

Summary Booklet of the PhD dissertation
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The „One Belt, One Road” and the Chinese geopolitical thinking



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I. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, we are witnessing the emergence of a new world order. The international political news of recent years has been about the frictions, trade wars, conflicts between the USA and a thriving China, as well as the Eurasian era that is replacing the Atlantic era, and at the time of writing my doctoral thesis, even the coronavirus pandemic.

We know the Western narrative well, but little is known about the Chinese mindset and geopolitical thinking on the subject. With China's political and economic consolidation, there is an increasing number of studies on China's international politics, border problems, island disputes in the South China Sea and “*economic colonisation*” under the “*One Belt, One Road*” initiative, all of which are highlights of Chinese geopolitics. However, most authors start their studies without the knowledge of the Chinese language the culture, using Western thinking, terminology and definitions to explore a country with a 5000-year-old culture and a geographical, historical and cultural background that is completely different from that of the West. As “*One Belt, One Road*” is a Chinese initiative, it is definitely worth looking at it through Chinese “*eyes*” to understand the strategy behind it.

A significant number of Hungarian China experts, without any knowledge of Chinese, dissect China's geopolitical aspirations on the basis of American and Western European research and articles hostile to China. In my research, I try to compensate for the above-mentioned professional shortcomings by using my knowledge of the Chinese language, the culture, local knowledge and thinking, acquired during my 12-year stay in China. I graduated with honours from one of China's leading universities, Fudan University in Shanghai in Chinese, and as Consul General of Hungary in Shanghai, and later as Senior Advisor to the Governor of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank, I was able to witness the development and evolution of the “*One Belt, One Road*” initiative in China. Utilising my experience, knowledge and research, and drawing on Chinese sources, my thesis seeks to bring a new geostrategic approach to the current world of research on China in Hungary, and to bring new perspectives to the research results so far, a part of which I will examine a Chinese initiative and Chinese geopolitical thinking not only from the perspective of the great colonialist and warring Western states, but will also examine one of the greatest multilateral cooperation of the 21st century from the perspective of a non-subjugating party with a 5,000-year-old culture based on Confucian teachings.

I based my research mainly on Chinese literature, but of course I did not neglect the work of Western and Hungarian researchers. In my PhD thesis, I will first present the announcement of the “*One Belt, One Road*” and its foundations, then I will examine the historical antecedents of the Chinese initiative and its Hungarian implications, as well as the roots of Chinese geopolitical thinking and its development, which will be the basis for understanding the individual political aspirations of the “*One Belt, One Road*”.

II. OBJECTIVES

This dissertation aims to offer a detailed description of the Chinese initiative "*One Belt, One Road*". A subject that has not been explored in a comprehensive book or doctoral thesis in Hungarian so far, although we can read almost every day about this Chinese initiative in the daily press. It also aims to provide an insight into Chinese geopolitical thinking and to examine Chinese international cooperation from a "*Chinese perspective*", comparing it to the Western understanding of it.

I will address the following hypotheses in the course of the research, and along these lines I will present the historical and philosophical background, development, current situation and future directions of the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative:

- 1. "*One Belt, One Road*" is not a spontaneous, sudden, large-scale initiative, but the next step in a deliberate, pre-planned and carefully constructed strategy that is typical of the Chinese.**
- 2. Behind the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative lies the Chinese geopolitical thinking, which stems from the Chinese ancient sages and strategists.**
- 3. The "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative is not an aggressive geopolitical ambition, nor is it intended to make China a hegemonic power-seeking autocracy. Rather, it is a tool for playing the "*weiqi*" game with the USA.**
- 4. China's "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative is more a source of opportunity than a source of danger. It's not a threat to everyone, it's just that the West fears its power, which is why it demonises China through negative communication.**

III. RESEARCH METHODS

The "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative in China is considered to be a recent topic, with the People's Republic of China announcing global cooperation in 2015. Due to the nature of the research topic, the deductive proof of the hypotheses in my study is based on primary and secondary analyses.

