

THE EURASIAN CORRIDOR THROUGH THE NEW SILK ROAD: DIFFERING GEOPOLITICAL PERCEPTIONS

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This article examines the nature of geopolitics and its impact on the international political economy of Eurasia/Silk Road. The research questions are exploratory and aim at revealing the differing geopolitical perceptions of the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the former Soviet Central Asian countries-Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan-within the context of an emerging "New Silk Road". Consequently, the main goal of this article is to contribute to a better understanding of what factors constrain and shape Silk Road initiatives in Eurasia. To this end, the article focuses on geopolitics and regional integration theories through a consideration of the Silk Road initiatives of a number of Eurasian countries.

Keywords: Silk Road, Eurasia, Geopolitics, Regionalism, China, Russia, Central Asia

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, a number of scholars have suggested that various regions of the world have gained increased importance in the current international system and act as an emerging potent force in the process of globalization (Choi and Caporaso 2002; Farrell, Hettne, and Langenhove 2005; Fawcett and Hurrell 1995; Hettne, Inotai, and Sunkel 1999; Mattli 1999). The Westphalian state is referred to as a system of political authority based on territory and autonomy and was the dominant model in the international system up to the 1990s. In the past decade(s), however, the underpinnings of this system have been challenged by the creation of new regional unions or the restructuring of already existing ones. Consequently, the international system has witnessed a *cohabitation* of multiple forms

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and levels of governance. Regions are the building blocks of this new international system and inherently, changes that take place within them affect the international system overall. To a certain extent, the regions and their development provides a context for the examination of newly emerged systemic trends.

The 1990s saw the strengthening of existing regional systems such as the European Union, (Burley and Mattli 1993; Caporaso 1998, 2000; Checkel 1999; Mattli 1999) and the *naissance* of many loose and new regional systems such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), (Ambrosio 2008; Aris 2011; Baizakova 2013; Cheng 2011; Dadabaev 2013; Eder 2014; Yuan 2010; Zhuangzhi 2004) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). However, this article argues that since most of the developed conceptual framework as well as the case studies vis-à-vis the regional systems are *Eurocentric*, the application of these lenses to the growing number of regional systems in other parts of the globe remains at best problematic and at worst elusive.

In addition, it is essential to address the mystery surrounding the question of regional/global dialectic or dichotomy. The growth of regional systems in the past decade does not constitute a threat to trends of globalization. Regional systems can be conceptualized as a component of globalization, a challenge to globalization, or as a parallel process of globalization. However, the growth of regional systems is an important step within the process of globalization.

The fascinating aspect of the Silk Road system is that it came to exist as a region composed by nation-states along Westphalian logic only after the end of the Cold War. An even more captivating phenomenon is the fact that nation building and region building have developed simultaneously. In December 1991, fifteen new political/administrative entities¹ emerged as new states after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In modern times, some of those countries have never enjoyed the status of independent actors in the international arena.

In contrast to other regions, the Silk Road as a regional system is characterized by the absence of democracy and the continuation of some sort of authoritarian leadership. The nature of the regime in place limits the possibility of interest and preference formation from the bottom-up. Consequently, regional integration theories utilized to explain European integration become blurry when applied to the Silk Road regional system.

The current emerging international system is characterized by regional diversity and not by uniformity. Consequently, since regional differences in the structure of the world exist, such differences should also matter theoretically. The current state of regional integration theories suggests more *European exceptionalism* than ‘a’ regional integration theory. However, it would appear to be quite a challenging task to develop a theoretical structure encompassing such regional diversity, though attempts have to be made. At this junction, it will be valuable

¹ The 15 post-Soviet states are typically divided into the following five groupings: Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), Eastern Europe (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine), Eurasia (Russia), Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan).

to look at the geopolitics to understand the prospects of the Silk Road as a political entity.

This article is guided by questions such as: What is the *rationale* behind various Silk Road initiatives? How do those Silk Road countries plan to achieve their goals? Why would those Eurasian transportation corridors stimulate economic growth in the region? To this end, I will elaborate further on various new Silk Road initiatives, their feasibility, their interactions with one other, and on their possible influences on the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation and the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Equally, the question which arises at this point is: To what extent, if any, do those initiatives contribute to a progressive change in the issue-areas and regions?

In this article, first, I will briefly define the concepts of geopolitics, Eurasia and Eurasianism, its various forms, debates, interpretations and directions. A final section highlights those factors that best explain the rationale behind the various approaches to Silk Road initiatives.

