

The New Silk Road:  
logistics disruption in the  
North-West European port system?

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# Introduction

The East-West route between the Far East and Europe is—together with the Pacific route between Asia and the Americas—a dominant route for containerised trade, traditionally served by deep-sea transport and making use of large container hubs such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Shenzhen or Singapore in Asia and Rotterdam, Antwerp or Hamburg in Europe. Since 1967, the first containers were transported by rail between the Far East and Europe in the so called Trans-Siberian Landbridge. Since 1971 this landbridge became an accepted container route (Hayuth, 1987). Recently, a number of alternative routes emerged: a new, revitalized landbridge, a northern route (Infographic 1) and the ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative. Especially this One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative is seen as a game-changer for global logistics flows and as a potential force for disruption of current logistics practises and structures—some even expect a return of a ‘global around the world transport system’ because of the OBOR initiative (Haralambides, 2017). In this chapter we present our vision on the impact of One Belt, One Road, or the New Silk Road, for the ports of North-West Europe. First, we present the OBOR concept in more detail in section 2. In section 3 we identify driving forces for this initiative. In section 4 we take a closer look at OBOR-logistics investment in Europe, in section 5 we present a comparative analysis of different transport routes between Europe and the Far East and assess the competitive position of OBOR. In section 6, possible effects on the North-West European port system by OBOR are identified and in section 7 we present possible strategies by the ports and maritime stakeholders of North-West Europe to react on OBOR. Finally we present some conclusions.

## ‘New Silk Road’ concepts

“Yi dai, yi lu”, ‘One Belt, One Road (OBOR)’, the (Maritime) ‘New Silk Road’. These concepts refer to Chinese President Xi Jinping’s 2013 initiative to create a modern, USD 890 billion version of the ancient silk road (Johnson, 2016)—in total, cumulative OBOR investment will be USD 4 trillion (The Economist, 2016). In this chapter we distinguish between the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ (One Road) and the land based ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ (One Belt). In its simplest form OBOR is an infrastructure project that aims to establish a transport corridor that connects 4.4 billion people (Notteboom, 2016). Chinese investment is increasingly directed to the Silk Road. Investment in ports, like in the port of Piraeus by Chinese shipper Cosco Shipping Lines, is an important part of the project but also investment in a Chinese-designed

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