

## NEW SILK ROAD DIPLOMACY: INDIA'S CHALLENGES AND RESPONSES

Punit GAUR

*D.Sc. (International Relations), Director,  
Center for G-Global and The Great Silk Road Projects Development,  
L.N. Gumilev Eurasian National University  
(Astana, Kazakhstan)*

Akbota ZHOLDASBEKOVA

*Ph.D. (Political Science), Dean,  
Faculty of International Relations,  
L.N. Gumilev Eurasian National University  
(Astana, Kazakhstan)*

### ABSTRACT

**T**he historical significance of the Silk Road as a network of several inter-linked trade routes connecting Eastern Europe and Africa to South and East Asia, with intersections in the present-day Eurasia or Central Asia, is well established. For the last couple of decades (post-U.S.S.R. disintegration period), voices have been heard from all over the world calling for a revival of the ancient Silk Road with an aim of enhanced overland commercial cohesiveness in the region connected/covered by it. However, the continuous war in Afghanistan over the course of the last three decades and uncertainty in Central Asia have continuously rendered the idea of revival unviable, up until the present time.

Efforts aimed at the revival of the Silk Road seem to be gaining a renewed mo-

mentum lately. It is important to note that the present-day major international powers have their own, distinct concepts of the revival of the Silk Road that seem to be moving ahead at varying paces, operating parallel to each other, if not exactly coinciding.

With all the above inferences, India is still in the process of expanding the association, which would eventually lead to close engagement with major powers. In the rapidly changing geopolitical scenario, some of the most important challenges for India are the adverse economic effects of world economy and energy security along with geocultural relevance in the context of Islamic State and fundamentalism. In this context, this paper aims to elaborate India's challenges and responses for a new Silk Road diplomacy.

**KEYWORDS:** *Silk Road, Central Asia, India, China, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan.*

## *Introduction*

The mystique of the Silk Road has been conjured up as a hazy image of a caravan of camels laden with silk on a dusty desert track, reaching from China to Rome involving trade of not only fine Chinese silk, spices, perfume, grapes, coriander, Baltic amber, and Mediterranean coral but also forming kinship alliances along the route through marriages.<sup>1</sup> Christopher Beckwith describes the rise and fall of the great Central Eurasian empires, including those of the Scythians, Attila the Hun, the Turks and Tibetans, and Genghis Khan and the Mongols associated with this route.<sup>2</sup> Not just the rise and fall of the empires that were associated with this path, but the spread of great world religions such as Buddhism, which emerged from India, was also related to it. The Silk Road has been indeed the “first engagement in globalization.”<sup>3</sup>

The Central Asian saga forms a major narrative in the mystique of the Silk Road. Central Asia was the heart of the great Mongol empire of Tamerlane, site of the legendary Silk Road and scene of Stalin’s cruelest deportations. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of newly independent republics, Central Asia—containing the magical cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, and terrain as diverse as the Kazakh steppes, the Karakum desert, and the Pamir Mountains—has been in a constant state of transition.<sup>4</sup> Civilizations flourished, died and reflowered along this route in Central Asia. It was and still is a region which has been a witness to the Victorian Great Game and to the war-torn history of the region in recent decades. The original Great Game, the clandestine struggle between Russia and Britain for dominance in Central Asia, has long been regarded as one of the greatest geopolitical conflicts in history.

In this context, the historical significance of the Silk Road as a network of several interlinking trade routes connecting Eastern Europe and Africa with South and East Asia, with intersections in the present-day Eurasia or Central Asia, is well established. For the last couple of decades (post-U.S.S.R. disintegration period), voices have been heard from all over the world calling for a revival of the ancient Silk Road to attain enhanced overland commercial cohesiveness in the region connected/covered by it. However, the continuous war in Afghanistan over the last three decades and uncertainty in Central Asia have rendered the idea of a revival unviable, up until the present time.

Efforts aimed at the revival of the Silk Road seem to be gaining a renewed momentum lately. It is important to note that the major present-day leading powers have their own, distinct concepts of the revival of the Silk Road that seem to be moving ahead at varying paces, operating parallel to each other, if not exactly coinciding.

