

## “THE SILENT THREAT” – CHINA’S GEOPOLITICAL “GAME” IN THE BLACK SEA REGION

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**Abstract:** *Since the 2000s, China has become an increasingly visible presence in Europe. In the last 20 years, China has signed an extended strategic partnership with the European Union, developed the 17 + 1 platform, of strategic cooperation with the Eastern European corridor states, invested heavily in the European economy and diversified its soft-power means of action. In this context, the states of the Black Sea region are implicitly targeted by China's interests and actions. How large is China's presence in the Black Sea region? What are the objectives of China's geopolitical game in the Black Sea region? Do they belong to an independent game? Or are they part of a much more complex strategy, which aims at a major reconfiguration of global spheres of influence?*

**Keywords:** *Black Sea region, China, 17 + 1 format, Belt and Road Initiative, Ukraine, Georgia, Danube estuary, Chinese "belt" of the Black Sea.*

**Motto:** *„Lions mainly move in silence, although their roar can be heard over 5 miles away” – African saying*

For centuries, domination of the Black Sea region was disputed between Tsarist Russia and Ottoman Turkey, imperial powers interested in gaining control of the "gates of the East." The mirage of access to the warm seas and the privileged status of master of the straits that unite the Black Sea with the Mediterranean Sea, strained relations between the two regional hegemonies, as evidenced being the long series of bilateral wars, which marked the history of this region since the eighteenth century. If, initially, after the conquest of the Crimean Khanate by the Russians (in 1783), the dispute involved exclusively the two great riparian powers, starting with the 19th century, the confrontation began to internationalize, by attracting European players to the region, especially France, Austria and Germany. The hegemonic wars and geopolitical reconfigurations of the twentieth century added new players, whether state or non-state, whose positions basically respected the fault lines between the two military blocs intersected in this region: Eastern, Soviet, and Western, of Turkey and its European and American allies.

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The new world order, following the implosion of the Soviet Empire, reconfigured the Black Sea region, making it one of the most valuable political geographies areas of Eurasia. If, in the second half of the twentieth century, the geopolitical partition of this area was structured on the north-south axis, between the Soviet-dominated north and the western-dominated south, after 1991, the partition returned to the east-west axis; thus, Russia is losing much of its sphere of European influence, with Kremlin leaders being forced to resort to the entire arsenal of hybrid warfare to avoid the region turning into a predominantly Western space.

Thus, one by one, the former Soviet states bordering the Black Sea, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, as well as also the other two extremely valuable geostrategic states in the Caucasian neighborhood, Armenia and Azerbaijan, became hybrid theaters of war, reflecting longstanding disputes, vulnerable to conflicts orchestrated by the Russian Federation.

The paradigm shift in the region's geopolitics, amplified by the accession of the Western flank states, Romania and Bulgaria, to the Euro-Atlantic formats, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), has greatly diminished the register of effective *soft power* instruments which Moscow could apply in the region, forcing it to *hard-power* actions, effective in the short term, but harmful in the long term, through the historical tensions and animosities reawakened by their use.

In this mosaic of active geostrategic players, regional powers and non-state actors, in the second half of the last century, another player has emerged. A silent but very tenacious one – China. A player which, in the last three decades, has intensified his political and economic actions in the Pontic area, implementing a regional strategy that belongs to the much bigger frame of his Grand Strategy of transformation into the hegemon of the Afro-Eurasian continental mass.

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## **1. CHINA'S POLITICAL, CULTURAL AND MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE BLACK SEA REGION**

China "played" in the Pontic space even before 1991, the year of the dismemberment of the Soviet Empire. High-level political relations, economic, academic, scientific cooperation, etc. between the Eastern bloc states, Romania and Bulgaria, and China are well-known. But although the bilateral relations between the two Pontic states and China were flourishing, they were limited by their adherence to Communist ideology, the associated political framework imposed by Moscow, and, above all, Soviet restrictions and control. Therefore, even though it was present in the region, China was only a secondary player.

The same level of presence was registered with respect to the relationship with Turkey, whose relationship with China was similarly subordinated to its role in NATO in bipolar competition with the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Eastern hegemony, thus, was an opportunity exploited by strategists in Beijing who recognized the sovereignty of the new ex-Soviet states, opened an opportunity for diplomatic relations with them, with accompanying new forms of regional cooperation. Thus, in the 90s and especially after 2000, China's presence in the Black Sea region intensified to the point where it became an active geostrategic player, directly involved in the competition for regional domination.

### **1.1. China-Georgia bilateral relationship**

Due to its geographical position as a Caucasian state, bordering the Black Sea, located in the South-Eastern extremity of the Ponto-Baltic Isthmus, on the corridor that connects the Black Sea with the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, Georgia has an exceptional geostrategic and geo-economic value. Geo-strategically, Georgia is a *pivot* with potential strategic transformation into a *bridgehead*. Geo-economically, Georgia is a logistic *hub* and a *nexus* between transcontinental transport corridors and communication networks and the regional geopolitical game.

On June 9th, 1992, China and Georgia established permanent diplomatic relations at the embassy level, opening the "gates" of bilateral cooperation on multiple levels. From 1992 to the present, the economic cooperation between the two states has steadily increased, to the point where today China is Georgia's main export partner, with a volume of 476.3 million dollars, representing 14.3% of total Georgian exports.<sup>371</sup> Just in the decade between 2010 and 2019, Georgian exports to the Chinese market increased by 700%<sup>372</sup>. The total volume of trade transactions, over \$1.18 billion in 2020, places China in third place among Georgia's trading partners, after Turkey, with \$1.59 billion, and Russia, with \$1.32 billion<sup>373</sup>.

The first Chinese investors entered the Georgian market in 2002<sup>374</sup>. In 2015, Georgia became member of the *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)*, linking China and EU markets, in May 2017, the two states ratified the *China-Georgia Free Trade Agreement (FTA)* and, in January 2018, they signed an agreement on the creation of free trade zones. It should be noted that prior to FTA ratification, Georgia had become a member of the *World Trade Organization (WTO)*, signed an *Association Agreement (AA)* with the EU to join the *Deep and Comprehensive*

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<sup>371</sup> 2020 data: *China is Georgia's top trading partner by exports*, 20.01.2021, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/145>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>372</sup> Vakhtang Charaia, Mariam Lashkhi, *Georgia and China: The Economic Ties that Could One Day Bind*, „A Sea Change?: China's Role in the Black Sea”, Frontier Europe Initiative, November 2020, <https://mei.edu/sites/default/files/2020-11/A%20Sea%20Change%3F-China%27s%20Role%20in%20the%20Black%20Sea.pdf>, accessed on 01.05.2021, p.33.

<sup>373</sup> 2020 data: *China is Georgia's top trading partner by exports*, *op.cit.*

<sup>374</sup> Vakhtang Charaia, Mariam Lashkhi, *op.cit.*, p.31.

*Free Trade Area (DCFTA)*, it had signed free trade agreements with Turkey<sup>375</sup>, Japan, Canada, the USA, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)<sup>376</sup>, a status shared by only three other countries: Israel, Iceland and Switzerland.

According to Ji Yanchi, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Georgia in 2017, “*the Chinese-built Khadori hydropower plant was the first power plant built and the first large-scale foreign investment since Georgia's independence. Chinese companies have built 82.1 kilometers of roads, 40.6 kilometers of railways and offered technical solutions for modernizing Georgian railways. In the process, Chinese companies have created an estimated 5,000 jobs for Georgians. China has also provided \$60 million in free aid to support Georgia's social and economic development*”<sup>377</sup>. " There are currently 222 Chinese companies operating in Georgia, of which only 12 have mixed Sino-Georgian capital<sup>378</sup>. One of these companies, *Hualing Group*, is one of the largest investors in the Georgian market. Two of the mega-projects managed by this company are the *Kutaisi Free Industrial Zone*, the second largest city in Georgia, and the largest residential and commercial complex in the capital, Tbilisi<sup>379</sup>.

