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The Old Silk Road and the New Silk Road

An Analysis of the Changed Discourse

Lubina Sarwar

Abstract

The 'Silk Road' had predominantly been a series of trade routes that intertwined their way through Europe, Central Asia, Persia to China to facilitate exchanges of trade, commerce, culture and knowledge roughly between 130 BC and 1453 AD. Known for trades of silk and spices, it was a significant economic corridor for almost one-and-half millennium connecting major regions of the world. In 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping resurrected the idea to re-open trade corridors between China and its neighbors in the west and notably Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe, and put-forth the idea of 'The New Silk Road'. In May 2017 China held first summit of 'Belt and Road Forum' (BARF) to unveil the idea of 'New Silk Road' before world. The New silk routes are different from the historic silk routes as the former served as a mode of connection for trade and cultural exchange with little political significance. Contrarily, the New Silk Road (also called Belt and Road Initiative-BRI) is an overt expression of China's power ambitions in the 21st century and is regarded as hedging strategy of China against the eastward move of USA. It is assumed a game-changer strategy with a potential to shift the center of geo-economics towards Eurasia instead of Asia-Pacific region which is dominated by the USA and its allies. The New Silk Road has brought certain apprehensions with it. The idea of 'New Silk Road' by many nations is viewed as a form of neo-colonialism to grab local resources. Contrary to 'Old Silk Road', it is opaque and ambiguous for it is motivated in the power politics of China. Against this backdrop, the paper will make a comparative study of old and New Silk Road and examine various challenges to the New Silk Road. There is a need to analyse the implications of the New Silk Road and also explore the future prospects of the same amid the challenges that it faces presently, this paper shall try to meet these objectives

Keywords

Silk-Road, China, BRI, OBOR, New Silk Route, CPEC.

Introduction

The Chinese foreign policy underwent a decisive shift since 2012 when president Xi Jinping assumed power. He changed the traditional concept of Chinese foreign policy and adopted a utilitarian approach, from 'hide our capacities approach' to more assertive and 'Go Global Approach' (Jain, 2017). He declared "Socialism with Chinese characteristics",

characterized by mutual understanding, strategic trust, respecting each other's core interests, mutually beneficial cooperation (Lampton, 2013), multi-polarity, focusing on world community of a shared future with common interests (Wang, 2013), non-interference and discarding hegemonism (Wang, 2015) as core principles of Chinese foreign policy. This doctrine focuses on partnership rather than alliance between states, cooperation based on equal footings and inclusive international relations. To achieve these goals president Xi Jinping stressed on peaceful development with connectivity in terms of road, rail, sea links, people to people movement, internet, infrastructure etc through the notion of 'Civilizational partnership' and was named as 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI)* or 'New silk Road' - an advanced state of the erstwhile Silk Road project (Aleksandra and Cerenkova, 2016).

Drawing hugely from the ancient Silk Road the New Silk Road is regarded as the Chinese Marshall plan. Spanning over 70 countries representing 60 percent of the global population and around a third of global GDP, the New Silk Road initiative has been touted as a powerful vision of future global economy centered on China and an important measure to counter the geopolitical influence of USA.

Old Silk Road

The term 'Silk Road' was first used by German geographer Ferdinand Von Richthofen in 1877 to refer to ancient trunk road crossing in central Asia (Foltz, 1999). The term 'Silk Road' is used to refer to a vast network of land and maritime trade and communication routes connecting the far east, central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Iranian and Anatolian plateaus, the Caucasus, the Arabian peninsula and the Mediterranean region and Europe (UNESCO).

