

The great Chinese realignment

by Guy Mettan,* Geneva



Guy Mettan
(Picture ma)

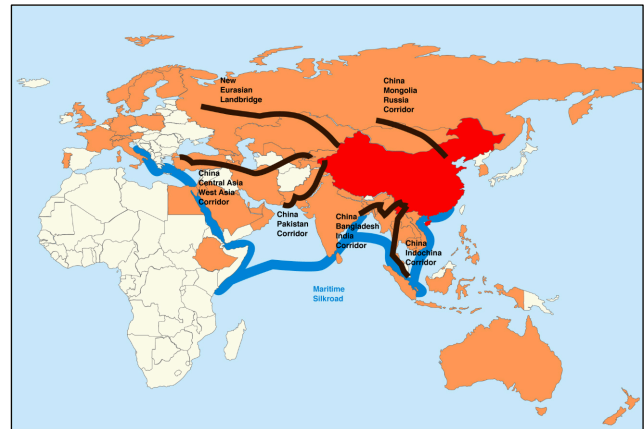
Responding to a Chinese invitation, I participated for around eight days in various meetings organised on the “Third New Silk Roads Summit” which was held in Beijing on October 17 and 18. By its scale, this forum was the largest international event since the Winter Olympic Games were held in February 2022. More than 130 countries, dozens of heads of state, prime ministers, and ministers from all backgrounds and all obediences were to be seen there, with the notable exclusion of Westerners and the G7, only represented by neighbouring Japan and a few leaders from the Balkans.

In the absence of time distance, I would like to share with you some impressions. First, on the internal level, I had the feeling that China had taken a quantum leap in terms of digitalisation of society, well beyond what is common in our country.

It is impossible to survive without the *WeChat* App, which solves almost all problems of everyday life. Anecdote in passing: business cards, once essential to any exchange, have disappeared in favour of personalised QR codes.

All common western Apps such as *Google*, *WhatsApp*, *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Telegram*, *X*, and others like *LinkedIn* have all been banned in favour of Chinese solutions. Was this in reaction to Huawei’s boycott and accusations of espionage or by desire to censor foreign influences? Everyone must judge for themselves.

There is also no doubt that the Chinese economy is in full realignment. A journey on a high-speed train (350 km/h nonetheless) to the railway port of Xian, starting point of the new Silk



China’s investment in international infrastructure projects as part of the BRI benefits everyone involved by creating jobs and growth. (Graphic Wikipedia)

Roads to Europe and the Indian Ocean, is enough to highlight Beijing’s determination to find new business opportunities with the Global South, the Middle East and Russia. At the same time, the magnitude of the real estate crisis and over-investment in the building sector becomes evident by seeing construction sites and dozens of abandoned high-rise buildings. Although spectacular, it is less devastating than the 2008 American subprime crisis.

However, most disturbing is the fact that Chinese leaders seem to have endorsed the new partition of the world. They took notice of western distancing – or even hostility? – towards them and therefore focus on countries most likely to favour them, such as Russia. This was demonstrated by *Vladimir Putin’s* welcome at the summit, as well as the Asian neighbours, and especially the Muslim, African and Latin American world, representing two thirds of the UN member countries and of humanity. A strategic option very well received by the Global South, no matter what we say in our country.

Officially, there are no signs of any animosity against Europe or the United States. On the contrary, one seeks to preserve, as much as possible, good economic relations with the West, and emphasise the inclusive and open dimension of the BRI [Belt and Road Initiative] project for everyone.

But in practice, the West gets simply ignored. Beijing appears to have realised that the heart is no longer in it and that, under the influence of the

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United States which clearly defined China as its main adversary and its hysteria unleashed last winter against the phony spy balloon – there was no longer much to expect from the West, and from the Europeans in particular since the outbreak of the Ukraine war. The turnaround of Italy, which had nevertheless joined the New Roads project, also left its mark. Thus, for Beijing, the far-western tip of the Silk Roads stops at the Poland-Balkans-Greece line.

Finally, a word about Switzerland. Our country was not invited to join the summit, even though the Chinese hold Switzerland in high esteem and have always regarded it with respect, as this was the case during President *Ueli Maurer's* visit in 2019. Austria received an invitation, which their green ministers refused to honour. But not us. Why? Out of solidarity with Russia, which we

have heavy-handedly sanctioned? Possible but unlikely.

But a Polish colleague whispered in my ear that the campaigns led by the University of Basel, cutting ties with the Chinese academic world, and working against the Confucius Institute in Geneva, have left their mark.

An anonymous video toured European countries last year: it virulently denounced the Geneva institute as being a den of Chinese spies and aggressively attacked Ueli Maurer, portrayed – what paradox! – as a supporter of the Chinese communist dictatorship. Following this campaign, Poland suspended its collaboration with the Confucius Network. A singular event perhaps, but its symbolism wasn't missed in China ...

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")