GEOPOLITICS

It was the German traveler and geographer, Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen, who first coined the term "silk road" in his multivolume historical geography of China (1877–1912). Moreover, another German geographer, August Hermann, used the term "silk road" for the first time in a title in his 1915 essay, "The Silk Roads from China to the Roman Empire," highlighting the corridor from the "east" to the "west." It is noticeable that the Silk Road has always captured and captivated the Western and Eastern imaginations. All new initiatives and projects regarding the New Silk Road are indicative of those tendencies, inclinations and fascinations.

In fact the "Silk Road" was not one road but many; it was actually a network of roads, generally going East and West, but with spurs into southern Iran, the northern Eurasian steppe, and south over the Hindu Kush, to the Indian subcontinent.

In the 21st century, there is no doubt that new Silk Road projects offered by a number of countries are not only instrumental in terms of laying the foundation for regional cooperation, creating political flexibility, improving economic growth, offering trade diversifications and investing in infrastructure projects such as transportation, mining, and energy, but are also a source of geopolitical frictions and competition among the same countries. All of these represent a historically unprecedented chance for all the Silk Road countries to become important players in the world economy. Besides, for many countries located on the path of the ancient Silk Road, particularly the landlocked Central Asian states, international trade is the only option for sustained economic growth and development.

At this junction, I would like to provide a very brief intellectual review of the research pool out of which my ideas originate. This brief literature review connects my study to the larger intellectual project of international relations (IR) in political science.

EURASIAN GEOPOLITICS RECONSIDERED

Any discussion about Eurasian geopolitics should start with the seminal work of Sir Halford Mackinder: “The Geographical Pivot of History”. Mackinder refers to the Eurasian continent as the “world-island” that contains two-thirds of the world’s population, identifying the defining nature of certain geographic relationships, particularly the “Pivot” or “Heartland” area of Eurasia (Mackinder 1904). Outside of the Pivot area is the marginal or inner crescent, which is part continental and part oceanic. To the south, east, and west of the heartland lie what Mackinder called the “marginal regions” of the inner crescent, which he divided into four geographic areas. Asia possesses two of these regions that he called monsoon lands (China and India), that are each angled away from each other, one to the north and one to the south. Europe and the “lands of the five seas” or the Middle East, are the other two regions surrounding the pivot. These geographic regions coincide with the spheres of influence of the four major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity.

On the other hand, Nicholas J. Spykman’s “The Geography of the Peace” built upon Mackinder’s work in a more extensive and focused manner (Spykman 1944). He explains that there is a new mobility in the Eurasian land mass due to improvements in the infrastructure of rail, road, and airplanes, though the natural obstacles of transportation keep the central Asian region from realizing its power potential in the immediate future. Spykman redefines Mackinder’s Inner Crescent as “The Rimland”, which is the intermediate region between the Pivot and the seas. He also considered this area as the “Eurasian Conflict Zones.”

Moreover, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Samuel P. Huntington set forth an evolutionary piece of geopolitical theory “The Clash of Civilizations.” He presents his work as a theory of culture and civilization that utilizes a modernization theory of political violence (Huntington 1997). As such, it is also very much a geopolitical theory, since civilizations are in part defined by a specific, generally fixed territory. His hypothesis is that conflict in the post-Cold War era will be between differing cultures or civilizations instead ideologies. He argues that this conflict will take place along “cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another.” He pays special attention to Islam, noting that its cultures are to likely be the primary clash in the future of the Western world.

It must be clear by now that the term ‘Eurasia’ is rooted in the classical theories and concepts of geopolitics, particularly the concepts of ‘pivot’ and ‘heartland’ as mentioned earlier. It would be fair to argue that Eurasia is a highly debated, contested and illusive term with different meanings and perceptions in time and space. It has several apparent meanings and dimensions. This article will rely upon a geopolitical view of Eurasia which is very complex and complicated by multiple views and perceptions, often conflicting and contradictory. On the other hand, the term ‘Eurasianism’ is more of a politico-ideological and philosophical concept, with multi-dimensional aspects that emerged and re-emerged in various historical stages, because of philosophers, historians, nationalists, and communists, as well as individual

groups and leaders pursuing their respective goals and aspirations. The geopolitical concept of Eurasianism, with all its changes and modifications, is still very powerful, dominant and alive in historic-cultural, academic, as well as national, political and ideological debates and discourses. For instance, the Russian, Chinese and Central Asian understandings and interpretations of Eurasianism are fundamentally different from each other in terms of underlying goals, objectives, methods, directions and mechanisms of implementation.

