

MICHEL FOUCHER

Chair of applied Geopolitics at College of World Studies (FMSH-ENS), former Director of the policy planning staff of the French Foreign Ministry

In-Kook PARK

Now I would like to invite Prof. Michel Foucher, Chair of applied geopolitics at College of World Studies and former Director of the policy planning staff of the French Foreign Ministry. He will present on One Belt One Road and South China Sea issues.

Michel FOUCHER

I will focus on two main aspects of Chinese projection of influence, OBOR and South China Sea.

It's important to understand that the general context has changed. The time of low profile in foreign affairs is over. The watchword Go Global » 走出去 Zǒu chūqù zou chou chie, has been completed by a second one since 2012 fenfa yuwei, striving for achievement.

So classical Realpolitik is the new norm, with areas of influence, pacts and alliances, logistical and military facilities abroad.

Among the tools of external projection - new institutions, diplomacy of regional forums, trip diplomacy, energy diplomacy and access to raw materials, soft power, ..., I will focus only on two of them : a explicit maritime strategy and the OBOR, which is both continental and maritime.

1) Maritime issues

The new naval facility in Djibouti in 2017 will be the first since the retreat of Chinese troops from North Korea in 1958. The concept of foreign facilities was advocated by Shen Dingli, head of the Center for American Studies in Fudan, as early as 2000. The official argument for the Tadjoura Gulf base is logistics, with is on line with the OBOR program, with Suez Canal and Greek port presence. I understand that there is also a plan for a facility in Namibia, close to Walvis Bay.

But it is also in compliance with the White Paper on military strategy released in lay 2015, which is the ninth one since 1998 but the first to insist exclusively on strategy. The main argument is that in favourable strategic context at the world scale, armed forces have to shift to an active defence posture with a stronger naval presence on riparian seas. The maritime realm is one of the 4 critical sectors where to increase capacities (along with space, cyber and nuclear). The White Paper writes that it is time to give up the traditional mentality, which states that land prevails over the sea.

I quote : « It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation. »

It means that the South China Sea disputes is first and foremost about maritime strategy and not only about the divergences between the international law of the sea and claimed historic rights.



The famous 1947 nine-dash line, if enforced, could deprive the Philippines of 80% of their EEZ in the west, 50% of the EEZ of Vietnam, 90% of Brunei's and 30% of Indonesia's.

After the arbitral proceedings instituted by the Philippines against China in 2013 under the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (12 July 2016) (which is not the ICJ) concluded, I quote, that there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the 'nine-dash line'.

And I understand that the line is now on Chinese citizens passports and official documents.

China is not the only country to transform tidal reefs into polders so as to build runways. Vietnam, Taiwan and others are doing the same

The issue leads to a simple question: China claims 85,7% of the maritime space in South China sea (Eastern Sea for Vietnam) without taking account of the rights of the other riparian states, how to play a growing role as a global actor, which ratified by the way the Convention of the Law of the Sea?

To understand better Chinese claims, it is important to refer to two main features of strategic significance: the one is bathymetry (the deepness of the seas, greater in the northern part, close to Sanya naval base) and the other one is the existence of underwater corridors in the middle of shallow waters of the Spratleys, with fit for East- West and North-South navigation by sub-marines.

Of course, the argument of FONOP (Freedom of Navigation Operations) raised by the US government is important but what could be the interest of China to block any trade routes, which are first inbound and outbound in Chinese harbours.

I will stop on that issue, and to go further, records of official statements during the last Shangri La meeting in Singapore are available, including the official position presented by the French Defence Minister about the primacy of the Law of the Sea, in times where regional order, as an effect of historical process, may evolve and change without catastrophic instability. I quote. If not, what will happen in the Mediterranean to-morrow of the Arctic?

II) One Belt One Road, or Yidai yilu,

It seems to be the grand design of President Xi. It has a strong geo-economic dimension, which could shape geopolitics in the immediate neighbourhood, notably Central Asia.

A look at the diplomacy trip of the first semester 2016 shows that President Xi is watching closely the development of the project Yidai Yilu, with visits in Central Asia, Egypt but also places like Poland and Serbia .

He travelled also to Saudi Arabia and Iran, to secure energy access and to protect Chinese interests after the agreement on nuclear programme. But Iran is on the map of OBOR program, west of Central Asia and with a long coast.

By the same token, investments in Pakistan are on the way; Laos and Cambodia offer access to Mekong river and UDG Group from Tianjin is building an harbour in the gulf of Thailand, with PLA (People's Liberation Army) which was inaugurated by Zhang Gaoli deputy vice-PM and member of the Permanent Committee of the Political Bureau. Myanmar is becoming more complex.

Launched by President Xi during a speech in Nazarbaev University in Astana (september 2013), OBOR a two dimensions, a maritime one and a continental one. An Action Plan has been published in March 2015, three days



before the closing date of application for membership at the new Asian Investment Bank for Infrastructures, another Chinese initiative.

The OBOR project is managed by a “small leading group” headed par Zhang Goali, with Yang Jeichi, Wang Yang and the head of the centre for political research of the CCP, Wang Huning. The general secretary is Ou Xiaoli.

The economic context is a slowing path of growth but this objective is to reinforce connectivity, the key word, with Eurasia and East Africa, without precise geographic definition, with networks of infrastructures (transport, energy and digital).

OBOR is also a way to export industrial over-capacities, to improve trade routes, to integrate inland China with its peripheries and to diversify access to raw materials and to contribute to stability in the border regions. OBOR gives a continental dimension to globalisation, which is so far almost exclusively a maritime one. 40 Bn\$ will be devoted to connectivity, financed by the OBOR Fund (this is a private fund, a kind of investment fund backed by Chinese financial institutions) and the AIIB. The first project is the hydro power in Karot, Pakistan. One the major stake is to unlock Central Asia and give Western and Southern China access to the warm seas (Gwadar in Pakistan, in competition with Chabahar in Iran with India).

Another horizon is Eurasia, where trans-continental trains are already circulating: 18 days between Cengdu and Duisbourg, 10 to 13 days less than by sea but more expensive. This is why President Xi paid a visit in Poland, and signed an agreement on rail transport. The visit to Serbia is complementary of the investment by Cosco in Athens container harbour, after Suez Canal facilities.

One impact of OBOR strategy is that Central Asia will soon or later be the first step to the formation of a yuan monetary area. Another one will be achieved when digital network will cease to be exclusively maritime with sub-marine cables. Geo-economy will end-up to create solid influence.

With OBOR, China seems to get inspiration form the worldwide network of bases and facilities of the British Empire in the XIX century. India was the power base. To-day, India is bypassed and the main goals are the markets and the resources, everywhere.

The only major hurdle to this grand strategy is security challenges, Pakistan, Central Asia and the Middle East. Like in previous external projections by global actors in the past, China will have in its turn to engage deeply in handling geopolitical crises to protect and promote its far-reaching interests.