1. Primer analysis

From my previous studies and work in China, I was able to do primary research on the topic. During my undergraduate studies at Fudan University in Shanghai and my work as Consul General of Hungary in Shanghai and Senior Advisor to the Governor of the Magyar Nemzeti Bank, I had the opportunity to personally experience the birth and development of the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative.

2. Secondary analysis

After preliminary mapping and processing of books and studies and hypotheses, I conducted further secondary research in China and Hungary. I also studied available government documents, such as government materials published on the official website of the *"One Belt, One Road"* initiative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economy and the Chinese government, and relevant databases and statistics published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Economy and the Central Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, to ensure that the thesis takes into account the official position of the Chinese government.

For the secondary analysis, due to the recent nature of the research topic, I also used studies from Chinese, American, European and Hungarian think tanks, as well as news and articles from professional journals and various newspapers, both printed and on-line.

IV. SUMMARY OF RESULTS

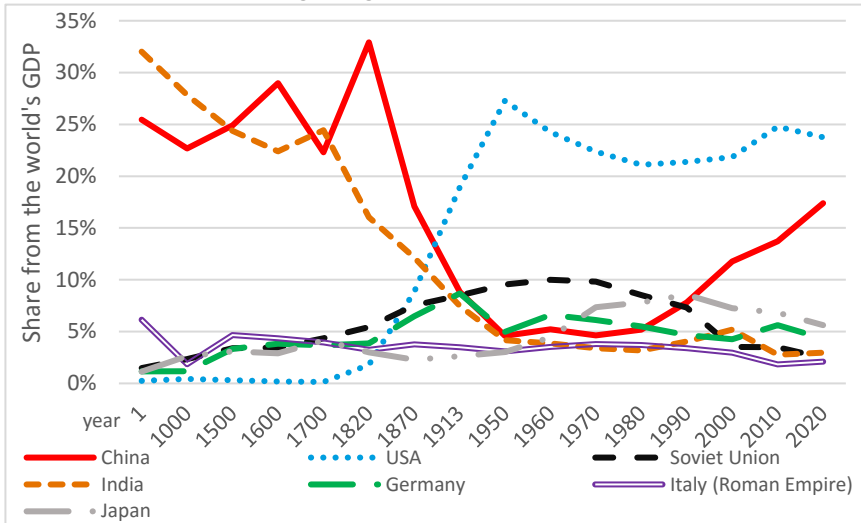
To conclude my research and draw conclusions, I will present my research findings through the hypotheses I set out at the beginning of my thesis, and then I will draw the final conclusion:

1. *"One Belt, One Road"* is not a spontaneous, sudden, large-scale initiative, but the next step in a deliberate, pre-planned and carefully constructed strategy that is typical of the Chinese.

I will answer my hypothesis through the chapters of the dissertation on the historical, political and economic background of the *"One Belt, One Road"* initiative. From a historical perspective, I show that China has consistently led the world economy throughout its 5,000-year history, accounting for 20-30% of global GDP, until the violent rise of the Western countries (chart 1.). The hundred years following the Opium War brought China decline and chaos, and it was not until 1949 that a strong government was able to reunite the European-sized country. The People's Republic of China came into being at the start of the US-Soviet Cold War, which immediately presented China with a choice. However, China soon chose a third way and started to balance the world powers. While it initially sided with the Soviet Union for ideological reasons, it later distanced itself from the Soviet superpower for geopolitical reasons and began to build close ties with the USA. After the Mao era, China's rise was initially based not on international relations but on a policy of *"reform and opening up"*. Since 1978, China has been struggling to regain its rightful place in the world economy. Under the guidance of Deng Xiaoping, economic reforms and the policy of opening up were carried out with constant study of the situation, modestly, in the background, but with diligent work. *"In the spirit of the 24-Character Strategy"*, they did not seek hegemonic domination, they did their job and waited for the right moment.