Historians are divided on the usage of the term "Silk Road" that flourished in 100 BCE, as there were many roads, routes, paths that headed in the east-west direction. Some prefer to call it 'Silk Road or Silk Route' and others call it "Silk Roads". Those historians using term 'Silk Road' exclusively focus on the trans-Eurasian caravan routes that crisscrossed Eurasia's heartland. But others and mostly contemporary historians choose to call it "Silk Roads", they focus on the network

* Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the official name of New Silk Road. Initially the Chinese name of 'New Silk Road' was translated as 'One Belt One Road Initiative' (OBOR) till 2016, but the word "One" seemed controversial and misleading, so the Chinese government in order to avoid any misinterpretation and criticisms over it named it Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)..

of sea lanes of Indian ocean, the red sea, the Mediterranean and other similar networks of maritime transportation in addition to land routes as part of the route (Beaujard, 2010). Even Ferdinand Von Richthofen differentiated between the two by calling Silk Road as a single route to the 'Land of Silk', whereas Silk Roads were the multiple trade routes between imperial Rome and Han China from which the commodity of silk used to travel to the various parts of world (Waugh, 2007). The road or roads are prefaced with "Silk", as it was the important commodity carried along these roads. The incessant movement of people and goods along these routes resulted in an unprecedented transmission and exchange of knowledge, ideas, beliefs, language, religion, customs and traditions (UNESCO). These roads not only served as a trading conduit but also as an important means of promoting cultural phenomena and exchange of information (Hahm, and Soon 2016). The downfall of the Tang Empire in China in the early 10th century declined the trade along the Silk Road, because with it an era of political upheavals started in China resulting in pandemonium that simultaneously led to trade decline. In the 13th century, the conquests of the Mongols ushered in an era of frequent and extended contacts between east and west. These increased contacts created a demand for Asian goods in Europe, which eventually led to a search for a safe route to Asia due to uncertainty on the old Silk Roads. The discovery of sea route from Europe to Asia in the late 15th century was the final nail in the coffin of the silk route trade. It was easier and safer to transport goods by water than over land that were facing problems of insecurity (Mote, 1999). With the discovery of the maritime route to India by Vasco-Da-Gama (1498 AD), the Portuguese Goa route (1510 AD) and the Malay port of Malacca (1511 AD) became important bases of trade with East diminishing the role and concept of "Silk Road".

New Silk Road

The idea of reviving 'Old Silk Road' was first made by Chinese president Xi Jinping (Tatar, 2013). In his speech at the University of Astana, in September 2013 the Chinese president stated that, 'to forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand space for development in the Eurasian region, we should take innovative approach and join hands in building an economic belt along the silk road; this was for the first time China presented world the idea of "Silk Road Economic Belt" (Wang. 2015). And at the Economic Leaders Meeting of the

Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) held in October 2013 Xi Jinping unveiled the second part of his idea of reviving Silk Road, Xi Jinping stated that, “Since ancient times the south-east Asia region had a fundamental role as hub for ‘Maritime Silk Road’, now China wants to enhance the maritime collaboration with partners of Association of South-East Asian Nations, in order to create new network sea routes” (Jinping, 2013). With it, the idea of reviving old Silk Road was put forward by China before world under the initiative of “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI). The BRI project has the main objective of building a large common Eurasian market, it includes various investment plans that in Chinese government’s opinion are necessary to improve the economic scenario of the Asian continent, thus leading to deep economic and technical partnership and creation of free trade zones (Wang, 2015). Even before Belt and Road Initiative, the idea of reviving Silk Road was made by various countries from time to time like in 1998 Japan put forward the idea of reviving ‘Silk Road Diplomacy’ to enhance ties with central Asia. In 2011, the USA came forward with the proposal of ‘New Silk Road’ presented by the US secretary of state Hillary Clinton while her visit to India. India itself came with the ‘Mausam project’ in 2014 (Zhiping, 2014), but it was only China who put forward the revival of the road more tangibly in the form of BRI project (Wang, 2015).

Old Silk Road and New Silk Road: A Comparison

The old Silk Road was created more than two thousand years ago during the expansion and outbreak of political upheavals towards the west by Han dynasty of china (206 BC to 220 AD). It was stretched on about four thousand miles passing through central Asian countries before arriving in Europe. Apart from silk the main products carried were various Chinese valuable goods like textile, spices, olive etc and these were exchanged for gold, ivory and glass objects. The expansion of routes reached their peak under tang dynasty of China, but with the decline of tang dynasty, outbreak of political upheavals in China and invasions of central Asia by Mongols lead to the outbreak of crusaders and plunders on these routes thus reducing the safety of these routes (McBride, 2015). For many centuries this was the only route of contact between the two extremes of the Eurasian continent. This route served as an important channel in the development of Chinese civilization, of the Indian subcontinent, of Persia, the Arabic peninsula and Europe. The meeting between merchants, pilgrims, monks, soldiers, citizens of

different regions helped cultural fusion (McBride, 2015). One of the prime examples of this was the spread of Buddhism from India into Afghanistan, China, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