China is also the second largest export market for Georgian wines<sup>380</sup>- the main export product of the Caucasian state. Reflecting the increasing importance of trade between China and Georgia and the rest of the region, on October 4th, 2020 the Danish transport company *Maersk* inaugurated a railway line linking Chinese city Xi'an with Georgia's capital, Tbilisi<sup>381</sup>.

At the same time, China was one of the participants in the tender for the construction project of a deep-sea port and a 600-hectare free industrial area in Anaklia, the *Anaklia Black Sea Deep Water Port Project*. The tender was won by a Danish company, but canceled, with the case presently pending before the arbitration court of the *International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID)*<sup>382</sup>. Undoubtedly, if the project materializes, this unique deep-sea port in Georgia could turn the small Caucasian state into a logistics hub on the Black Sea,

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<sup>375</sup> Georgia, Republic of Turkey Ministry of Trade, <https://www.trade.gov.tr/free-trade-agreements/georgia>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>376</sup> *Free Trade Regimes*, <https://investingeorgia.org/en/georgia/free-trade-regimes>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>377</sup> China-Georgia Friendship Celebrates the 25th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations, Georgia Today, 13.06.2017, <http://gtarchive.georgiatoday.ge/news/6781/China-Georgia-Friendship-Celebrates-the-25th-Anniversary-of-Diplomatic-Relations>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>378</sup> Vakhtang Charaia, Mariam Lashkhi, *op.cit.*, p.32.

<sup>379</sup> *HUALING GROUP*, <https://www.investingeorgia.org/en/keysectors/success-stories/hualing-group.page>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>380</sup> Shi Yinglun, *Georgia's wine exports continue to grow*, Xinhua, 05.08.2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/05/c\\_138285849.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/05/c_138285849.htm), accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>381</sup> *Maersk's first block train from China arrives in Georgia*, Maersk, <https://www.maersk.com/news/articles/2020/10/06/maersk-first-block-train-china-georgia>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>382</sup> Maximilian Hess, Maia Otarashvili, *Georgia's Doomed Deep-Sea Port Ambitions: Geopolitics of the Cancelled Anaklia Project*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 02.10.2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/10/georgias-doomed-deep-sea-port-ambitions-geopolitics-of-the-cancelled-anaklia-project/>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

with very important strategic value. Investors and operators in the future port of Anaklia could gain huge capital of influence over the Tbilisi authorities.

The importance of the project must also be understood in conjunction with Russia's trans-Eurasian, *Razvitie*, and China's *BRI* transport master plans. China, through *CEFC China Energy Company Limited*, owns 75% of the shares of the *Poti Free Industrial Zone*, with an area of 300 hectares, located next to the seaport of the same name where a new depth terminal is currently being built<sup>383</sup>.

In terms of security, China has refused to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which claimed independence from Georgia in August 2008. China continues to recognize Georgia's sovereignty over the two territories. Indeed, as the leader of the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (SCO), China played an important role in drafting the *Dushanbe Declaration*, which called on the parties to the conflict to resolve "existing issues" exclusively through diplomatic<sup>384</sup> instruments. For its part, Georgia reciprocated by recognizing a "single China", rejecting diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

A very strong cultural and academic relationship has developed between China and Georgia. According to China's ambassador to Georgia, Ji Yanchi, in 2017, the Confucius Institute within the Free University of Tbilisi has organized "Chinese language courses in 26 universities and high schools in Georgia. Each year, 25 Georgian students have continued their studies at Chinese universities supported by scholarships offered by the Chinese government through its cultural promotion organization Hanban. Each year, 20 Chinese language teachers and volunteers came to Georgia to help teach the Chinese language and culture. Georgia already has over a thousand local Chinese-speaking students. In 2016, more than 10,000 Chinese tourists visited Georgia, an increase of 46%"<sup>385</sup> comparing with the previous year. And on February 15th, 2019, the governments of the two countries signed an agreement to support the process of teaching Chinese in secondary schools in Georgia<sup>386</sup>.

## 1.2. China - Ukraine bilateral relationship

Ukraine belongs to the Ponto-Baltic Isthmus, a pivotal space with exceptional geostrategic value, located between the German West and the Russian East. In addition, Ukraine is very attractive as a transit logistics hub within the *BRI* and, very importantly, it is a granary of Europe.

Ukraine and China established permanent diplomatic relations at embassy level in 1992. In 2011 the two states signed the *Joint Declaration on the*

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<sup>383</sup> *Free Industrial Zone in the city of Poti, Georgia*, 12.03.2021, <https://georgiawealth.info/en/free-industrial-zone-in-the-city-of-poti-georgia/>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>384</sup> *Dushanbe Declaration of Heads of SCO Member States*, President of Russia, 27.08.2008, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/287>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>385</sup> *China-Georgia Friendship Celebrates the 25th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations*, op.cit.

<sup>386</sup> *Georgia, China sign deal on Chinese language popularization*, 19.02.2019, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/475>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

*Establishment and Development of the Strategic Partnership between Ukraine and China.* In 2013 and 2018, they signed and ratified the *Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Ukraine and China*, the *Joint Declaration for the Further Deepening of the Strategic Partnership* and the *Program for the Development of the Strategic Partnership between Ukraine and China in 2014-2018 years*<sup>387</sup>. In 2017, Ukraine became a member of the BRI and declared itself interested in the 17 + 1 Format developed by China with Central and Eastern European countries.

At present, China is Ukraine's main state trade partner, with increased Chinese demand for its agricultural goods bolstered by China's rising living standards, as well as its trade war with the United States. Exports of maize originating in Ukraine to the Chinese market increased from \$26 million in 2013 to \$896 million in 2019, in parallel with the decline in US exports to the same market from \$847 million in 2013 to \$75 million in 2019<sup>388</sup>. China's importance as a trade partner was also increased by the Ukraine's conflict with the Russian Federation that generated a decrease of over 76.5% in Ukraine-Russia bilateral trade, from \$31 billion in 2013 to 7.3 billion in 2020<sup>389</sup>.

Despite the growing trade relationship, as a result of Ukraine's risky and unfavorable investment climate, Chinese direct investment in Ukraine remained low, reaching less than \$18 million in 2018. The majority of these investments, 39.6%, targeted the agricultural sector, 19.4% the industrial sector and 11% transport and communications<sup>390</sup>. The majority of these investments, 39.6%, targeted the agricultural sector, 19.4% the industrial sector and 11% transport and communications<sup>391</sup>. However, China is Ukraine's largest "hidden" creditor through unconditional low-interest loans, with no requirements regarding good governance practices and fiscal stability rules. Such practices have been amplified by the endemic corruption in Ukraine. As in Georgia, China is investing in Ukraine's port facilities. Through *China Harbor Engineering Company Ltd.* has already completed the first stage of the renovation project of the seaport Pivdennyi

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<sup>387</sup> All three documents have been signed in the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2013. See: *Legal Basis of Ukraine and China*, Embassy of Ukraine in the People's Republic of China, 27.10.2020, <https://china.mfa.gov.ua/en/partnership/184-dogovirno-pravova-baza-mizh-ukrajinoju-ta-kitajem>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>388</sup> Maxim Samorukov Temur Umarov, *China's Relations with Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova: Less Than Meets the Eye*, 31.12.2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83538>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>389</sup> *Russia is among top three trade partners of Ukraine in 2020, customs service says*, Tass, 12.01.2021, <https://tass.com/economy/1244021>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>390</sup> Lilia Ukrainets, *Chinese FDI to Ukraine in the context of road and belt initiative*, iunie 2019, [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Chinese-FDI-into-the-Ukrainian-economy-by-types-of-economic-activity-as-of-01012019-p\\_fig1\\_335679930](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Chinese-FDI-into-the-Ukrainian-economy-by-types-of-economic-activity-as-of-01012019-p_fig1_335679930), accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>391</sup> Lilia Ukrainets, *Chinese FDI to Ukraine in the context of road and belt initiative*, iunie 2019, [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Chinese-FDI-into-the-Ukrainian-economy-by-types-of-economic-activity-as-of-01012019-p\\_fig1\\_335679930](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Chinese-FDI-into-the-Ukrainian-economy-by-types-of-economic-activity-as-of-01012019-p_fig1_335679930), accessed on 01.05.2021.