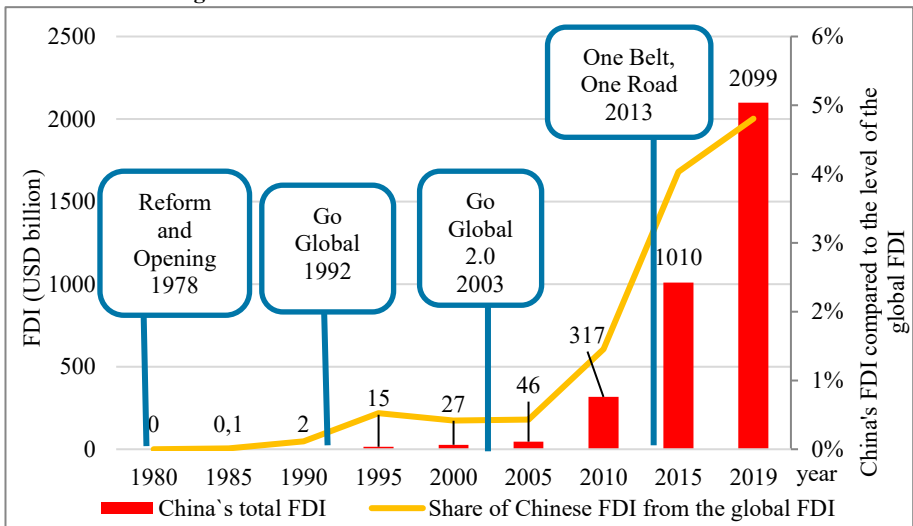
Having strengthened its economy, built up its infrastructure network and established close international ties since the launch of its *"reform and opening up"* policy, China was already one of the leading economic powers at the time of the 2008 global economic crisis. The global economic downturn, which started in the USA, caused a major economic downturn around the world, but China dealt with it successfully and the continued economic growth of the Far Eastern giant helped the world to recover. Prior to the crisis, the relative power of the USA in the world economy had already begun to decline and China was growing stronger.

Chart 1. The development of the world economy from the beginning of the Common Era until 2020



Source: Edited by the author based on the database of Angus Maddison’s “*Historical Statistics of the World Economy*”

Chart 2. Changes in China’s outward direct investment between 1980 and 2019



Source: Edited by the author based on the statistics from the World Investment Report issued by the UN between 1990 and 2019

In 2008, during the global economic crisis, Xi Jinping was already in China's leadership as Vice President of the People's Republic of China, and from 2013 he led China as the Head of State of the People's Republic of China, as Party leader and Chairman of the Central Military Commission. In 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative, which was launched at the right time and in the right political and economic environment, building on China's booming economy of nearly 40 years, bringing together multilateral relationships around the world, and based on a well-developed Chinese infrastructure (chart 2.).

So, my hypothesis that "*One Belt, One Road*" is not a sudden, large-scale initiative, but the next step in a deliberate, pre-planned and carefully constructed strategy that is a Chinese characteristic. Over the past forty years, China has built its "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative around a careful strategy, which is more of a grand vision than a concrete action plan. This grand strategy encapsulates the domestic and foreign policy of the past forty years, starting a new era not only in China or the region, but in the world.

2. Behind the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative lies the Chinese geopolitical thinking, which stems from the Chinese ancient sages and strategists.

I sought to answer my second hypothesis in the chapter of the dissertation on the introduction and exploration of Chinese geopolitical thinking. The international advance of China is an increasingly popular topic in Western literature, but most researchers without any knowledge of Chinese rely on Western, Anglo-Saxon books and works, or on English translations of Chinese works. In Hungary, too, most of the translated works are made from English translations, which means that translators continue to translate Chinese texts into Hungarian from a third language without any knowledge of Chinese culture and mindset.