RENEWAL OF INTEREST IN THE GREAT SILK ROAD

The direction of routes on the historical Silk Road was not constant, but was subject to change according to the transformation of political conditions in and around Eurasian regions, caused by a number of factors such as climate change and interstate wars.

The Silk Road connection(s) most certainly played a pivotal role in the development of human cultures in the Huang He (Yellow) river valley, Ancient Greece and Persia. The Great Silk Road was one of the earliest channels of cultural exchange in the history of mankind. It has strengthened and reinvigorated mutual understanding and trust among representatives of different religions and philosophies.

Moreover, the various migrations of the populations in Eurasia and their subsequent integration into their new environment through the fusion of races, cultures and languages, contributed tremendously to the uniqueness and the prosperity of the Silk Road. To this end, the Silk Road was instrumental in terms of facilitating a continuous dialogue among different civilizations and cultures.

The most recent period of prominence of the historical Silk Road manifested itself in the 13th and 14th centuries, when Mongolian armies subdued the territories from China to Russia and Persia. This territorial and administrative structure provided a uniform supervisory regime on almost all the Eurasian trading routes for one and a half centuries. However, in the second half of the 14th century, the Great Silk Road was wiped out almost entirely by Tamerlane the Great, of the Timurid Empire.

In subsequent centuries, the Silk Road lost its major significance as a trade route or as a venue for cross cultural exchange, mainly due to the impact of the “Age of Discovery”², the “Age of Enlightenment”³, the “Age of Revolution”⁴, and the “Industrial Revolution”⁵.

² The Age of Discovery is an informal and loosely defined European historical period from the 15th century to the 18th century, marking the time in which extensive overseas exploration emerged as a powerful factor in European culture and globalization.

³ The Age of Enlightenment is an intellectual movement which dominated the world of ideas in Europe in the 18th century. The Enlightenment included a range of ideas centered on reason as the primary source of authority and legitimacy, and came to advance ideals such as liberty, progress, tolerance, fraternity, constitutional government, and separation of church and state.

⁴ The Age of Revolution is the period from approximately 1774 to 1848 in which a number of significant revolutionary movements occurred in many parts of Europe and the Americas.

During the Cold War period, there were a number of attempts to recreate transport corridors in Eurasia. On the East-West axis, the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the PRC signed an agreement to build a “Friendship” railroad connecting the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (KSSR) and Xinjiang, in 1954. Nevertheless, it took another 36 years to finish the project. On the North-South axis, the USSR and Iran signed an agreement in 1975 to build a railroad connection between Turkmenistan and Iran. However, the railroad connection between Mary, Turkmenistan and Meshed, Iran was not completed until 1996.

After a long period of oblivion, partly due to the Cold War and the superpower competition between the United States of America (USA) and the USSR for a good part of 20th century, the United Nations (UN) initiated a project for the revival of the Great Silk Road. This program, namely “The Silk Road Project: Integral Study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue 1988-1997” was a great first step, not only shedding new light on the glorious history of the Silk Road by reopening the doors to the past, but also generating awareness about future cross cultural ventures in the age of intensive globalization.

Undoubtedly, the movements of peoples and cross cultural exchanges have played a crucial role in the evolution and transformation of human civilization. At that junction of human history, the development of cultural contacts and dialogues between the East and the West was particularly important among different populaces occupying the Eurasian continent due to the fact that the end of the Cold War finally allowed an uninterrupted flow of ideas and values to transform cultures and even civilizations.

The 21st century looks promising for Eurasia. There are a number of important initiatives in the region to build an economic corridor (belt) through intensive cooperation among Eurasian countries. Currently, transport corridors have become the major components of the Silk Road. The transportation systems are particularly important to increase economic development for a number of countries on the Silk Road. Consequently, these transport arteries for goods, services and natural resources have become the object of economic wars and geopolitical disputes. In particular, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet Central Asia/Caucasus is the main target of such competition for influence.