The continuity of this great game in the present times is reflected in the multiple Silk Road initiatives at the behest of various “powers” vying for a place of significance in the world. In this power struggle, the Central Asian region has again emerged as a place of immense geopolitical significance.<sup>5</sup> The rise of the Arab world and China, which have since the ancient times created challenges for other countries, especially in the context of China’s current trade and economic hegemony, are all associated with this route.<sup>6</sup> Today it has become a major policy initiative of the Chinese state that involves the highest level of government functionaries.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See: P. Hopkirk, *Foreign Devils on the Silk Road: The Search for the Lost Cities and Treasures of Chinese Central Asia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> See: Ch.I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present*, Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Traveling the Silk Road: Ancient Pathway to the Modern World*, ed. by M. Norell et al., Sterling Signature Publication, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> See: C. Thubron, *Shadow of the Silk Road*, Harper Collins Publishers, Noida, India, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> See: B.V. Anand, “Afghanistan and America’s New Silk Road Strategy,” 2012, available at [<http://www.vifindia.org>].

<sup>6</sup> See: K. Rezakhani, “The Road That Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2010, pp. 420-433.

<sup>7</sup> See: M. Kaczmarek, “The New Silk Road: A Versatile Instrument in China’s Policy,” 2015, available at [<http://www.osw.waw.pl/en>].

The Chinese idea of a New Silk Road emerged long ago, when Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng visited Central Asia in the mid-1990s. As China's economic boom gained momentum in the 1990s and continued through the first decade of the 21st century, the country has understandably searched for ways to diversify its fast-increasing energy needs, for which the hydrocarbon-rich Central Asian region provided an important source and a rather safe alternative. Thus, China has built two important pipelines to import natural gas from Turkmenistan and oil from Kazakhstan. In addition, China has not only established road and rail connections with the CAR, but is also working on extending them beyond CAR to other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and beyond, to Europe. Of course, China has plans and objectives of its own similar to those of the U.S. and its allies.

In a persistent pursuit of this strategy, Chinese leader Xi Jinping presented the concept of the New Silk Road in Astana in 2013—an aggregation of land and maritime routes, including the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The Silk Road Economic Belt is a Chinese plan to amalgamate the economies of Asia and Europe with the Chinese economy along the Eurasian route through the expansion of transport infrastructure and communication networks connecting railways, roads and fiber optics highways that would link South Asia, South East Asia, Central Asia and Europe along an integrated land corridor. The Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt is an ambitious project aimed at heightening international cooperation and joint development throughout Eurasia. The project, which has been presented by Chinese president under the slogan of “Belt and Road,” is supposed to be essential for the development of the entire region.

The notion of the Maritime Silk Road is another major aspect that is gaining significant importance in light of China's hegemonic attempt to create an overland Silk Road. The Maritime Silk Road emphasizes improved connectivity, but, more importantly, it is designed to improve China's geostrategic position in the world. It is an effort to initiate a “grand strategy” with global implications, which could be very helpful in reinforcing cooperation and raising it to a new level of maritime partnerships. Nevertheless, China has yet to cultivate the much-needed political and strategic trust.<sup>8</sup>

The major reasons for this renewed Chinese interest has been attributed to mostly domestic rationales: a need to preserve stability on its borders and in the western part of China, secure export markets and energy supplies, develop inland transport routes as an alternative to unstable sea lines, and to narrow the development gap between the eastern and western parts of China by Justyna Szcudlik-Tatar.<sup>9</sup> Another proposition in this sphere has been made regarding security and economic imperatives in Xinjiang, home to Muslim Turkic nationalities who have historically challenged Beijing's jurisdiction, thus prompting and shaping China's relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>10</sup> The historical rhetoric that China has built around the mystique of the Silk Road has been challenged by Tansen Sen. He claims that the goal is to link China's historic and modern roles in promoting peace and prosperity for Asia. But the history of ancient expeditions is complicated, with goals and practices unacceptable in the modern context. “Not mentioned ... are the backdrops of conflict and the push to spread a Sino-centric world order.”<sup>11</sup>

The U.S. is another major power vying for presence in this region through its own Silk Road project. Of all these parallel initiatives, the first was the New Silk Road Initiative (NSRI) that has extensively been promoted by the U.S. and its allies. A closer look at the NSRI and the programs related to it makes it apparent that the proponents of NSRI are planning a network of roads, railways

---

<sup>8</sup> See: R.R. Chaturvedy, “New Maritime Silk Road: Converging Interests and Regional Responses,” *ISAS Working Paper*, No. 197, 8 October, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> See: J. Szcudlik-Tatar, “China's New Silk Road Diplomacy,” *PRISM Policy Paper*, No. 34 (82), 2013.