(Yuzhny), the largest port in the country<sup>392</sup>, and completed the dredging works of the seaport Chornomorsk<sup>393</sup>.

The most interesting cooperation between the two states is in the military field, in which Ukraine has become a provider of technical documentation for the Chinese military industry. Not coincidentally, eight of the 20 Chinese companies listed by the Pentagon as being controlled by the Chinese Army are present in key sectors of the Ukrainian economy, including the military field<sup>394</sup>.

The bilateral military relationship has been initiated in the '90s by China's purchase of Ukrainian military goods, based on Ukraine's position in the military industrial complex of the former Soviet Union, which has helped China to modernize its own armed forces and overcome key technical hurdles. In 1998, China bought the Soviet-made Ukrainian aircraft carrier *Varyag*. China later upgraded it, renamed it *Liaoning*, and used it as a prototype in the construction of Shandong, the first aircraft carrier produced entirely by Chinese industry. China has purchased 10 UGT 25000 gas turbine engines from Ukraine, along with complete technical documentation. Chinese industry used these purchases to produce QC 280 gas turbines on its own, which equip the new type 055 destroyers, *Nanchan* class. The same happened with the *Bizon* amphibious assault ships bought by China, together with the complete technical documentation; the last two ships in the class were built in a Chinese shipyard, probably with Ukrainian technical assistance<sup>395</sup>.

As with the Ukrainian shipbuilding industry, AI-322 and AI-222-25 aircraft engines manufactured by the Ukrainian giant *Motor Sich* were bought by China for use in its L-15<sup>396</sup> combat training aircraft. Moreover, in early 2015, Motor Sich, the engine manufacturer for the world's largest transport aircraft, the An-225 *Mriya*, and the Chinese company *Beijing Skyrizon Aviation* signed an agreement that included some technology transfers from Ukraine to China. In exchange for the agreement, the Ukrainian company was to receive a \$100 million loan from the state-owned *China Development Bank* for a period of 10 years. In 2016, a new sales agreement was signed, by which the Chinese acquired control of the company, although in 2017, Skyrizon's majority stake was frozen by the *Security Service of Ukraine* (SBU), pending an investigation. The Chinese side has filed a \$3.6 billion arbitration lawsuit against Ukraine for unjustified blocking the

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<sup>392</sup> *Chinese projects in Ukraine*, Kyiv Post, 14.09.2018, <https://www.kyivpost.com/business-focus/chinese-projects-in-ukraine.html>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>393</sup> *China Harbor Engineering Company completes dredging in port of Chornomorsk*, 21.06.2019, PortSEurope, <https://www.portseurope.com/china-harbor-engineering-company-completes-dredging-in-port-of-chornomorsk/>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>394</sup> Richard Kraemer, *Beijing's military industry on the move in Ukraine*, 10.09.2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/beijings-military-industry-move-ukraine>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>395</sup> Richard Kraemer, *op.cit.*

<sup>396</sup> Yurii Poita, *Why Ukraine is Reassessing its Defense Cooperation with China*, CHOICE, <https://chinaobservers.eu/why-ukraine-is-reassessing-its-defense-cooperation-with-china/>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

transaction. In December 2019, the Ukrainian state defense concern, *Ukroboronprom*, confirmed the sale of over 50% of Motor Sich shares to the Chinese<sup>397</sup>. This acquisition provided China with access to the company's prototypes, technical documentation and research projects. In March 2021, Oleksiy Danilov, head of *Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council*, said that in the near future, Motor Sich "will be returned to the ownership of the Ukrainian state in a legal and constitutional manner", without making any further additions<sup>398</sup>.

In addition, China is Ukraine's main export partner in the field of weapons and military equipment, which in 2020 involved \$15.42 billion in sales<sup>399</sup>, including collaboration by the two states to improve the engine characteristics of fifth-generation Chinese fighter jets, at construction of marine radars and ship engines, developed by the Ukrainian company *Zorya - Mashproekt*<sup>400</sup>.

### 1.3. China - Moldova bilateral relationship

Former Romanian territory occupied and annexed by the USSR in 1940, the Republic of Moldova declared its independence in March 1992. Although it is an enclave state, Moldova is effectively a riparian of the Black Sea, accessing it through the river port Giurgiulești.

Located in the pivotal space of the Ponto-Baltic Isthmus, between Ukraine and Romania, Moldova was the subject of an internal conflict, generated in 1992 by the Russian Federation, through which the districts on the left bank of the Dniester came out of Chișinău, proclaimed themselves the Dniester Republic of Moldova, known as Transnistria, becoming a Russian bridgehead in the immediate vicinity of the mouth of the Danube. As a result of this frozen conflict, Moldova was thrown into the "gray" zone of the "buffer" states, like the other ex-Soviet states bordering the Black Sea.

Moldova and China established permanent diplomatic relations at the embassy level in 1992. In July 2010, China and Moldova signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) through which Moldova received a \$1 billion loan from China, representing one-tenth of GDP of the country. Subsequently, the Chinese presence in Moldova grew through an increasing volume of trade, with China becoming one of the main importers of Moldovan wine. China is also exploring three megaprojects in Moldova:

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<sup>397</sup> *Ukrainian Motor Sich to Sell 50% Stake to Turkish Firm*, Defense World, 15.04.2021, [https://www.defenseworld.net/news/29352/Ukrainian\\_Motor\\_Sich\\_to\\_Sell\\_50\\_\\_Stake\\_to\\_Turkish\\_Firm](https://www.defenseworld.net/news/29352/Ukrainian_Motor_Sich_to_Sell_50__Stake_to_Turkish_Firm), accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>398</sup> Tomoyo Ogawa, *Ukraine blocks Chinese takeover of jet engine maker on US urging*, 18.03.2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-deals/Ukraine-blocks-Chinese-takeover-of-jet-engine-maker-on-US-urging>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>399</sup> *Ukraine, China discusses development of bilateral cooperation*, UKRINFORM, 16.04.2021, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3228957-ukraine-china-discuss-development-of-bilateral-cooperation.html>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>400</sup> Yurii Poita, *op.cit.*



In 2015, by signing a terminal services agreement with a local Moldovan operator, *China Shipping Container Lines* launched container shipping services in the Free International Port of Giurgiulești. The Chinese plan to develop a business park in the surrounding areas for Chinese companies, to facilitate their access to the EU and CIS markets<sup>401</sup>;

In 2017, the two states launched negotiations to establish a Free Trade Agreement<sup>402</sup>;

In 2019, Moldova began negotiations for an infrastructure agreement with two Chinese contractors, *China Highway Group* and *China Railway Group Limited*, to build the capital's ring road, Chișinău, as well as two highways, one of which will connect the northern districts of country with Ukraine. Construction is expected to be completed by 2022<sup>403</sup>.

