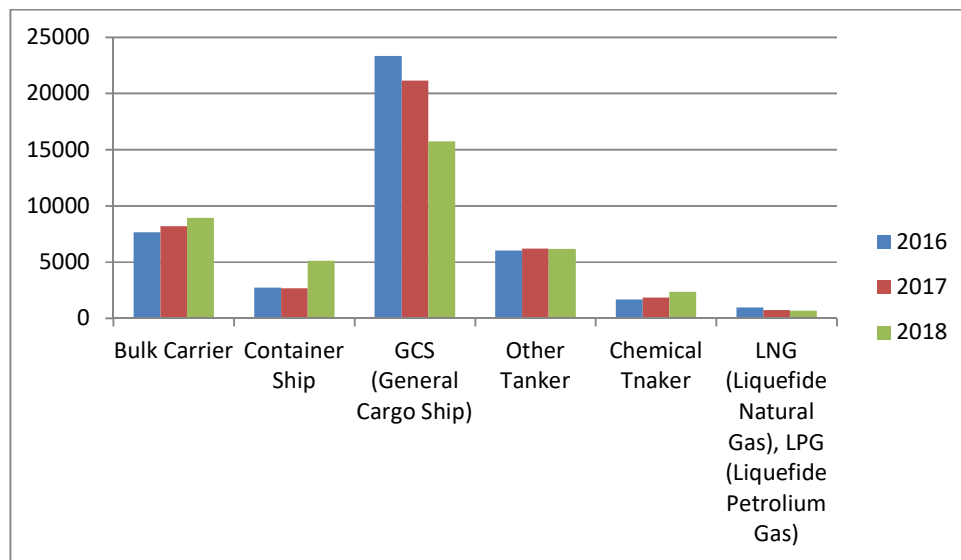


Source: <https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/home/centerx:25.7/centery:40.8/zoom:7>

The number of ships that pass through on an annual basis is relatively constant, which proves a permanent high degree of importance for the region and for the world at large. The main reason that this pair of straits is so used is that it is the shortest maritime route to the economical hart of Europe. The route continues through the Black Sea, the Danube-Black Sea Cannel, the Danube and the all the important cities along the Danube. This route is an alternative for the goods coming in from Asia, to the Mediteranean Sea-Gibraltar Strait-Dutch ports (Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Antwerp etc.) route, witch shortens the delivery time with approximately 13 days.

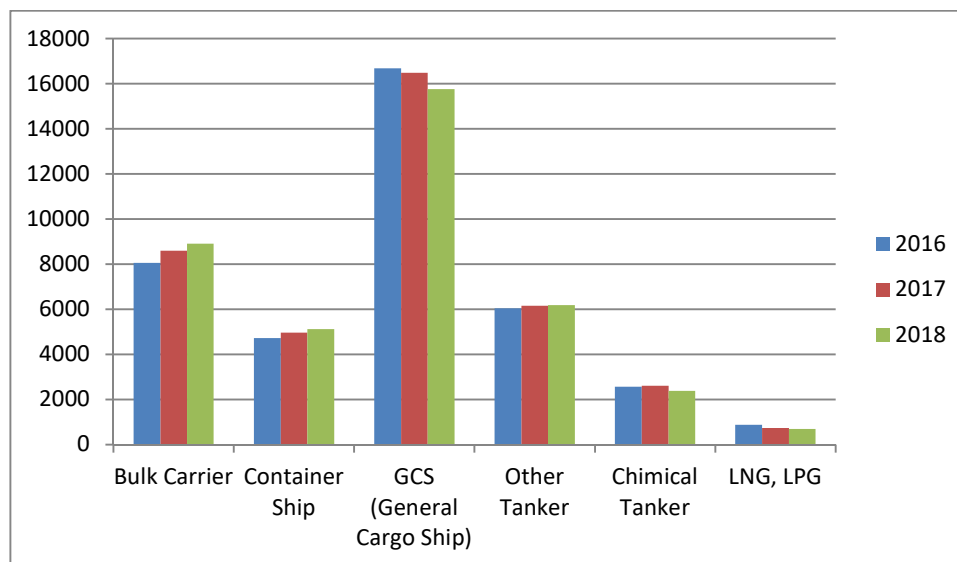
Looking at the official statistics of the maritime traffic through the Turkish Straits for the years 2016, 2017 and 2018 we can observe small differences but nothing major, fact that reinforces the importance of this choke point.

