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Revista de Antropología, Ciencias de la Comunicación y de la Información, Filosofía,  
Lingüística y Semiótica, Problemas del Desarrollo, la Ciencia y la Tecnología

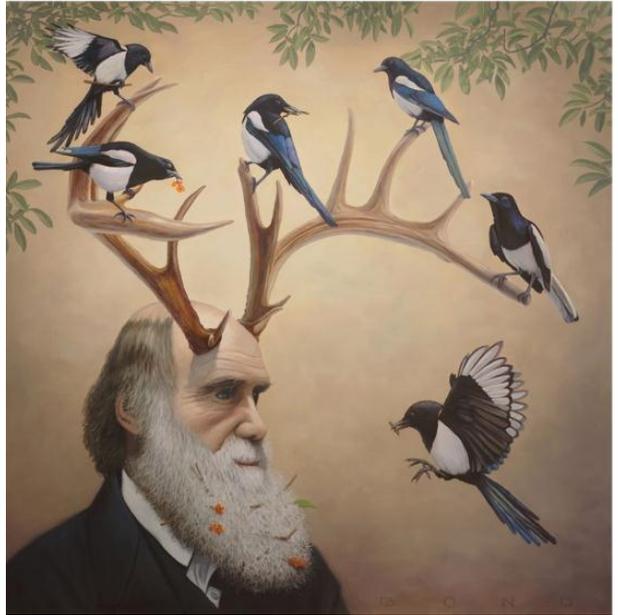
Año 35, 2019, Especial N°

# 22

Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

ISSN 1012-1537/ ISSNe: 2477-9385

Depósito Legal pp 198402ZU45



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Facultad Experimental de Ciencias  
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas  
Maracaibo - Venezuela



# Digital silk road in the context of the people's Republic of China

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## Abstract

The purpose of the article is the study and analysis of one of the components of OBOR - the Digital Silk Road in the context of the vision China foreign policy via the system-structural approach and comparative-comparative analysis. The main result of the study is the identification of new mechanisms of influence, features of the digital diplomacy of the PRC and the tools of soft power of China. Also, the conclusion was made that the Digital Silk Road project logically closes the Chinese initiative one belt - one road, girding the whole world with transport, economic, digital ways.

**Keyword:** Digital, Silk, Road, China, Diplomacy.

## Ruta digital de la seda en el contexto de la República Popular de China

### Resumen

El propósito del artículo es el estudio y análisis de uno de los componentes de OBOR: el camino de la seda digital en el contexto de la visión de la política exterior de China a través del enfoque estructural del sistema y el análisis comparativo comparativo. El resultado principal del estudio es la identificación de nuevos mecanismos de influencia, características de la diplomacia digital de la RPC y las herramientas de poder blando de China. Además, se llegó a la conclusión de que el proyecto de la ruta digital de la seda cierra

lógicamente la iniciativa china un cinturón, una carretera, dotando al mundo entero de medios de transporte, económicos y digitales.

**Palabra clave:** Digital, Seda, Carretera, China, Diplomacia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the President of People's Republic of China Xi Jinping announced an initiative to create a large-scale project One Belt One Road combining the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (PRC) confirms that the implementation of this project has become the focus of the PRC's foreign policy activities. In 2017, China declared a new initiative to create a Digital Silk Road as a part of the OBOR project. The construction of the Silk Road infrastructure is closely linked to the creation of a Digital Silk Road, which offers consumers a new level of logistics and retailing goods through the introduction of modern technologies (BROWN, 2017; ALTAN, OZTURK & TURKOGLU, 2018; BARRETO & ALTURAS, 2018; SADEGHPOUR, FAR, KHAH & AKBARDOKHT AMIRI, 2017; SEMA, DEMIRKAN & EMRE, 2018).

The Digital Silk Road in its spirit corresponds to the principles of the industrial revolution 4.0 and the state program of the People's Republic of China Made in China - 2025. Qualitative growth of industrial automation and technological modernization are planned within the framework of this program. Digital Silk Road has become one of the priorities of China, aimed at reducing production costs,

improving the global competitiveness of Chinese products, enhancing trade relations with the countries participating in the project. These goals are going to be achieved through the development of the digital economy, artificial intelligence, cloud technologies, the Internet of Things, Big Data technologies, satellite navigation system, ultra-fast broadband Internet Plus, etc. (LIU, 2017).

It should be noted that the Digital Silk Road (DSR) (like Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR)) is an international project affecting the interests of many countries. The economic component plays a major role there. Also, within the framework of foreign policy initiatives, the government of the PRC creates new mechanisms to increase soft power of the state and use them to solve foreign policy issues (JACOBS, 2012).

## **2. RESEARCH METHODS**

The methods of research allow us to see the main trends in the development of China's foreign policy and also evaluate the diverse mechanisms of China's foreign policy initiatives, as well as to analyze the DSR development prospects in terms of digital diplomacy. The theoretical and methodological bases of the research are the concepts of scientific works in the field of modern international relations (HONG, 2018). The methodology of existing researches contributes to a better understanding and deep analysis of the Chinese DSR project. The application of the general scientific logical method allowed us to

study the internal relations and mechanisms of the PRC's foreign policy activity in its continuity and consistency, considering internal logical connections between certain elements (YING, 2018).

### **3. RESULTS**

DSR is the Chinese project to create a Digital Silk Road – the development of IT-sphere in various areas and building the system of the digital world along all the routes of the new Silk Road. E-commerce, industrial computer networks, Internet banking, communications, high-tech developments, smart cities are all included in the DSR project. This idea is not new. Back in 2001, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) scientific committee decided to create a virtual silk road. According to the plan of the NATO Scientific Committee, this initiative was going to transform the entire region (Central Asia, Transcaucasia and Eastern Europe) into a zone of stability, security and good neighborliness. At the same time, it was supposed to serve the achievement of national development goals - progress in science and education, economics and business, as well as contribute to the formation of a democratic and technologically-savvy society.