In recent years, the Chișinău authorities have clearly stated Moldova's intention to participate in the BRI megaproject. In the context of the coronavirus crisis, the Chinese authorities have announced that service on the debts of 77 countries, including Moldova, have been temporarily suspended. For Moldova, this gesture is mostly symbolic, since its largest creditor is Romania<sup>404</sup>. Even so, China's presence in Moldova is still far below its potential, compared to other former riparian Soviet states.

#### **1.4. Bilateral relationship with Romania**

Positioned in the southwest of the Ponto-Baltic Isthmus, at the mouth of the Danube in the Black Sea, Romania has an exceptional geostrategic value, as a pivot and bridgehead at the Black Sea. The mouths of the Danube River connect the shipping lines from the Caspian Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. This, in combination with other rivers with navigable potential, give Romania a natural status of regional geo-economic and geopolitical hub and nexus. Further adding to Romania's geostrategic importance is the deep-sea port of Constanta, the largest port on the Black Sea, as well as the Dobrogea peninsula, the Danube's "Iron Gates", the Carpathian Arch and the riches of the soil and subsoil. With such strengths, Romania, as a NATO and EU member state, is an important focus of China's strategy in the region.

Reflecting its importance, Romania has one of the longest political and diplomatic relations with China, dating from 1880, when, in Paris, the Romanian diplomat and statesman Mihail Kogălniceanu (1817-1891) and the representative

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<sup>401</sup> *China Shipping Container Lines isi extinde serviciile in Portul International Liber Giugiulesti*, 25.06.2015, <http://eba.md/rom/news-from-members/china-shipping-container-lines-ii-extinde-serviciile-in-portul-internaional-liber-giurgiulesti>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>402</sup> *China, Moldova Kick Off Free Trade Agreement Talks*, Yicai Global, 29.12.2017, <https://www.yicai.com/news/china-moldova-kick-off-free-trade-agreement-talks>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>403</sup> Eugénie Davi, *Moldova's Unexpected Opening to China*, CHOICE, 22.09.2020, <https://chinaobservers.eu/moldovas-unexpected-opening-to-china/>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>404</sup> Adnan Akfirat, *China suspends debt payments for 77 poor countries*, United World, 17.06.2020, <https://uworld.com/11850-china-suspends-debt-payments-for-77-poor-countries/>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

of China, the diplomat Zeng Jize (1839-1890) established the first official contacts between the two states<sup>405</sup>. On October 5th, 1949, Romania was the third country to recognize the sovereignty of the PRC, after the USSR (October 3rd, 1949) and Bulgaria and established permanent diplomatic relations at embassy level. Since



**Fig.1:** 17+1 Format (Source: <https://www.oboreurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/171-greece.jpg>, accessed on 01.05.2021).

then, the relationship between the two states has been particularly strong in the political-diplomatic arena. Even in recent times, there have been high-level contacts between the two states, starting with the state visit of the Chinese President Hu Jintao to Romania, when the *Joint Declaration of Romania and the People's Republic of China on the Establishment of a Broad Partnership for Friendship and Cooperation* was signed, continuing with the visits of the President of Romania to the PRC in 2003, 2006 and 2008 and the bilateral meeting in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, from September 26th, 2015, between the President of Romania and the President of the People's Republic of China<sup>406</sup>.

Politically and economically, Romania is a member of the *17 + 1 Cooperation Format between China and the countries of Europe* (see the map in Fig. 1), established in 2012, designed to promote the BRI and strengthen cooperation in the areas of transport infrastructure, logistics, trade and investment<sup>407</sup>. But, with the exception of the meetings at the level of heads of government in November 2013 (Bucharest), December 2014 (Belgrade), November 2016 (Riga), July 2018 (Sofia) and April 2019 (Dubrovnik), within the mentioned format, the political relationship between the two states has not translated into a significant economic one. Even in 2013, when the Romanian government signed a MoU with Chinese companies, it adopted a neutral position regarding the broader role of the BRI as a transcontinental “economic bridge.” Consequently, Romania is located outside the regional BRI master plans within the 17 + 1, including the transport corridor (illustrated in the map in Fig. 1) that would to unite Budapest with the Greek port of Piraeus - that country's largest

<sup>405</sup> Radu Sava, *Reflecții asupra relațiilor româno-chineze la 70 de ani de raporturi diplomatice: Convorbiri cu Excelența Sa ambasadorul Romulus Ioan Budura*, Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu, 2020, p. 14.

<sup>406</sup> *Republica Populară CHINEZĂ*, Ministerul Afacerilor Externe, <http://www.mae.ro/bilateral-relations/3121>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>407</sup> ‘16+1’ mechanism set to bolster China-Europe ties, 10.07.2018, [http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zdogjhz\\_1/t1575579.htm](http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zdogjhz_1/t1575579.htm), accessed on 01.05.2021.

port, whose majority stake was acquired in 2016 by the Chinese company *COSCO*<sup>408</sup>. In addition, the Romanian government rejected a series of investment proposals from Beijing regarding the construction of highways<sup>409</sup>, the development of the *Huawei 5G*<sup>410</sup> network and the construction of reactors 3 and 4 of the Cernavodă nuclear power plant<sup>411</sup>.

China's direct investments in Romania, as in Moldova, are far below potential. Except for the grain terminal purchased in the Port of Constanta by *COFCO*, which is the largest grain trader in China and one of the largest in the world, the acquisition of a local shipping<sup>412</sup> company, three large grain silos in the South of the country<sup>413</sup> and some companies specialized in trade, the PRC is not active with respect to large infrastructure projects or other investments in Romania<sup>414</sup>. In terms of the economic trade, the trade balance is much in favor of China, in 2020 the Romanian exports to the Chinese market, although growing, reached only \$942.93 million<sup>415</sup>, while Chinese imports to the Romanian market reached a record value of \$5.74 billion<sup>416</sup>!

### 1.5. Bilateral relationship with Bulgaria

Bulgaria belongs to the Ponto-Baltic Isthmus, the Balkan area and the river Danube and the Black Sea region. It is a pivotal state, with a great geostrategic value due to its location on the trajectory of the terrestrial geo-economic corridors that unite the Levant of Central and Eastern Europe and with the potential to transform into a regional hub.

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<sup>408</sup> *Parlamentul de la Atena a ratificat vânzarea portului Pireu firmei chineze Cosco*, 01.07.2016, Economica.net, [https://www.economica.net/parlamentul-de-la-aten-a-ratificat-vanzarea-portului-pireu-firmei-chineze-cosco\\_121994.html](https://www.economica.net/parlamentul-de-la-aten-a-ratificat-vanzarea-portului-pireu-firmei-chineze-cosco_121994.html), accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>409</sup> Victor Cozmei, *Drulă, despre interzicerea companiilor din China să participe la licitațiile de autostrăzi și căi ferate: „E momentul să facem o alegere strategică”*, Hotnews, 02.02.2021, [https://monitorizari.hotnews.ro/stiri-infrastructura\\_articole-24578766-drula-transporturi-companii-din-china-interzise-licitatii-autostrazi-cai-ferate-proiecte-memorandum-guvern.htm](https://monitorizari.hotnews.ro/stiri-infrastructura_articole-24578766-drula-transporturi-companii-din-china-interzise-licitatii-autostrazi-cai-ferate-proiecte-memorandum-guvern.htm), accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>410</sup> Adrian Vasilache, *Mizele lobby-ului Huawei împotriva Legii 5G: Un studiu comandat de compania chineză arată că aceasta va avea pierderi de miliarde de euro dacă va fi exclusă din România*, 11.05.2021, <https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-telecom-24791422-excluderea-huawei-din-retelele-5g-din-romania-pierderi-miliarde-euro-pentru-compania-chineza-dar-pentru-industria-telecom-huawei-putea-cere-daune-tribunale-arbitraj-international-studiu.htm>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>411</sup> *Chinezii, eliminați din proiectul reactoarelor de la Cernavodă la cererea ministerului Economiei*, Radio Europa Liberă, 12.06.2020, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/chinezii-elimina%C8%9Bi-din-proiectul-reactoarelor-de-la-cernavod%C4%83-/30667951.html>, accesat la data de 01.05.2021.