New Silk Road or BRI in addition to the revival of old trade routes has two more aspects geo-political and geo-economics. Geoeconomic objective is creating a common market for Eurasia or coming nearer to Europe for trade expansion while as Geopolitical aspect is concerned with establishing China as a global hegemon. With the idea of revival of New Silk Road China is coming with new world order, they are reshaping world order moving away from traditional concept of treaties and alliances to infrastructure as basis, they are knitting world together just as USA knitted world together through alliances after cold war and Britain through network of colonies before world war second.

Belt and Road Initiative is called a 'Belt' as its ultimate goal is the creation of thickly integrated economic corridors rather than a transportation network linking two points, this follows not only ancient path but new regions also (Maçães, 2016). The new Silk Road is defined as Chinese strategic vision, a wide policy aiming to solve internal and external challenges, not a well-defined strategy. The basic idea is to build a thick network of infrastructures facilitating the exchange of goods, knowledge and culture not only between China and Europe but also among those countries in Eurasia, Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe involves in it. The basic aim to facilitate the movement of goods, service and people for boosting intra-regional trade and investment while simultaneously stimulating economic development, (Hooghe, 2016). It is not only a network of infrastructure but a platform to promote and bolster economic integration.

The New Silk Road consists of two main connectivity networks, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Silk Road Maritime Belt (MSR). Silk Road Economic Belt has three main routes through Eurasia; the middle route with oil and gas pipelines (Beijing-Xi-Urumqi-Afghanistan-Kazakhstan-Hungary-Paris) the northern route with Eurasia land bridge (China-Russia-Germany-Northern Europe), and the southern route with transnational highways (Beijing-southern Xinjiang-Pakistan-Iran-Iraq-turkey-Italy-Spain), inspired by the Chinese admiral Zheng during Ming dynasty (1368-1644) the silk Road Maritime Belt has been shaped. It plans to connect China's east coast with Europe via the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean (The Strait Times 2018).

Implications of New Silk Road

New Silk Road is designed mainly to counter various issues China is dealing with, internally it will provide Chinese economy a chance to open markets for its products that have no place in Chinese saturated domestic market (Markus, 2016). Improving transport facilities will boost Chinese industry and solve the problem of overcapacity (Nichola, 2015). In addition to trade with collaborating countries, it will provide China access to energy and primary resources of these countries, the new connections will provide safer access to Chinese industries. Building infrastructure will guarantee demand for goods of Chinese heavy industries like iron, steel, cement, aluminum and glass which suffer from overcapacities (Grieger, 2016).

Moreover, many analysts regard Belt and Road initiative Chinese move to establish herself as an economic and political superpower, by changing the rules that are organizing world economic order today, the BRI is designed in such a way thereby giving China a chance to reorder it (Bruno, 2016). China avers that BRI is a movement to establish the multi-polar world (MOFA, PRC). Some western analysts consider BRI as similar to Americas Marshall plan, but fundamentally it is different, the difference lies in the sense that china's Belt and the road initiative (BRI) is not based on aid or foreign direct investment but on loan financing, the lone similarity between two is of achieving geostrategic objectives.(Shen, 2016). It is presumed by analysts that prime objective of BRI is to tackle the Chinese economic, political and security issues through the projects like China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Thai canal.