In my research, I thought it was important to investigate whether the teachings of ancient sages and strategists have influenced contemporary Chinese culture and foreign policy, and whether geopolitical thinking exists in China at all. In the chapter on Chinese geopolitical thinking, I have explained in detail the systematic development of Chinese geopolitics as systematized by Chinese scholars, supported by quotations from Chinese ancient works, and also compared to the Western geopolitical thinking (table 1.). My research revealed that Chinese strategists laid the foundations for Chinese geopolitical thinking as early as 1000 BC, which was later developed by famous ancient Chinese philosophers and strategists and passed down to posterity in written form.

The message of Chinese ancient works and the strategies they describe are still useful in international politics today. As I have outlined, Chinese leaders are applying strategies that go back thousands of years, including the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative, but traces of ancient teachings can also be found in the entire foreign policy. Chinese foreign policy is strongly influenced by the emphasis placed by strategists and sages on peaceful coexistence based on hierarchy, mutual respect, harmony and cooperation based on mutual benefit, which have become the basic tenets of the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative, but also of foreign policy as a whole.

My hypothesis that behind the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative lies the Chinese geopolitical thinking, which stems from the Chinese ancient sages and strategists, has been proven to be well-founded.

Table 1. Comparing the development of the Chinese and Western geopolitics

Comparing the development of the Chinese and Western geopolitics		
	Western	Chinese
The beginning of geopolitical thinking	Aristotle (BC 383-322)	Xia and Shang dynasty (BC 2070 – BC 1046)
Founder of the geopolitical thinking	philosophers	strategists
Spatiality	global macro-geopolitics	regional micro-geopolitics
Characteristic of countries	small countries	extensive emperor with natural boundaries
Basics of the relationship system	hostile	peaceful
Factors	geographical	political
Goals	expansion	border protection
The development of geopolitics as a science	early 1990s	1980s
Main directions	Geopolitics	Geostrategy

Source: Edited by the author based on secondary research

3. The "One Belt, One Road" initiative is not an aggressive geopolitical ambition, nor is it intended to make China a hegemonic power-seeking autocracy. Rather, it is a tool for playing the "weiqi" game with the USA.

On various platforms, Chinese political leaders are keen to emphasise that the "One Belt, One Road" initiative is not a geopolitical ambition, but a strategy to promote sustainable development in the world. However, Western analysts are all writing about a geopolitical threat.

I summarised China's view of the world by reviewing Chinese history and culture, and the development of Chinese geopolitical thinking. Western political leaders, American and Western experts emphasise the geopolitical dangers of China's rise and the threats of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, but the West also often discusses China's alleged internal turmoil, the bursting of the Chinese "economic bubble" and also China's human rights situation. These stem mainly from Western prejudices and the lack of knowledge.

China has shown throughout history that it envisioned a China-centred world order in which it expected to be respected, but at the same time China also respected other countries according to the hierarchy it set. China had no colonial or conquering ideas and did not want to convert anyone, China "conquered" in the past with its achievements. China did not

interfere in the internal politics of countries, nor did it impose the model of the Chinese imperial system on other countries. The aim was peaceful coexistence, international stability and thus the protection of China's borders and the safeguarding of internal order. This also shows that although China played a very important role in the world economy, accounting for 25–30 % of the world's GDP until the mid-19th century, it did not use this for hegemonic domination, but instead organised its environment into a hierarchical order.

The same ideas are true for China even today, operating according to ancient Chinese teachings, unspokenly based on the yin and yang balance of the world, China still has no colonialist aims, does not interfere in the internal politics of others, and does not try to impose its own model on others, even though more and more people are writing on this subject. China wants to regain its former role, its rightful place in the world economy, which it held until the advent of the westerners, in peaceful and harmonious cooperation. This is the “*Chinese dream*”, the “*Chinese rebirth*”.

China's ambitions as a great power do not include world domination, but further growth, and to make China known to the world, as we have seen throughout history.