<sup>412</sup> Alexandru Pop, *Cum a preluat China controlul unei părți importante din Portul Constanța*, Newsweek Romania, 02.06.2020, <https://newsweek.ro/investigatii/cum-a-preluat-china-controlul-unei-parti-importante-din-portul-constanta>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>413</sup> Andreea Brînză, *Strategic competitors in search of China: The story of Romania and Bulgaria*, MEI, 17.06.2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/strategic-competitors-search-china-story-romania-and-bulgaria>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>414</sup> Andrei Chirileasa, *RO Govt. prepares to ban Chinese companies from big infrastructure projects*, 04.03.2021, <https://www.romania-insider.com/ro-govt-ban-chinese-companies-march-2021>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>415</sup> *Romania exports to China*, Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/romania/exports/china>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>416</sup> *Romania imports from China*, Trading Economics, <https://tradingeconomics.com/romania/imports/china>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

Bulgaria recognized the sovereignty of the PRC and established permanent diplomatic relations at the embassy level with this state on October 4th, 1949. Like Romania, during the communist period it developed bilateral relations with the Chinese state under the direct monitoring of the Soviet Empire. And, like Romania, Bulgaria is a member state of NATO and the EU. After 1990, Bulgaria renewed relations with China, both politically and economically.

A member state of the 17 + 1 Format, Bulgaria is much more receptive than Romania to the Chinese economic presence. In 2015, Bulgaria was one of the first countries in Central and Eastern Europe to sign the BRI intergovernmental cooperation agreement with China. In 2018, during the Bulgarian presidency of the EU Council, Bulgarian Prime Minister, Boiko Borissov, proposed the establishment of a global partnership center between China and the countries of the Format<sup>417</sup> in Sofia. In 2019, a strategic partnership<sup>418</sup> was established between the two states. In January 2020, the *China-Bulgaria Business Forum* was held in Beijing, with the participation of about 80 companies from both countries. On this occasion, Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister, Mariyana Nikolov, stated Bulgaria's desire to become "a gateway and a bridge for the Chinese companies in the EU market"<sup>419</sup>. In the same year 2020, China was also the second largest foreign market for the Bulgarian products, after Europe.

The Sino-Bulgarian strategic partnership has created favorable conditions for the development of corporate investments, collaboration in the field of digital technology and media as well as cultural activities. In 2019, within the BRI, *China Machinery Engineering Corporation* (CMEC) signed a 120 million Euro contract with the joint-stock company Logistical Center-Varna for the joint development of the infrastructure of the largest Bulgarian seaport, Varna. Also, the Chinese investments of over \$20 million turn the port of Burgas into a logistics hub designed to facilitate the transit of Central Asian goods to Piraeus<sup>420</sup>. *China National Nuclear Corporation* (CNNC) has expressed interest in building the Belene nuclear power plant in cooperation with the Russian company *Rosatom* and the Korean company *Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power Co.*. The Chinese firm *Huawei* ranks 2nd in the top of the Bulgarian mobile phone retail market. In addition, the Chinese newspaper *China Today* entered the Bulgarian newspaper market, being produced by the same Publishing House as *Russia Today*. In addition, the cultural, academic and scientific cooperation between the two states is flourishing<sup>421</sup>.

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<sup>417</sup> Rumena Filipova, *Chinese Influence in Bulgaria: Knocking on a Wide Open Door?*, CHOICE, 08.09.2019, <https://chinaobservers.eu/chinese-influence-in-bulgaria-knocking-on-a-wide-open-door/>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>418</sup> *China, Bulgaria lift ties to strategic partnership*, Xinhuanet, 04.07.2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/04/c\\_138196385.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/04/c_138196385.htm), accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>419</sup> Liu Hongcai, *Bulgaria calls for cooperation with China in auto industry, telecommunications*, CGTN, 16.01.2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-01-16/China-Bulgaria-strengthen-cooperation-in-various-industries-NiLKdXSRby/index.html>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>420</sup> Andreea Brînză, *op.cit.*

<sup>421</sup> Rumena Filipova, *op.cit.*

As Romanian analyst Andreea Brînză has remarked in an article published on the MEI website, “*although China-Romania and China-Bulgaria relations seem positive, the Chinese investments are low in both Romania and Bulgaria, compared to the Western countries. According to the German think tank MERICS, Romania attracted \$1.3 billion in Chinese foreign direct investment between 2000 and 2019, compared to \$0.45 billion in Bulgaria. By comparison, Germany attracted \$25 billion in foreign direct investment in China in the same period, and the United States received \$149.9 billion*”<sup>422</sup>.

### **1.6. Bilateral relationship with Turkey**

The political ties between Ottoman Turkey and Imperial China are very old. In contemporary times, permanent diplomatic ties at the embassy level between the two states were established on August 5th, 1971, when the Republic of Turkey recognized the PRC as the sole representative of China. During the Cold War, the two states were in different spheres of influence, never ending up in a confrontational situation. In 1982, President Kenan Evren (1917-2015) visited China. After 1991, the bilateral relations continued to improve. In April 2000, PRC President Jiang Zemin paid a state visit to Turkey, and in June 2009, Turkish President Abdullah Gül paid an official visit to China. On this occasion, Gül met with his counterpart, Hu Jintao, participated in a Turkey-China business forum and visited Ürümqi, the capital of the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang<sup>423</sup>. Most importantly, the visit resulted in a \$800 million line of credit granted by the *Export-Import Bank of China* to several Turkish banks to finance the bilateral trade<sup>424</sup>. One year later, on 7th of October 2010, China and Turkey signed eight cooperation agreements in the field of trade, cultural and technical exchanges, maritime cooperation, etc<sup>425</sup>.

In 2017, China's ambassador to Turkey, Yu Hongyang, said China is ready to discuss the conditions for Turkey's accession to the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*<sup>426</sup>. In July 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid an official visit to China. On this occasion, in the context of growing international criticism of PRC treatment of the Uighur population in Xinjian, he stated that “*it is a reality that people of all ethnicities in Xinjiang lead a happy life amid China’s development and prosperity*” and that “*Turkey does not allow anyone to incite*

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<sup>422</sup> Andreea Brînză, *op.cit.*

<sup>423</sup> *Turkish president concludes China visit*, 29.06.2009, <http://tr.china-embassy.org/eng/ztgx/t572762.htm>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>424</sup> Richard Weitz, *Turkey and China Establish Strategic Partnership*, „The Turkey Analyst”, vol. 3, no. 18, 25.10.2010, <https://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/230-turkey-and-china-establish-strategic-partnership.html>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>425</sup> *China, Turkey to establish strategic cooperative relationship*, Xinhua, 08.10.2010, [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-10/08/content\\_11386689.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-10/08/content_11386689.htm), accesat la data de 01.05.2021.