<sup>10</sup> See: H.H. Karrar, “The New Silk Road Diplomacy: A Regional Analysis of China's Central Asian Foreign Policy, 1991-2005,” 2006, available at [[http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object\\_id=102514&local\\_base=GEN01-MCG02](http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/R/?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=102514&local_base=GEN01-MCG02)].

<sup>11</sup> T. Sen, “Silk Road Diplomacy—Twists, Turns and Distorted History,” *YaleGlobal*, 2014.

and pipelines that connect primarily South and Central Asia through Pakistan and Afghanistan. On the face of it, seen from purely an economic and commercial point of view, NSRI seems to be an excellent initiative that can usher the region into a new era of unprecedented economic, trade and energy cooperation. But it is also a hard reality that peculiar geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-strategic significance of the South and Central Asian regions, and interests/objectives of the U.S. and its allies cannot be ignored.

Though fraught with some inextricable political, security and technical complications, the project aims to establish Afghanistan's intra-regional and trans-border trade with Central and South Asia after the withdrawal of NATO forces<sup>12</sup> and to improve Afghanistan's beleaguered economy by reviving one of history's oldest trading routes—the Silk Road.<sup>13</sup> Vladimir Fedorenko believes that with the announcement of the New Silk Road strategy, the United States drew global attention to the various ongoing initiatives aiming to promote trade, economic cooperation and development in Central Asia and in other countries located along the ancient Silk Road.<sup>14</sup> Such a shift in U.S. policy in the Central Asian region from a security-oriented approach to the new trade-driven and economy-oriented approach can become a turning point that empowers other ongoing national and international initiatives, such as those launched by Turkey, China, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, as well as the Customs Union, TRACECA, CAREC, SPECA, and INOGATE, among others.

The presence of other major powers like Russia and Japan is also important. Russia counters the various Silk Road initiatives with its long-standing SCO presence, which has never been a point of overt contestations. Russia's long-standing relationships with the states of Central Asia created the conditions for making the SCO a necessary tool of Russian foreign policy, while Moscow's relations with China and the U.S. have driven the development of the group.<sup>15</sup> With the continuation of the legacy of Russian dominance in the Central Asian region and predominantly its influence over and strong connectivity with the region, and areas beyond this region—China, on the one hand, and Iran and South Asia, on the other—initiatives such as the North-South Corridor and the recently established Eurasian Economic Union acquire a special significance. It is just as clear that Japan is using its Eurasia initiative to try to balance and stabilize its relations with Russia and the U.S., on the one hand, and with China, on the other, in the Great Game being played in Central Asia. While Central Asia as a region and Central Asian Republics (CARs) as individual states apparently seem to be obtaining economic gains from all these initiatives, but still find themselves balancing their acts in an atmosphere of competing influences of major powers, all of which are important to them.

## Positioning India: *Sine qua non*

---

With the expanse of almost 7,000 kilometers, the Great Silk Road as a plausible trade route was a significant passage for India to connect with Asia and Europe from 200 BC to the 14th century AD.

---

<sup>12</sup> See: M.A. Kaw, "New US Silk Route Project for Post-2014 Afghanistan: Myth or Reality," *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 17, 2014, pp. 75-98.

<sup>13</sup> See: R. Standish, "The United States' Silk Road to Nowhere, 2014, available at [www.foreignpolicy.com].

<sup>14</sup> See: V. Fedorenko, "The New Silk Road Initiative in Central Asia," Rethink Institute, *Working paper 10*, 8 May, 2015, available at [http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Fedorenko-The-New-Silk-Road.pdf].

<sup>15</sup> See: B.F. Gonzalez, *Charting a New Silk Road? The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Russian Foreign Policy*, University of Victoria, 2007.

The existing historical accounts of Central Asia secluded by immense deserts and overwhelming mountain ranges with the meandering Silk Road as a vital trade route through it have existed for over 2,000 years. Deconstructing the historicity of Silk Road with respect to Central Asia is required to remove the imaginings of Central Asia from the mold of exoticization as a distant land. The Silk Road is a continuous process whose impact continues from the past into the present and would extend well into the future as well, not just locally, but also globally.