China's goal is to play a polarizing role in a multipolar world order, which, according to traditional Chinese thinking, corresponds to restoring the yin and yang balance from “*the Book of Changes*”, i.e. to achieve a state in which the world is not ruled by a single superpower, but in which nations share responsibility for the sustainable development of the world.

Thus, China has not launched a geopolitical battle against America, nor is it playing on the world's chessboard in the Western sense, according to the rules of international chess, but is playing a game of “*weiqi*” according to the Chinese way of thinking. China no longer wants to be a pawn in the game – and rightly so, given its role in the world economy – but sees itself as a player, or even as the designer of the weqi board.

My third hypothesis, that the “*One Belt, One Road*” initiative is not an aggressive geopolitical aspiration, nor is it intended to make China a hegemonic power-seeking autocracy, but rather a tool of the “*weiqi*” game with the USA, can also be confirmed based the findings of my research.

4. China's “*One Belt, One Road*” initiative is more a source of opportunity than a source of danger. It's not a threat to everyone, it's just that the West fears its power, which is why it demonises China through negative communication.

I seek to answer the questions raised by the above hypothesis in my international outlook, in the context of which I examine the relationship between China and the other great powers of the current world order.

After World War 2, a bipolar world order emerged, with the United States and the Soviet Union as two superpowers. The new China was founded in such an international context under the leadership of Mao Zedong, who, drawing on the geopolitical history of China in “*The Story of the Three Kingdoms*”, had from the outset envisaged a Washington-Beijing-Moscow triangle.

The West welcomed China's opening up and took advantage of the opportunity for economic cooperation, which China also saw as necessary for its further development.

It was only in the 21st century that the West realised that with the rise of China, it is slowly becoming a competitor rather than a partner.

China is becoming increasingly active in different regions, including the CEE region. In countries that were previously heavily influenced by Western countries, China is able to build increasingly better relations through trade, tourism and other economic cooperation. Many countries are opening up to the East, a trend also observed in the region of Hungary. Some Western circles are most concerned about China-CEE cooperation and treat the CEE region as China's Trojan Horse.

Following the rapid rise of China, the West now sees China as a competitor in all areas and fears a reduction of its influence in certain regions, and therefore increasingly criticises China through the media and tries to demonise the Far Eastern country with statements such as China wants to divide the European Union through China-CEE cooperation, China is engaging in debt-trap diplomacy, etc. Again, and again, the events in Hong Kong, the human rights issue, the Taiwan issue, the situation of the Uighurs and Tibetans and the issues of religious persecution are highlighted.

The "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative can be seen as an economic threat, but it is also an opportunity. Western European countries have also expressed ongoing concerns about China's advance, yet most Western European countries have joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as founding members. While the United States sees the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative as an explicit threat, Western European countries, as partners of the USA, have consistently been harshly critical of China, but still seek close economic cooperation with Beijing. Based on this, they indeed see the opportunities in the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative not only the threat.

My fourth hypothesis is that China's "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative is more a source of opportunities than a source of danger, or that the OBOR is not a threat to everyone, but it is only the West who fears its power and therefore demonises China with negative communication, the second of which is definitely valid, and there may be doubt about the dangers of the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative, especially after having seen the tactics of the Chinese ancient strategists. It is certain that China has so far defined the "*One Belt, One Road*" initiative with peaceful intentions and on the basis of mutual benefit, but it is a question of the future to what extent China will build up its great power status later on, and whether it will abuse the opportunity provided by the initiative.

By the 21st century, the Earth's economic centre of gravity is shifting steadily towards Asia. The 500-year period of the "*Atlantic era*" is slowly coming to an end, and a new era, the Eurasian era, is beginning, with China playing a major role.

It is important to observe the emergence of the new world order from a different perspective, so that we can assess developments in a different way. What had been seen as a threat so far may now be an opportunity. The world order is changing, we need to prepare for the new era, we need to know the players, and that is why it is worthwhile for everyone to study the teachings of the ancient Chinese sages and strategists.