<sup>426</sup> Jan Gaspers, *Turkey’s SCO Ambitions Challenge EU and United States*, GMF, 14.07.2017, <https://www.gmfus.org/blog/2017/07/14/turkeys-sco-ambitions-challenge-eu-and-united-states>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

*disharmony in the Turkey-China relationship. Turkey strongly opposes extremism and is willing to increase mutual political trust with China and strengthen security cooperation*<sup>427</sup>. It was an unexpected statement from a supporter of Islamic tradition and unity. It did not, however, stop China's criticism of Turkish military interventions in North-Eastern Syria<sup>428</sup>.

In economic terms, the China-Turkey bilateral relationship has increased significantly. Turkey is a member state of the BRI, with the status of hub for freight and energy transport infrastructure networks linking East and West, with the potential to become an active global center of international trade, leader of the "Middle Corridor" of the Silk Economic Road. China is Turkey's main trading partner, ahead of Russia and Germany, with a total trade volume in 2020 of more than \$24 billion. A railway that runs from Istanbul and covers a distance of 8,693 kilometers passing through Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea and Kazakhstan, to the Chinese city of Xi'an, has been operational since the end of 2020<sup>429</sup>. In 2015, China's two largest port operators, *Cosco Pacific* and *China Merchants Holdings (International)* and a third investor paid nearly \$1 billion for a controlling stake in the Turkish container terminal Kumport of the Ambarli port complex on the European shore of Istanbul, near the Dardanelles Strait<sup>430</sup>.

In September 2019, the authorities of the two states announced the start of the construction of the Honotlu thermal power plant in the Turkish state of Adana, the largest Chinese investment in Turkey, worth \$1.7 billion<sup>431</sup>. In June 2019, the *People's Bank of China* transferred \$1 billion in funds to the Turkish economy plus a \$3.6 billion package to the energy sector<sup>432</sup>, aid to strengthen the ruling party's power, the AKP<sup>433</sup>, domestically and internationally. The \$2.7 billion bridge over the Bosphorus, *Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge* - one of the highest in the world - was financed by China as a result of the insolvency of the Turkish buyer and was sold to Chinese investors for \$688 million. Turkey's largest e-commerce platform, *Trendyol*, with 2 million active buyers and 25 million members, was

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<sup>427</sup> *China says Turkey President offered support over restive Xinjiang*, Reuters, 02.07.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-turkey/china-says-turkey-president-offered-support-over-restive-xinjiang-idUSKCN1TX1L7>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>428</sup> Catherine Wong, *China calls on Turkey to halt military incursion in Syria and 'return to right track'*, South China Morning Post, 15.10.2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3033066/china-calls-turkey-halt-military-incursion-syria-and-return>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

<sup>429</sup> *Economic Watch: Turkey-China commerce moves forward despite pandemic*, Xinhua, 12.05.2021. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/12/c\\_139941399.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/12/c_139941399.htm), accessed on 20.05.2021.

<sup>430</sup> Greg Knowler, *China port giants pour \$1 billion into Turkish terminal*, JOC, 17.09.2015, [https://www.joc.com/port-news/china-port-giants-pour-1-billion-turkish-terminal\\_20150917.html](https://www.joc.com/port-news/china-port-giants-pour-1-billion-turkish-terminal_20150917.html), accessed on 20.05.2021.

<sup>431</sup> *China's Largest Investment In Turkey*, 30.09.2019, <https://www.imtilak.net/en/articles/chinese-investments-in-turkey>, accessed on 20.05.2021.

<sup>432</sup> Ilan Berman, *Erdogan's Chinese Gamble: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is betting big on China*, The Diplomat, 04.10.2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/erdogans-chinese-gamble/>, accessed on 20.05.2021.

<sup>433</sup> Acronym of *Al Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – *Justice and Development Party*.

bought for \$750 million by Chinese operator *Alibaba*<sup>434</sup>. In 2019, 8,000 Chinese workers were active in Turkey and the total volume of Chinese direct investment in Turkey exceeded \$15 billion<sup>435</sup>.

Bilateral political-economic collaboration is complemented by cultural, academic, journalistic and military interaction. At the military level, cooperation began in the 1990s, in the context of the failure of negotiations with the United States of America to produce, with technology transfer, the M-270 MLRS multi-launch missile system. Consequently, since 1997, Turkey has licensed the Chinese missiles WS-1 302mm and TR-3000, under the name *Kasırga*. Since 1998, it has licensed the B-611 SRBM short-range surface-to-surface missiles<sup>436</sup> and subsequently, in 2007, the *Yıldırım* J-600T tactical ballistic missiles. In 2017, it licensed China's Bora-1 ballistic missiles<sup>437</sup>. Also, against the background of the American decision makers' refusal to sell F-35 fighter aircraft to Turkey, in 2019 Ankara announced its intention to buy Shenyang J-31 planes from China<sup>438</sup>. And, last but not least, we must mention the intense military cooperation relationship between Turkey and Ukraine, which also targets the *Motor Sich* company. In the midst of the scandal over *Skyrizon's* acquisition of a majority stake in the company, in April 2021, Turkey said it was interested in acquiring 50% of the Ukrainian "giant's" stake<sup>439</sup>.

### **1.7. Bilateral relationship with Russian Federation**

China's relationship with Russia is complex. Its course is shaped by the intersection of the interests of the three global players: the USA, China and the Russian Federation (Russian Fed.).

In fact, the bilateral relationship, China – Russian Federation, is dominated by structural tensions.

While “the overpopulated Chinese state” is demographically the largest power in the world, the Russian Federation is the state with the largest territory. The later, however, faces, a real demographic challenge, given its population decline, driven in part by Russia's high mortality rate and diseases generated by lifestyle there.

While the Chinese state faces a shortage of energy resources, the Russian Federation is competing with the U.S. the status of the largest player in the global

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<sup>434</sup> George Marshall Lerner, *China to the Rescue in Turkey?*, The Diplomat, 03.07.2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/china-to-the-rescue-in-turkey/>, accessed on 20.05.2021.

<sup>435</sup> *China's Largest Investment in Turkey*, *op.cit.*

<sup>436</sup> Richard Weitz, *op.cit.*

<sup>437</sup> Paul Iddon, *How China is heavily contributing to Middle East drone and missile proliferation*, The New Arab, 04.07.2019, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/china-heavily-contributing-middle-east-drone-proliferation>, accessed on 20.05.2021.

<sup>438</sup> Liu Xuanzun, *Intl interest in China's FC-31 stealth fighter jet grows*, Global Times, 11.06.2019, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1153844.shtml>, accessed on 20.05.2021.

<sup>439</sup> *Ukrainian Motor Sich to Sell 50% Stake to Turkish Firm*, *op.cit.*

energy market, being the owner of the largest natural gas resources in the world”<sup>440</sup> and about 30% of the world's underground resources.

“Such competition is an inexhaustible source of suspicion in Moscow. A suspicion fueled by the BRI, China's pan-continental strategic project, complemented by a *Polar Silk Road* that overlaps Russian Federation's “internal security ring” and may lead to a complete containment of her. Suspicion is also fueled by China’s ambitious military and space research programs, which increase China's military and technological potential and seal its transformation into a hegemon (see map in Fig. 2).