Experts and analysts also underlined certain risks for this region: in addition to scientific progress, the virtual Silk Road project has significant geostrategic importance for NATO countries. In this case, their offensive is unquestionably active in the virtual space

(KHIZHNYAK & KHIZHNYAK, 2018). Digital diplomacy is becoming one of the most important areas of foreign and domestic policy of any state. China, in this case, is no exception. The country's leadership, which has long been actively using soft power technologies for its own purposes, highly appreciated the potential of digital diplomacy – the use of information and communication technologies to solve foreign policy problems. Beijing sees its main goal is not only the promotion of foreign policy, but also ensuring internal stability. Now China has leading positions in the growth rate of the Internet users' number and in their total number.

For example, the popular WeChat mobile communication system has more than 500 million subscribers. According to domestic analysts, the 50 millionth army of Chinese migrants – Huaqiao– plays a significant role in the international influence of the Chinese segment of the Internet, national social networks and mobile applications. An important achievement of Beijing's soft power was the reorientation of the Huaqiao: today they see China as their homeland, not the Republic of China, as it was at the dawn of the communist China emergence (KENNETH & VIKTOR, 2013). It should be noted that the use of Western information exchange services by the Chinese was slightly decreased. The Chinese alternatives remain in priority: QQ (analog of ICQ), Sina Weibo (analog of Twitter), WeChat (WhatsApp, Viber), Renren (Facebook), etc. To promote national social networks and instant messengers, their foreign versions are being created. For example, WeChat is available in 15 languages of the world, including Russian.

In the XXI century, the Internet and social media are becoming effective political weapons. China, in its turn, needs digital parity with Western countries. The start of the Digital Silk Road project confirms the readiness to build up forces in this area and Beijing's potential to become a leader in the coming years. Digital Silk Road has become one of the priorities of China, aimed at reducing production costs, increasing the global competitiveness of Chinese products and the growth of trade with the countries participating in the initiative. These goals will be achieved through the development of the digital economy, artificial intelligence, cloud technologies, the Internet of Things, Big Data technologies, a satellite navigation system, ultra-fast broadband Internet Plus, etc.

Chinese companies cover developing countries with a gigantic network of fiber-optic highways and mobile communication stations – it is assumed that in this way the partner countries will be provided with digital infrastructure according to uniform standards. For example, the telecommunications company China Mobile is currently building fiber optic highways to Myanmar, Nepal and Kyrgyzstan. And Huawei is ready to cable Pakistan, Djibouti and Kenya, and also takes an active part in the deployment of the 5G network in the countries participating in the OBOR Project.

The large-scale project of the People's Republic of China One Belt One Road is transformed from a purely economic (SREB) into a geopolitical one. Now we have four directions already: the SREB, the XXI century MSR, and the new ones –Polar Silk Road and Digital Silk

Road. China actively applies modern political technologies, uses economic tools to achieve its own goals. This process carries certain risks. Chinese technological giants have long been suspected, not without reason, of close cooperation with the authorities.

Therefore, there are no guarantees that the installed systems will not have backdoors that Beijing can use for intelligence or propaganda purposes. The construction of infrastructure and the supply of information technologies, as a rule, are accompanied by personnel training, which is not always neutral. As some researchers note, employees absorb cultural and political values as they acquire skills (WASSERMAN, 2015). After all, many internships are carried out in Chinese media companies. In addition, they adopt the Chinese view of journalistic practice, getting the opportunity to compare this approach with what is offered by Western media professionals.

The involvement of a large number of foreign countries in the Chinese initiative to build a single belt and a single path inevitably forces the Chinese government to create a positive image of a partner in recipient countries. For this purpose, soft power tools are being applied. Following this concept, China seeks to force the states involved in the OBOR project to voluntarily admire its values, leading to a desire to follow the PRC as a successful example of achieving prosperity, well-being and openness. Soft power, in this case, implies the formation of a favorable image of the PRC in the minds of the local population not only through diplomatic mechanisms but also through economic assistance, business communications, the provision of

scholarships and grants, training programs, the opening of educational institutions and targeted media policies.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

For the full implementation of this plan, the Chinese government needed the creation of a Digital Silk Road. At first glance, the construction of the Digital Silk Road is directly related only to investments abroad, directed, as a rule, to the construction of international data centers and the development of logistics infrastructure (terminals, hubs, distribution centers). Recipient countries benefit from external effects, including increased demand for electricity and increased employment. The development of infrastructure and logistics, the emergence of smart cities and science parks, as well as the introduction of information and communication technologies, lead to the overall economic development of the OBOR countries.

On the other hand, alike the case of the NATO virtual silk road project, the Chinese side is seeking complete control and strengthening its own influence, including cyberspace. Network technologies are becoming the main instrument of digital diplomacy in China, and the Digital Silk Road project logically closes the OBOR initiative, girding the whole world with transport, economic, digital ways. This foreign policy strategy is driven by the desire to realize the Chinese dream - a large-scale development plan for the country, implemented within the

framework of the concept of One Belt One Road. OBOR covers the entire world island, building an economic and sea bridge from Asia to Europe.

## 5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales

Año 35, Especial No. 22 (2019)

Esta revista fue editada en formato digital por el personal de la Oficina de Publicaciones Científicas de la Facultad Experimental de Ciencias, Universidad del Zulia.

Maracaibo - Venezuela

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