Conclusion

The New Silk Road (BRI) is a geopolitical and economic initiative inspired by the ancient Silk Road that once used to serve as an only meeting point between China and Europe. Starting from eastern China, the Ancient Silk Road followed various routes in Anatolia and uniting again in Istanbul and then dividing into the inner regions of the Europe. Anatolia was the bridge in between East and west and it was a major crossroad of the Silk Road.(Vaugh, 2010) . The Ancient Silk Road reached the Pamir region (Mountain range in Central Asia) after going through Iran and Afghanistan's northern territory. This road branched into two arms, one arm passed through the southern part of Turkistan and other arm through India. The New Silk Road follows not only this

ancient path but new regions also. With the New Silk Road initiative China is drawing a new map of world economic order, making China a central power in the world. Beijing is seeking a bigger military and trade role in the world affairs especially in the Indian Ocean region. The Russian affiliation to BRI is making Russia-china-Pakistan triangle very important in the world politics. The objective of New Silk Road is to comprehend five bonds in five different spheres in which China is trying to improve the interconnections between different Asian countries. First is policy coordination and collaboration among the governments of countries located along the Road and Belt initiative. Second is to coordinate in the management of standards of construction network as the project necessitates the building of infrastructure like harbors, bridges, land transport channels etc. third is an exchange of knowledge and emerging sectors like information technology, biotechnology, new energy technology and new material. Fourth is collaboration in financial partnership to enhance cooperation in financial sectors (Chin, 2015). Finally BRI initiative focuses on the people-to-people connection as it will enhance interaction among people leading to the building of common identity (Yafei, 2015) .

With this initiative China is expanding its economic and political influence in the region and in the globe. For china BRI overland networks will enable it to increase its economic sphere of influence with China as centre of power in the world. The diversification of its trade routes will therefore enable China to reduce its dependence on shipping lanes, thus enhancing its economic security. The New Silk Road will facilitate strengthening of relationships in between countries through railways, transportation facilities, transnational gates, energy corridors, and natural gas pipelines thus bringing harmony, peace and economic prosperity.

Despite huge floating there are serious contradictions and apprehensions associated with this initiative both internally and externally. Internally its regarded as threat for Chinese security as with it the country will become vulnerable to security challenges especially to straits of Malacca (the strategic waterways that connect the South China Sea with the Burma Sea on its way to the Bay of Bengal and therefore a strategic place). Externally New Silk Road initiative is mainly criticized due to lack of transparency as nothing is visible; everything is designed, finalized and operated by China itself with the meager role of collaborating country. Another apprehension related to this project

is the question that, what will be the outcome of this initiative as the plan passes through highly political and economically unstable regions of the world (eg. hostile environment from central Asian countries like Afghanistan- which has been called graveyard of empires). There are some toughest areas of the world with serious instability through which BRI has to pass. Another apprehension is related to environment as what will be impact on the eco-system as China is using high machinery tools which has potential of polluting environment. Moreover given the huge nature of the project there are trepidation related to the accomplishment of the project as it took Europeans about three hundred years (as Vasco de Gama came in 1155 to India) to get territorial control on Asia and Africa, it took many decades to set New world order by setting world bank, IMF and certain other setups which worked in setting world order for trade and other development projects. So apprehensions for its boom and completion are there.

It is assumed that Belt and Road Initiative will improve infrastructure, physical connectivity across the region and has potential to be game changer by reshaping global trade. BRI will anchor world's centre of economic gravity in Asia with china as the centre of that centre, with majority of roads leading to Beijing. It is also assumed that the way china is proposing the trade partnership with that the major economies of the Asia will work together there will be no trade war, no alliance with face off against each other. it is also believed that with the expansion of routes China will probably seek to protect those routes (Land and Maritime) that means expansion of Chinese military bases, security arrangements, along with silk route. Also it is believed that BRI initiative will lead to multi-polar world thereby reducing USA's ability to decide unilaterally thus changing the geo-political equation. Despite many apprehensions related to this initiative BRI project is assumed as a game changer in the world politics with potential of global economic development without trade war, leading to new world order based on partnership rather than alliance. No doubt there are many global trade agreements in operation like Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)-an alliance for global development, but it has trepidation of promoting the interests of bigger partner generally (Seshadri, 2013). On the other hand New Silk Road project comes with the idea of equi-development with countries as equal partners. It is believed that to make it success BRI needs a multilateral approach that will allow participating countries to be involved equally in decision making so to foster the interests equally, only then the true idea and spirit of the BRI will be established.

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