My basic aim was to present the Chinese point of view as well, in contrast to the one-sided Anglo-Saxon literature, following Seneca's saying that "*let the other side be heard*", and thus find a kind of middle ground.

LIST OF OWN PUBLICATIONS ON THE TOPIC

1. **SCIMAGO Q4:** Horváth, Levente (2020). The Geopolitical Role of China in the CEE Region. *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations*, Vol. 6, No. 2, August/September 2020. China, Taiwan: Institute of China and Asia-Pacific Studies, National Sun Yat-sen University. pp. 617-651.
2. **Category „A”, national scientific journal:** Horváth, Levente (2020). A kínai geopolitikai gondolkodásmód és az „Egy övezet, egy út” kezdeményezés [The Chinese geopolitical thinking and the One Belt, One Road]. *Geopolitikai Szemle*, 2020/1., II. évfolyam 1. szám. Magyarország, Szeged: Egyesület Közép-Európa Kutatására. 203-220. oldal
3. **Category „A”, national scientific journal:** Horváth, Levente (2020). Kína geopolitikai szerepe a kelet-közép-európai régióban [China's geopolitical role in the Central and Eastern European region]. *Geopolitikai Szemle*, 2020/2., II. évfolyam 2. szám. Magyarország, Szeged: Egyesület Közép-Európa Kutatására. 189-210. oldal
4. **Category „A”, national scientific journal:** Horváth, Levente (2020). Magyar–kínai pénzügyi kapcsolatok a kezdetektől napjainkig [Sino-Hungarian financial relations from the beginning to the present day]. *Külügyi Szemle*, XIX. évfolyam, 2. szám. Hungary, Budapest: Külügyi és Külgazdasági Intézet. 76-100. oldal.
5. Horváth, Levente (2018). A kínai geopolitika fejlődése [Developing of the Chinese geopolitics]. In: *Kína, Indonézia és Vietnam – Geopolitikai összefüggések a 21. században* (szerk. Moldicz Csaba). Magyarország, Budapest: Keleti Üzleti Akadémiai Központ, Budapesti Gazdasági Egyetem. 13-30. oldal.
6. Horváth, Levente (2018). Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) by China in the world and in the Central-Eastern European region. In: *Shanghai Forum Pre-Session: Global Governance and Asia from the perspective of the CEE countries*. Hungary, Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Bank. pp. 94-118.
7. Horváth, Levente (2020). Hungarian-Chinese Tourism Diplomacy from the Perspective of Chinese Outbound Tourism. In: *A Geopolitical Assessment of the Belt and Road Initiative* (szerk. Moldicz Csaba). Hungary, Budapest: Oriental Business and Innovation Center, Budapest Business School University of Applied Sciences. 79-104. oldal.
8. Horváth, Levente (2019). Sino-Hungarian Financial Relations. In: *International Conference of Economics PhD Students and Researchers in Komarno*. Slovakia, Komarno: J. Selye University. 97-107. oldal.
9. Horváth, Levente (2019). A kínai filmturizmus fejlődése, avagy Magyarország lehetőségei a kínai turisztikai piacon [Development of the Chinese Film Tourism Opportunities for Hungary in Chinese Outbound Tourism]. In: *II. Nemzetközi Marketingturizmus Konferencia: Turizmus, Fogyasztás, Generációk*. Magyarország, Pécs: Pécsi Tudományegyetem. 293-302. oldal.
10. Horváth, Levente (2018). Educational Relations of China in the Central-Eastern-European Region. In: *Shanghai Forum Pre-Session: Global Governance and Asia from the perspective of the CEE countries*. Hungary, Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Bank. pp. 205-233.

11. Horváth, Levente (2018). Magyar országimázs építés a Kínai Népköztársaságban [The working up of the Hungarian country-image in The People's Republic of China]. In: I. Nemzetközi Marketingturizmus Konferencia: Generációk a Turizmusban. Magyarország, Pécs: Pécsi Tudományegyetem. 116-124. oldal.