Apart from being a trade route, in India's perception the Great Silk Road was also a germane avenue for cultural and knowledge exchange. This was the only route that allowed India and Central Asia to have a significant impact on each other. Whereas after the disintegration of the U.S.S.R., India lost an opportunity to strengthen the relationships in this region with the conceptualization of "revival of Silk Road." From the peak of the non-alignment movement and up to this day, India has not been able to fully integrate itself into the modern-day Silk Road initiatives.

The issue that arises out of the above-mentioned facts is about India's reaction and India's presence in all the proposed Silk Road initiatives. Anand wonders "whether America's new Silk Road strategy is really new or whether it is old wine in a new bottle? What are the objectives and significance of this strategy?"<sup>16</sup> or what will happen if India joins China's maritime Silk Road?<sup>17</sup> J. Jacob believes that Beijing does not seem to have invested enough effort in convincing Indian policymakers of both China's good intentions and its willingness to see India as an important player in its own right in Asia and the world and as a country not to be ignored when China and the United States talk shop.<sup>18</sup> At the moment, therefore, the view from New Delhi is that China's Belt and Road initiative is about consolidating Chinese leadership in the region, particularly in opposition to the United States. This seems quite worrying to Indian strategists, who understand that it requires a stable and forward-looking relationship between Beijing and Washington for both China's progress and a peaceful Asia. But some believe that in spite of the trust deficit in India with respect to China, India's partnership in this initiative might prove fruitful.<sup>19</sup>

Global interconnectivity is the primary attribute of the globalization era. U.S.-led "Asia rebalancing" and "Asia Pivot" policies aimed at countering Chinese hegemony in Asia, as well as at contending the recently proposed SREB and MSR policies, which are considered an expansion of the Chinese "string of pearls" theory in the Indian ocean and the region, could be seen as rebalancing the U.S. role in this whole region and as an important element of the Great Game being played in Central Asia. On the other hand, India's age-old partnership with Russia and its evolving partnership with Japan have increased these two countries' ambitions of having more impact, especially through the Eurasia project in the context of the Silk Road revival.

With all the above conjectures, India is still in the process of expanding the collaboration and eventually engaging with these countries. In the rapidly changing geopolitical scenario, some of the most important challenges for India are the adverse economic effects of world economy and energy security along with geocultural relevance in the context of Islamic State and fundamentalism. In pursuit of these objectives, which are of utmost priority for Central Asian countries as well, India would not be able to disassociate itself from other countries in this aspect, as well as in the subsequent planning and implementation of the Silk Road plan. In this regard, India is already contemplating the development of strategies like Cotton Route, Spice Route and Mausam to balance its position in this region. Whether these strategies emerge as counter-balancing or as cooperative to the existing Silk Road strategies of other countries in this region is a matter of time.

---

<sup>16</sup> B.V. Anand, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> See: M.K. Bhadrakumar, "Modi Leads India to the Silk Road," 7 August, 2014, available at [www.rediff.com].

<sup>18</sup> See: J.T. Jacob, "Pothole Potential on China's Silk Roads," *Asia Times*, 13 March, 2015, available at [www.atimes.com].

<sup>19</sup> See: A. Mattoo, R. Medcalf, "How the World Looks from India," *The Hindu*, 20 May, 2013.

## *Conclusion*

Great power rivalries between the U.S.-China-Russia troika would define the power balance of and in the Asian landscape in the coming decades. The Silk Road would be a significant tool for manifestation of this rivalry. The Russia-China axis or Russia-U.S. entente-cordiale would influence the future power dynamics in Asia. If this future alliance does happen, then would it be correct to assume that India, Japan, Australia and NATO alliance partners would merely be peripheral actors in a balancing role or that India could be the central rather than a peripheral participant. In the latter case, the arising query is how India can play a proactive role in new Silk Road projects.

Apropos to this entire discourse, India has proposed its own programs like the Spice Route, the Cotton Route and ancient maritime routes with a specific emphasis on the Central Asian region. These programs endeavor to delve in-depth into the two scenarios where India could make its presence felt: as an independent proposer of another Silk Road project or as a strong contributor to an existing Silk Road initiative. It would be significant to know which of the options is more viable for India's position, if the second aspect noted above emerges to be a strong point. However, in either scenario, India's strong presence may act as a smooth game changer in this entire New Silk Road diplomacy. The efforts of the current Indian government have enthused new energy in the Indian foreign policy corridors and may lead to a successful synthesis of various Silk Road initiatives.

---

---