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Securitization and Climate Change
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Characteristics and Implications**
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The Future of Asia
by Poornima Vijaya

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“ADVANCING DIVERSITY”

Contents

- World News 05 - 10
by Ahmed Yesevi Taşçı
- 13-18 Geopolitical Influence of Italy on
the "21st Century Maritime Silk
Road"
by Tianyi Liu & Giuseppe Bettoni
- Securitization and Climate 21 - 24
Change
by Sitong Lin
- 27 - 32 Shinzo Abe's Politics in Japan:
Characteristics and Implications
by Yukio Sakurai
- The Future of Asia 35 - 39
by Poornima Vijaya

Geopolitical Influence of Italy on the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road"

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Italy is the only G7 country to participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative offers tremendous opportunities for international economic cooperation, and new international relations featuring peaceful coexistence, harmonious tolerance and win-win cooperation. The Belt is short for "Silk Road Economic Belt", and the Road is short for "21st Century Maritime Silk Road". And the Belt and Road Initiative has drawn inspiration from western geopolitical theories, improving the traditional power theory and geopolitical landscape of Eurasia to build the new silk road. Now, Italy is becoming the new entry market between China and European countries. And the entry of Italy into the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is considered the first and true recognition by the western countries. The partnership established between China and Italy could take advantage of the potential benefits for Italian ports.

China could be studied for its vast size, economical rapid expansion, regional significance and political system. This approach brings to mind the dimension of complexity and makes the reflection on the different categories of cultural geography, the size of which exceeds the realities of the European nation-states inherited from history. The external projection of China towards areas providing materials and markets to be conquered on a world scale (Gavinelli, 2014). China is appearing in the world as a new emerging power.

Throughout history, The Silk Road was not only a trading network but also a cultural road, civilization and people-to-people exchange. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road also shoulders a dual responsibility of promoting international economic, and trade cooperation and promoting cultural exchanges in countries along the Belt and Road Initiative. In the wake of the global financial crisis in 2008, the European economy has continued to decline, and it would be difficult for the European economy to recover only by relying on the domestic market. Nowadays, the economy in the European continent is improving faster. A growing economy means growing wealth and income for European people, a better trade environment and a market to drive industrialization.

International cooperation and partnership in economy and trade are crucial for the economic recovery in Europe, especially with China. The 21st

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Century Maritime Silk Road is to build a community of economic and trade cooperation and exchange between Asia and Europe. As the end point of the ancient Silk Road, Italy not only can but should play a key role in the construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. And Italy is one of the Group of Seven(G7) countries and also the first country to sign a joint memorandum of understanding for the implementation of the Belt and Road initiative. Former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (ruling time from 2014 to 2016) strongly endorsed the construction of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, and at the Asia-Europe Meeting Summit organized by him, he made a statement about the common development of European countries and Asian countries, including China. In March 2019, China and the Italian government has signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Jointly Promoting the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (PRC, 2021).

The Belt and Road Initiative is a global initiative proposed by China, with the interconnection of countries along the route. The goal is to build free and equal development and cooperation among countries, with main connotations of policy exchange, transactions, and people-to-people connectivity. It takes into account the international considerations of the continents of Asia and Africa, covering more than 60 countries and more than 4 billion people in the world. The geopolitical and economic theories here mainly refer to the political and economic game through the change of the spatial situation. The proposal of One Belt & One Road not only plays an important role in China's development but also has different effects on other countries in the world. The countries participating in BRI have an important close relationship (Xi Jinping, 2018).

Ever since the implementation of the BRI, which was first put forward by President Xi Jinping in 2013, and then gradually evolved from theory into action, the subject has increasingly become the focus of research by think tanks around the world. China emphasises the accessibility of some provinces to adapt the infrastructure, and opening up an increasing number of ports to European countries. China's "One Belt, One Road" strategy provides China with an opportunity for trans-Eurasia cultural exchange, connecting Asia, Europe and Africa. This is a theory based on the characteristics of China's geographical location at the eastern end of the Eurasian continent and the combination of land and sea and makes its geopolitical implications.

Alfred Thayer Mahan contented that naval supremacy could be exercised by transnational consortiums acting in defence of a multinational system of free trade (Rhodes, 2020). The previous classical geopolitical theory was mainly about the hegemony among regional power. The level of scientific and military development, emphasizes how a country can gain geopolitical development and gain advantages in national competitions. Western marine geopolitical thought focuses on the world, and the research methods of holistic thinking and comprehensive analysis have great reference significance. The "One Belt, One Road" gives the Eurasian continent a new

geographical perspective of harmonious cooperation. China needs to inherit the ancient but develop modern Chinese national maritime geopolitical thinking, criticize and reconstruct Western maritime geopolitical thinking, and form a new national maritime geopolitical thinking based on a community of shared future for mankind, to guide the national maritime geopolitical practice and contribute to China's peace the rise provides the support (Pengfei, 2021). A geopolitical theory of openness and inclusiveness, a governance system to regional development.