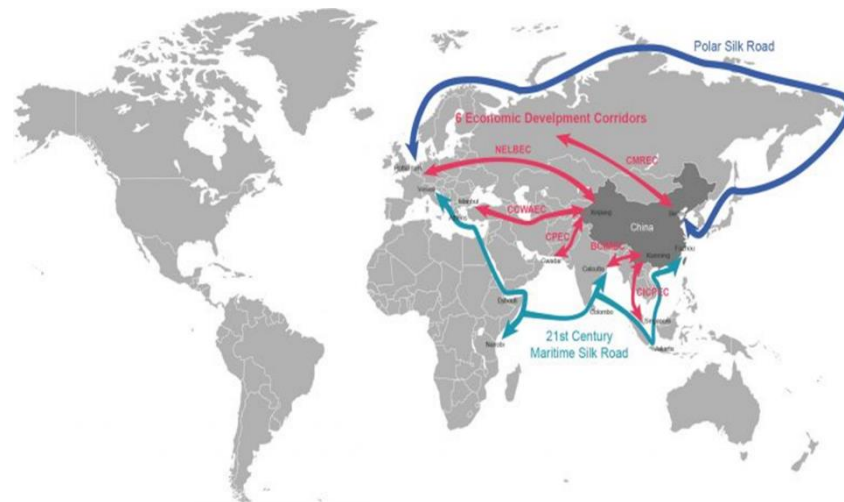


Fig. 2: BRI<sup>441</sup>

Indications of a growing Chinese strategic challenge to Russia were strengthened in 2015, when the Chinese company General Nice took over the project to exploit the Isua iron deposit in Greenland, marking China's entry among mine owners in the Arctic<sup>442</sup>. This growing interest from China in the Arctic region could become an important factor of tension in the bilateral relationship, as well as potentially an opportunity for rapprochement between Russia and the United States.

Despite such tensions, in the tradition of “maskirovka”<sup>443</sup>, the Russian Federation maintains “cordial” relations with China, one of its main partners in multipolar organizations such as the BRICS<sup>444</sup> and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It is a strategy by which the Russian Federation seeks to maximize

<sup>440</sup> Alba Iulia Catrinel Popescu, *Analize incomode*, Editura Militară, București, 2020, p.62.

<sup>441</sup> [https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/World-Map-Basis\\_sRGB.jpg](https://www.beltroad-initiative.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/World-Map-Basis_sRGB.jpg), accessed on 05.05.2020.

<sup>442</sup> Lucy Hornby, Richard Milne, James Wilson, *London Chinese group General Nice takes over Greenland mine*, FINANCIAL TIMES, <https://www.ft.com/content/22842e82-9979-11e4-a3d7-00144feabdc0>, accessed on 01.10.2016.

<sup>443</sup> Russian military doctrine of disinformation and deception of the opponent.

<sup>444</sup> Organization of emerging powers whose name is an acronym for the initials of the Member States: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.



its benefits using its status seemingly neutral to the confrontation between the other two powers of the trilateral.

The Chinese government is well aware of Moscow's suspicions. This is arguably why it has avoided to amplify its presence in both the region of the Danish Straits, vital to the Russian Federation, the only maritime chokepoint where China has not expanded his influence, and in Iran, where it ceded to India the concession of the strategic port of Chabahar, near the Strait of Hormuz.

The two powers are also cooperating on issues favorable to both, such as *the Chinese-led 17 + 1 forum*, which overlaps the *US-backed Three Seas Initiative (East-European North – South Corridor)*, in which China has wooed Balkan states regarded as part of the Russian sphere of influence<sup>445</sup>. A Format completely relieved of the energy transport projects, so problematic for Russia.

Another issue is the close bilateral cooperation during the Syrian conflict, when both states helped militarily, economically and politically the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Another issue is the common front in the United Nations Security Council in mutually beneficial cases, the common attempts to de-dollarize the international market by imposing the Yuan as an exchange currency for oil sells<sup>446</sup> etc »<sup>447</sup>.

And, last but not least, we must mention the common naval maneuvers in the Mediterranean Sea or the presence in the Black Sea, in May 2015, of the Chinese class 54A frigates carrying missiles, *Linyi* (574) and *Weifang* (547). The two frigates anchored at Novorossiysk Naval Base before Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow, occasioned by the celebration of the Allied Victory in World War II<sup>448</sup>.

## **2. CHINA'S GEOPOLITICAL “GAME” IN THE BLACK SEA REGION**

The domination of the Black Sea region is arguably just one component or phase in the Grand Strategy behind the “China’s Dream”. China’s Grand Strategy was arguably conceived in the “century of humiliation” (1839-1949) and then implemented, step by step, by all the governments that have administered the Chinese state. In this Grand Strategy the Chinese state seeks to become the undisputed hegemon of the Afro-Eurasian continental mass, with the World returning to an East – West bipolarity. Such a “dream” would end only with the complete rebirth of the “Celestial Empire” in which China is transformed into the Master of the World, through its unipolarity.

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<sup>445</sup> Alba Iulia Catrinel Popescu, *op.cit.*, p. 253.

<sup>446</sup> Kvantor V., *The World Trends Toward De-Dollarization*, 05.09.2018, <https://medium.com/@kvantorcom/the-world-trends-toward-de-dollarization-d282fc97fb8f>, accessed on 05.05.2020.

<sup>447</sup> Alba Iulia Catrinel Popescu, *Geopolitică și pandemie*, Editura Top Form, București, 2020, pp.80-84.

<sup>448</sup> Andrei Popescu, *China trimite fregate în Marea Neagră*, Epoch Times, 07.05.2015, <https://epochtimes-romania.com/news/china-trimite-fregate-in-marea-neagra---233169>, accessed on 05.05.2020.

This is a “dream” which was imagined in the Imperial period and implemented in the Communist period, in full accordance with the objectives of the Communist ideology, of establishing a global, multilaterally developed Socialist society. An atheist global Socialist society, ordered and disciplined on Confucian principles, focused on work, productivity, efficiency.

Obviously, on a global scale, the Black Sea region is just a “piece” of a “huge geopolitical puzzle”. But the geostrategic value of this particular “piece” makes it extremely important for the Chinese masterplan.

In ancient times, the Pontic region along with the Baltic were considered the **de facto borders of Europe**. This thesis, formulated by the great Greek astronomer and geographer Ptolemy (87-165), was later taken over by other geographers who located the European border near the Isthmus that connects the Southern shore of the Baltic Sea with the Northern shore of the Black Sea. Therefore, the Black Sea region is located in a **geographical transition zone between Asia and Europe**.

The geopolitical complex of the Black Sea region is a **buffer zone**, part of the *Ponto-Baltic limes*, which separates the Germanic West from the Russian East. It is a confluence of two great civilizations: Orthodox Christianity and Sunni Islam.

Geo-strategically, the Ponto-Baltic limes is a **pivotal area of exceptional value, the “gemstone” of the “security ring” of the Russian Federation**, which extends South with the exceptionally valuable Turkish pivotal zone, through which Europe unites with Asia and the Black Sea joins the Mediterranean Sea. The pivotal character of the Pontic area is completed by the presence of one of the seven global maritime chokepoints, the Turkish Straits, and by the mouths of navigable rivers that connect the Pontic region with:

- the Caspian region, through the Volga-Don River Corridor;
- the Central European region, through the river corridor of the Danube - and in perspective with Western Europe, through the Danube-Elbe-Oder, Danube-Main-Rhine corridors;
- the Baltic region through the river corridors of the Dniester, Dnieper and Bug.

Geo-economically, the Black Sea region is a hub of economic corridors linking Western Europe to Central Asia and Northern Europe to the Levant, a nexus of Mediterranean, Levantine, Caspian, Central and Eastern European geopolitical and geoeconomic interests, a market of over 400 million consumers, who are generally less demanding in terms of brand and quality than their Western counterparts. It is also a cheap and educated labor market (very attractive for any investor interested in producing quality goods with less expenses).