BELLE ÉPOQUE FOR EURASIA: A SILK ROAD TO PROSPERITY

The Great Silk Road has existed for more than two millennia and has played an important role in the development of civilizations and trade/economic relations. New geopolitical conditions that have emerged over the last decades in the Eurasian space and the increasing

⁵ The Industrial Revolution was the transition to new manufacturing processes in the period from about 1760 to sometime between 1820 and 1840. This transition included going from hand production methods to machines, new chemical manufacturing and iron production processes, improved efficiency of water power, the increasing use of steam power, the development of machine tools and the rise of the factory system.

role of China and Russia in global affairs have contributed to an understanding about the need to revive the Great Silk Road.

Undoubtedly, Russian history presents a manifestation of spectacular vision, coordination, dedication and leadership when it comes to grandiose transportation corridors in Eurasia. For instance, at the turn of the Century, these included construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad (1891-1905), covering more than 9,000 km — including southern the Chinese branch connecting Chita and Vladivostok through Harbin in Manchuria — or the Zakaspijsky railroad (1881-1891), from the Caspian sea through Turkmenistan to Tashkent, covering more than 1,500 km, or again the Orenburg railroad (1900-1908), creating another connection to Tashkent. Projects on such scale are important signs of the capabilities of a state. Consequently, in this first quarter of the 21st century, echoes of similar ambitious projects related to the creation of Eurasian transportation corridors connecting the East and the West through Central Asia suggest some assurances about the prospects of their attainments (Kapitsin 2015).

Russia is surrounded by three oceans — the Atlantic, the Pacific and the Arctic. However, since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the country has become more limited in terms of its shipping routes, particularly in the west (Bradshaw 2008; Elletson 2006; Morozova 2009). On the other side, the potentiality of the maritime Far East is untapped (Alexeeva 2008; Troyakova 2007). This geopolitical open space has lagged behind in terms of economic development due to the lack of investment in basic infrastructure. The envisaged Silk Road transportation corridors would serve Russia both in Siberia and in the Maritime Far East. Close cooperation among Russia, Central Asian countries and China could unleash the economic potential of Siberia through those transport corridors, to the benefit of all Eurasian countries (Kapitsin 2015).

Three countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS),⁶ namely Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan established the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in May 2014. Russian strategic thinking gives serious consideration to the importance of EAEU on the international scene. In geopolitical terms, historically and traditionally, Central Asia falls in the sphere of influence of Russia and is strategically important in the preservation of its great power status (Allison 2004; Allworth 1967; Allworth 1995; Buszynski 2005; Frickenstein 2010; Poussenkova 2009). In the context of unfolding regional integration in Eurasia, the creation of the EAEU is necessary for reintegration of the post-Soviet space. However, any new ideas and initiatives on the Silk Road cannot perform well without the support of China.

⁶ The Commonwealth of Independent States is a regional organization formed during the breakup of the Soviet Union. Nine out of the 15 former Soviet Republics are member states, and two are associate members (Ukraine and Turkmenistan). Georgia withdrew its membership in 2008 after Russian military campaign in the country, while the Baltic States (Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia) renounced altogether such membership. According to the experts, the CIS countries hold 16,3 % of terrestrial world, almost 5 % of the global population, 25 % of proven reserves of natural resources (including 7 % of world's reserves of oil and 40 % of natural gas), 10 % of the global industrial output.

Deepening economic cooperation and all sorts of interactions must be the basis for the creation of the “Economic belt on the Silk Road” (Shuchun & Tsinsun 2014).

The envisaged economic belt of the Silk Road between Asia and Europe represents a zone of possible mega-infrastructure projects for economic development, taking in consideration the fact that the zone would have contain almost half of the global population and half of the global GDP. Economic development is the main objective of all the new initiatives on the Silk Road. The connection between Europe and Asia would introduce a new critical force and energy to ancient Central Asia, through investment and cooperation in the issues pertaining to transport corridors, natural resources, the agricultural industry, science and technology. The Silk Road à la 21st century would have high-speed transport corridors (automobile and railroad), fiber optic communication lines, oil/gas pipelines and electricity grid connections.

Russia considers the 21st century to be the “Asian Century”. Subsequently, their policymakers have put forward a roadmap stressing the rationale behind the development schemes in the Russian Far East. The development of those mega-infrastructure and logistics projects would inherently create long desired employment opportunities in local economies and eventually make tourism-related activities possible. It is important to remember that the bumpy road to prosperity can be smoothed out by joint cooperative efforts of the Silk Road countries in this intensive phase of globalization.