China is deemed to have a potentially hybrid geopolitical character. The BRI focus on the relaunch of both a land-based and a sea route with Europe appears to be the key element to justify an implicit correspondence of the Chinese project with an amphibious idea of the Rimland (Marconi, 2021). The ancient Silk Road, in its land or sea routes, goods and people have circulated for centuries, today seems to be experiencing a new revitalization and greater expansion thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative through the Chinese and other countries' coastal cities (Gavinelli, 2018). And Italy had a strong Roman Empire in its history, which once flourished in the three continents of Europe, Asia, Africa. The Silk Road directly connected Chang'an and Rome and built a major trade channel between the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the European countries have been in a state of division in the Middle Ages for a long time. This Italian Renaissance movement gradually removed European countries from the shadow of the Middle Ages and pushed a new stage of modern science and social democracy. The current economic and social development of Italy is obviously lacking in the European developed countries, while the construction of the economic belt along the Silk Road has provided a new development opportunity for this ancient civilization. As a country at the end of the ancient Silk Road, if we can make good use of the opportunity of the Silk Road Economic Belt and actively promote the economic, trade and cultural exchanges and cooperation between Europe and Asia, the Italian national economy will keep in a period of revitalization. Unlike the Renaissance period in European history, the BRI will focus on economic revival.

Italy boasts a mature manufacturing industry with world-leading technology. Foreign trade is currently the main support for its national economy. Italy has the world's largest international brand for individual consumers, and also has a high reputation among domestic consumers. Its world-leading mechanical and electronic equipment technology is very important. China's industrial upgrading has great positive significance. The Italian port of Trieste is the most important cargo port in Italy, with a total of 62.68 million tons of cargo per year (Arnone&Sicomo,2019). The port of Genoa, another historic port of Italy, ranks second among Italy's 15 largest ports, with 54.26 million tons of cargo passed through in 2018. With a floor space of 700 square meters and a depth of 500 square meters, it is the largest port in Italy (We Build Value, 2019). The port of Genoa is the

second-largest port on the Mediterranean coast after Marseille, and the port of Trieste in Italy is an important connection point for the Central and Eastern European markets.

The port of Trieste in the development of China's Belt and Road Initiative can provide more opportunities for Chinese products to enter European markets, as well as improve the infrastructure between China and western countries to facilitate transportation. The Italian port is back in action, and the port of Trieste will not only serve as a destination on the Belt and Road Maritime Silk Road but also as a hub in the Mediterranean area. China Maritime Logistics COSCO SHIPPING acquired a 67% stake in Piraeus Port for 368.5 million euros (Xinhuanet, 2016), which fully proves China's commitment to strengthening sea routes and relying on Southern Europe.

Italy offers new areas to attract the Chinese market. Italy occupies an important geopolitical position in the European Mediterranean region. The Mediterranean region today is a "geopolitical paradox" (MED, 2017) not only distributed but also interrelated between regions. On the one hand, the hegemonic rivalry is the centre of ideological and conservative confrontation. On the other hand, is the node connecting the economy, energy and infrastructure among Europe, Africa and Asia. In recent decades, with the development of sea power, the concept of the Mediterranean has gradually changed. New Mediterranean spaces are emerging with new political influence. Today's Mediterranean region is the centre of multiple power, a new global centre. So Italy gained new meaning as a platform for global connections. With the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative between Italy and China, the Mediterranean region has become an important hub in terms of transport and logistics networks.

Infrastructure investments related to the Maritime Silk Road have undoubtedly improved connectivity between Europe and Asia. Therefore, the Maritime Silk Road project can expand trade in these regions by reducing costs, and expanding foreign investment and connectivity. From 2013 to 2018, China invested more than \$90 billion in countries that have signed the initiative, including Egypt's Suez Canal, the largest container port in the Mediterranean - Greece's Piraeus, ports in Spain and Italy. Meanwhile, the annual volume of China-Europe freight trains has increased from 80 to more than 6,000 during the same period (Xinhua Finance Agency, 2018).

In 2019, while the new Genoa-Savona port system is poised to act as a link with Northern Europe and Trieste as a link with Eastern European countries, Venice remains Europe's natural gateway to the East, with an ancient port of 1200 Years of history connected to the surrounding developed modern railway network and entrepreneurial hub, enabling complementary and mutually beneficial transactions with Chinese counterparts. Faced with the EU's reluctance to show a coherent plan, Italy, with its unique capabilities in different sectors, will have to deal with

governments like Beijing, where the Chinese government is accustomed to five-year plans and ten-year visions.

To achieve coordination, stability, and continuity, the Italian government attaches great importance to that could potentially change the landscape of globalization and engage institutional interlocutors, port authorities, and business organizations to commit to regional development in the medium- and long-term. China is Italy's fourth largest trading partner, Asia's largest trading partner, and Italy is China's fourth largest trading partner in the EU. According to China Customs statistics, in 2020, the bilateral trade volume between China and Italy was 55.19 billion US dollars, an increase of 0.4%; among which, China's exports to Italy were 32.94 billion US dollars, a decrease of 1.7%; China's imports from Italy were 22.25 billion US dollars, increased of 3.8% (MOFCOM Guide, 2022). And The Belt and Road Initiative offer China a valuable opportunity to set norms for the international economic and trade order.

Now, the port has become one of the essential elements of this initiative, enhancing local competitiveness by making ports more efficient, flexible, and productive (IMD, 2012), which could stimulate consumer demand from Northern Europe and transform it into a multi-modal transport hub. China and Italy are located at the eastern and western ends of the Eurasian continent respectively, and Italy's contribution to the Belt and Road is not only a testament to China's growing influence as well as a new dawn of the new era of bilateral relationships between China and Italy. References

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