With these attributes, it becomes obvious why the states of the region have been important in different ways, for the Chinese masterplan through the BRI. It similarly helps to explain why Turkey is “courted” by the Chinese to become an

active global center of international trade, seen as leader of “The Middle Corridor” of the Silk Economic Road. Or why China is becoming the main trading partner of Georgia, Bulgaria and Ukraine.

For the same reasons, we can say that the loss of control of this pivotal zone by the Maritime and Euro-Atlantic powers in favor of the Russian-Chinese bloc would have a geopolitical impact of equal magnitude with the loss of Iran from the Western sphere of influence, in 1979. This situation must be analyzed in the context of the Russian domination of Eurasia, the Northern pivot zone, and of the Chinese domination of sub-Saharan Africa, the Southern pivot zone<sup>449</sup>.

Of course, looking at the extent of China's presence in the Pontic region, it is important to understand how China was able to get so easily into such a sensitive area for the security of the Russian Federation? This poses the question of whether ***China's regional geopolitical “game” is an independent one, or rather, part of a much more complex strategy, which targets a major reconfiguration of global spheres of influence?***

Certainly, China's regional game in the Black Sea region cannot be an independent one. In a region considered by Russia as her greatest strategic vulnerability, China would not have been able to enter without her knowledge and her acceptance - because, alongside the Baltic Sea region, the Black Sea region is the only open area, with no natural borders, of Russia's internal “security ring”. The explanation for this concession is in part a function of the recent history of this area. Mainly because of Russophobia fueled by the Soviet period, which has been amplified after 1991, following the hybrid war launched by the Russian Federation mainly in the former Soviet riparian states, in order to block the Westernization of the region.

As a result, the range of soft-power instruments available for Russia has been greatly narrowed. Subsequently, there was the huge risk that the riparian states, crushed by frozen conflicts generated by Moscow and located in a gray zone, *will unconditionally slip towards the West.*

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<sup>449</sup> More about Sub-Saharan Southern pivot zone in Alba Iulia Catrinel Popescu, *Jucătorul din umbră – Caracterul pivotal al Africii Subsahariene și implicațiile acestuia asupra securității euro-atlantice*, Editura Militară, București, 2017.



Fig. 3: Galați – Gdansk Corridor<sup>450</sup>

In this context, China has emerged in the regional equation and has begun extracting from the potential Western sphere of influence those states where Russia either:

- had triggered frozen conflicts (Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova),
- had lost the political control at some point (Bulgaria),
- or is an economic player, but cannot have the necessary force for generating a radical change of geopolitical orientation (Turkey).

The only state that has resisted and resists the assault of both the two *de facto, conjunctural or not*, major powers in the region is Romania.

What is occurring is a clear delimitation of the camps on the regional and European “chessboard”. On the one hand, there are the partners of the new Eastern Sino-Russian bloc of the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, and on the other hand, the allies of the Euro-Atlantic format. Allies engaged, at the regional level, in the masterplan of the North-South, East-European Corridor, of the *Three Seas Initiative* and the *Bucharest-9 Format*, which acquires in this context a huge strategic importance.

Any concession in favor of the two Eastern powers such as any postponement on the implementation of the North-South, Eastern-European Corridor and, especially, a diminished involvement of Romania in the 3SI format, is a step forward for the regional Russian-Chinese strategy. *In this context, the Eastern transport corridor, Galați-Gdansk, connecting the Romanian Danube port of Galați, going along the Prut, Siret and Vistula rivers to the seaport of*

<sup>450</sup> CANALUL DUNARE - SIRET - MAREA NORDULUI, 08.08.2015, <http://politici.weebly.com/transporturi/canalul-dunare-siret-marea-nordului>, accessed on 05.05.2020.

*Gdansk, in Poland, becomes vital for maintaining the Black Sea region in the Western sphere of influence (see map in Fig.3)!*

In addition, it is becoming increasingly clear that the international system is slipping into bipolarity. A bipolarity that will be generated by Russia's policy of alliances within the current trilateral of the international system's leading powers. It is threatened, on the one hand, by the emergence of the Chinese hegemony on her Southern border and by Beijing's masterplans in Eurasia and the Arctic region, and, on the other hand, by the cold, competitive relations with the USA, which have described her as the main threat to their own national security, Russia is forced to juggle between the two partners of the global strategic trilateral. A threesome game in which Russia will have to choose a lesser "evil", relying on her technological research in the military field and her huge nuclear arsenal, which she will parade it whenever she will feel threatened by any of them.

But there are some other aspects worth to be mentioned. While China comes with the economic instrument of hard power, the US uses the other, the military one. While China, with Russia's agreement, has largely assigned its Southern pivot zone of sub-Saharan Africa as an area for expansion and development, lowering demographic pressure at the common border, the US is asserting its role as superpower in Europe and comes into direct competition with Russian interests. A competition that is gaining "hot" accents in the Black Sea region, where:

- Turkey is playing her own geopolitical game, as if it is detached from Euro-Atlantic commitments,
- Bulgaria becomes China's strategic partner and deepens her strategic partnership with Russia in the energy field<sup>451</sup>,
- Former Soviet states, faced with frozen conflicts, are looking for survival formulas for state and economy in collaboration with China.

Between the military and the economic threat, what will be Russia's choice? It seems that, so far, Russia (at least at the tactical level) is leaning towards the second option, the two Eastern powers playing in tandem, both within international institutions and at the regional level, in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and South America, in the Mediterranean Sea or in the Black Sea region. But there could be another calculation in this choice. More and more voices are contesting China's true financial power, saying that it is built on shifting "sands", while US military power is as real as possible. In these circumstances, the Russian-Chinese bloc would be nothing more than another Russian "maskirovka", meant to move away the competitive zone from her security "ring" of Central Asia, Caucasus, Ponto-Baltic Isthmus.

But even so, the Chinese Black Sea "economic belt" associated with Russia's military domination of the region risks to remove the Western influence

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<sup>451</sup> *Bulgarian Head of State: Bulgaria Can Deepen its Strategic Partnership with Russia in the Field of Energy*, 04.03.2019, *novinite.com*, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/195563/Bulgarian+Head+of+State%3A+Bulgaria+Can+Deepen+its+Strategic+Partnership+with+Russia+in+the+Field+of+Energy>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

from the Southern component of the Ponto-Baltic Isthmus - Eurasia's most geo-strategically valuable space - and to lower the "iron curtain" over this area again. A "curtain" that could act on both, the East - West axis and the North - South axis, automatically transforming Romania into a bridgehead of the Atlantic influence and guardian of the mouths of the Danube - a strategic objective targeted by Russian expansionist plans since the times of Tsar Peter the Great (1672-1725). An objective increasingly targeted by the Chinese presence in Ukrainian and Moldovan ports. It is a target that should also be seen in the context of Sino-Ukrainian military cooperation. A "curtain" supported by the current decline of the Chinese presence in Europe<sup>452</sup>.

Therefore, Romania must be supported militarily and economically by her Euro-Atlantic allies and must be interconnected with Poland, the other state of the Eastern flank, but also with the other Central and Southern European states within the 3SI strategic corridor. Georgia and Moldova should also be supported economically and militarily by Western allies and interconnected in Ponto-Caucasian security formats, all the more so as the two Pontic states have not developed military partnerships with China. And last but not least, a formula for a diplomatic solution of the conflict in Ukraine, of which ultimately benefits China and Russia, should be sought.

All the more so as China's geopolitical and geoeconomic game in the Pontic region, that has turned into a real "silent threat" to Euro-Atlantic interests, serves and announces potential reconfigurations of regional and global spheres of influence.

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<sup>452</sup> Xue Qing, *How China is losing Europe*, The Diplomat, 25.05.2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/05/how-china-is-losing-europe/>, accessed on 01.05.2021.

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