The traditional Silk Road combined with the envisaged Sea Silk Way and Arctic Passage would most definitely strengthen the Central Asian position through the flow of cargos from South East Asia to Europe, both from the south and the north. China is showing serious interest in the Arctic Ocean as an alternative to the Suez Canal for reaching Europe. China, as the top export country⁷ in the world, depends heavily on reliable and rapid transportation of goods to Europe and North America. Within this context, the Northwest passage and the Arctic Ocean offer immeasurable advantages in terms of cost and time (Brosnan, Leschine, and Miles 2011; Gerhardt et al. 2010; Gupta 2009; Kuhrt 2012; Young 2011; Zellen 2009).

Other important regional powers are advancing other integration projects, such as the South Korean «New Eurasia» initiative. In 2013, the President of South Korea, Park Geun-hye, proposed the “Eurasia Initiative.” Under the motto of “one continent, creative continent, and peaceful continent,” this South Korean initiative proposes a unified system of transport, energy, and trade networks across the vast Eurasian continent. It postulates a “Silk Road Express,” which would connect rail and road networks from Busan to Europe, as well as new sea routes through the Arctic Ocean. The ultimate goal of this Eurasian initiative is the gradual elimination of all trade barriers, leading to the establishment of a vast free trade zone. The main geopolitical aim of this strategic move by South Korea is to align itself with China's “One Belt, One Road” strategy. Correspondingly, the linking of those energy and

⁷ In 2015, global exports were around 18.4 trillion US dollars and China ranked first in exports with an export value of about 2.3 trillion US dollars.

logistics infrastructures through Eurasian transport corridors is expected to create favorable circumstances for a possible diminution of tensions with North Korea by incorporating it into a multilateral negotiation process (Kim 2015).

Although transboundary transportation corridors on the Silk Road may face some regulative excessiveness or technical restrictions, there are also some positive indicators with regard to integration policies in the domain of infrastructure and logistics corridors. For instance, the “northern” railroad transportation corridor is making significant headway. The Minsk-Beijing railroad, partly financed by China, is already in use and transporting cargo to Lodz in Poland through Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus. Moreover, the motor car transportation corridor from Europe to China (8,400 km) through St.Petersburg, Moscow, Nizhni Novgorod, Kazan, Orenburg, Aktobe, Kzyl-Orda, Almaty, Horgos, Urumchi, Lanchow, Cheng-chou, and Ljanjungan (a port on Yellow sea) is under construction. The Russian part is expected to be finished by 2020; Kazakh part by 2017. The Chinese section of the expressway, from Ljanjungan to Horgos, at the border of Kazakhstan (4393 km.), has been in operation since 2004 (Kapitsin 2015).

In China, there is a certain geopolitical asymmetry, in contrast to the Russian geopolitical outlook, with rapid development of coastal areas and underdevelopment of the continental Western parts of the country —Xinjiang⁸ and Tibet⁹. Chinese ports along the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea are geopolitically obstructed in terms of free passage to the seaways, since the area in question contains a number of island and peninsula states — Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan — alarmingly reducing China’s access to sea routes. Moreover, the omnipresence of the US through aircraft carrier groups and military bases in the area, constitutes a substantial geopolitical impediment regarding the transportation of raw materials and energy sources vital for the uninterrupted economic development of China. Therefore, it is essential for China to develop an alternative strategic Eurasian transport corridor in order to import raw materials and fossil fuels from Russia and Central Asia (Kapitsin 2015).

The SCO is another emerging regional organization in Eurasia. This organization, created at the initiative of China in 2001, is not an alternative to the Eurasian Union (advanced by Russia) but on the contrary, they would both supplement and expand each other’s activity zones. The SCO has become an important part of both Russia’s and China’s regional strategy

⁸ Xinjiang is an autonomous region of China in the northwest of the country. It is the largest Chinese administrative division spanning over 1.6 million km². The historical Silk Road ran through the territory from the east to its northwestern border. It is also home to a number of ethnic groups including the Han, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Uygur, Mongols, Tajiks and Kyrgyz. Historically, the area is also referred as "Chinese Turkestan" or Eastern Turkestan.