Figure 4. The evolution of maritime traffic through the Bosphorus Strait in the last 3 years, separated by the main types of ship



Source: made by the author based on the official statistics found in https://atlantis.udhb.gov.tr/istatistik/gemi_gecis.aspx

Figure 5. The evolution of maritime traffic through the Dardanelles Strait in the last 3 years, separated by the main types of ship



Source: made by the author based on the official statistics found in https://atlantis.udhb.gov.tr/istatistik/gemi_gecis.aspx

The official statistic, show us almost a constant traffic amongst the most important type of ships. The total number of ships that passed through the Bosphorus in 2016 was 42553, in 2017 was 42978, in 2018 was 41103 and the strait of Dardanelles register similar numbers, in 2016 a number of 44035 ships, in 2017 a number of 44615 and in 2018 a number of 43999 ships. The number of ships that use this pair of straits, constitutes proof for the importance of this choke point.

4. Analyze of the risks and opportunities that the New Silk Road present

Given the economic force and the geopolitical drive of China, the New Silk Road will be implemented in the coming years. President Erdogan of Turkey is making the necessary projects of infrastructure agreed upon in order to facilitate road traffic across the Bosphorus strait. In Europe there are a number of countries that will have to invest substantial amounts of money in order to create a continuous highway connecting Beijing to Moscow and then Western Europe. This highway will run across Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, the Baltic Stats and then the Western countries. Because the New Silk

Road, proposes a new final European port for Asian goods, that of Venice, the maritime traffic that would have gone through the Turkish Straits is now diverted and it will be replaced in a good proportion by the road highway that will be built. Given this context, it is wise, in order to have a clear picture of the changes that will take place when the New Silk Road will be implemented, to use a SWOT analyze to assess the future geopolitical power of the Turkish Straits.

Table 1. SWOT analyze of the future geopolitical and economic power of the Turkish Straits

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better diplomatic and economic relation between European and Asian Countries; • Faster goods transport between the two continents; • Reduced delay between in economic development for the two continents; • A partnership that can rival with the economy of the USA; • Long term and sustainable economic development of the two continents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diplomatic disputes can destabilize the whole flux of goods transport; • If the highway infrastructure is affected, that could lead to the delays which means higher costs; • Continues attention from China to the European market can drive a economic wedge between the USA and the two continents.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further development of this network can give small countries fast access to countries with bigger markets; • Additional economic development for the countries along the way on the basis of the high number of transiting or delivering goods; • The possibility of creating logistical centers in some countries that could coordinate to a degree the international road traffic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diminished maritime traffic can affect economically the countries of the Black Sea; • A shift in the international economic structure of power, that could render this investment unprofitable for China (the biggest investor in the New Silk Road); • High cost of maintenance can raise the cost of transport.

Source: Made by the author

Conclusions

The nature of the economy is constantly shifting creating new poles of power and with them, the geopolitical power shifts as well. China is steadily becoming the biggest economy in the world and thus it is seeking new markets to sell its goods.

This necessity is generating investment in the New Silk Road. Better economic relations with Europe translate into long term and sustainable development for the Chinese State and the elimination of the dependence on the US market. Thus, this investment must be seen as a way for China to guarantee its future demand for its products, not as a benevolent partnership.

The trading routs that we have between the two continents at the moment are heavily dependent on geographical features. The economic belt that the New Silk Road is proposing bypasses the inconveniences and limits of geography and establishes a route with a high degree of control. One of the focal points of the New Silk Road is the Bosphorus Strait that will be crossed by a highway bridge that will absorb a great proportion of the international cargo from the maritime routs. The key factor that reinforces the Turkish Straits as a major geostrategic choke point is the constant high maritime traffic. In the pan of the New Silk Road, the maritime routes no longer use the two straits as a main gateway to the heart of Europe because it shifts the maritime traffic to the port of Venice, Italy.

In this context the Turkish Straits will suffer small change to its geoeconomic, geostrategic and geopolitic relevance. Its importance will be focused more as a land choke point then as a maritime one, even though it will still retain the position of the gateway to the Black Sea.

This paper has proven that the choke point of the Turkish Straits will change the perspective in which we see the geopolitical and economic spheres of power in the relations between Asia and Europe when the New Silk Road will be fully implemented. In order to do so, we have used as a snapshot, the empirical data regarding the density and of the maritime traffic of the last few years through the Turkish Straits and geopolitical theory. We used a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to assess the future impact of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits.

The importance of the work consists in future perspectives for economic development and for geopolitical planning. Given the circumstance of the New Silk Road, the big opportunity of establishing economic and diplomatic relations at a new level with the countries that are in the driving position in future world geopolitics, must be taken advantage of in order to better develop the economy of that small countries. The New Silk Road gives fast access to countries that totals to more then 2,3 billion consumers and it restructures the main maritime routs between Asia and Europe. In this context it is very important to understand the changes that will take place in the maritime system and to adjust for the change, especially the choke points that control maritime traffic in key points, one of which is the Turkish Straits.

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