⁹ Tibet is an autonomous region of China. It was created in 1965 on the basis of Tibet’s annexation by China in 1951. It is also the second-largest administrative division of China by area after Xinjiang, extending over 1.2 million km².

towards Central Asia and the security and economic policies of the newly independent former Soviet Central Asian states. Moreover, the development of the SCO is of wider significance to global politics, security and economics, due to the fact that the core member states, covering 30 million km², form one fifth of the earth's landmass, with one fourth of the global population and one sixth of the global GDP. Russia and China are two of the most prominent states of the international system, as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Over the last decade, the SCO has become a powerful regional organization, enjoying considerable international esteem. Member countries can use this multilateral platform to increase mutual trust and cooperation, thus facilitating intensification of economic relations through public and social awareness in those Silk Road countries, and using multilateral mechanisms more effectively in order to eliminate untenable political outcomes. The Chinese-Russian good neighborhood and friendship relations are playing an essential role in the success of this project (Kravchenko 2016; Luzyanin and Sazanov 2015; Pinyugina 2015; Prihodko et al. 2015).

Undeniably, China has long pursued policies designed to magnify its influence in Asia through aid and investment, and to gain access to Central Asian energy resources and raw materials. To this end, the Chinese dominated the New Infrastructure Bank¹⁰ (NIB), the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank¹¹ (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund,¹² in order to establish a serious alternative to the US-led World Bank (WB) or the Japan-led Asian Development Bank (ADB) for the gargantuan infrastructure projects in Eurasia (Page 2014).

The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) was unveiled in 2013. This is a development strategy articulated by the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, promoting connectivity and cooperation among Eurasian countries. It consists of two main components — the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and the sea-based Maritime Silk Road. This geopolitical strategy highlights clearly China's ambitions to play a more substantial role in global affairs. This project would also have as much impact on China's domestic economy as it would have internationally. Currently, one of China's top priorities is to give a major boost to the domestic economy via exports from

¹⁰ The NDB is a BRICS multilateral development bank established on 15 July 2014, by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The bank was seeded with US\$50bn initial capital, with the intention to increase capital to US\$100bn. The bank will be headquartered in Shanghai. Each country will have one vote and no country will have power of veto.

¹¹ Founded in October 2014, the AIIB aspires to be a global development bank with 21 Asian member countries (China, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Laos, Myanmar, Mongolia, Nepal, Oman, Qatar, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan and Vietnam), with registered capital of US\$100bn.

¹² Launched in February 2014, the China-led US\$40bn Silk Road Infrastructure Fund invests in One Belt, One Road infrastructure projects. The fund is capitalized mainly by China's Foreign exchange reserves and is intended to be managed like China's sovereign wealth fund.

industries with considerable overcapacity, such as steel¹³, cement¹⁴ and aluminum¹⁵. These products are essential for any construction project and China, with the biggest global capacity, is well placed to meet the supply side requirements of those mega-projects on the Silk Road.

Central Asia is a crucial geopolitical factor in the creation of an East-West corridor through the Silk Road. This corridor would present great opportunities not only for the developed nations of Europe but also for developing nations of Southeast Asia. Certainly, the Great Silk Road has played an important role in terms of economic development and cultural contacts among various populaces across Eurasia. The Silk Road served as a diffusion point of not only technologies and innovations but also developments in art, architecture and religion. Today, in this unprecedented phase of globalization, the global market infrastructure requires rapid and cost effective circulation of goods and services. In this regard, railway transportation represents an essential link, which allows the transportation of the products over long distances in a cost effective manner, all year around, irrespective of weather conditions. To this end, there are many attempts by Chinese, Uzbek and Kyrgyz policymakers to support the construction of a China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad, which in turn would be a segment of a larger China-Europe railroad connection.

At the domestic level, all the Central Asian countries are building new internal railroads to reduce transit time between cities. For instance, in recent years, Kazakhstan constructed 1,200 km of railroad and the Russian Federation connected the city of Yakutsk in Siberia to its national railroad network. In the recent years, Uzbekistan has extended its railroad network by more than 500 km, connecting the Fergana Valley to the rest of the country. Kyrgyzstan also built a modest 424 km of railroad (Kindgebaev, N., and Nurbekova 2016).

Kazakhstan has been probably the most active in terms emphasizing the importance of the Eurasian corridor, by putting into practice one of the most ambitious infrastructural projects of the century. Thus Kazakhstan intends to become a key reloading and logistical point for bringing Chinese goods to global markets. “Dostyk-Alashanhou” and “Korgas-Horgos” at the Kazakh/Chinese border are designed to become future hubs to serve exactly that purpose. Therefore the Kazakh government and local authorities have hired remarkably skilled managers from the United Arab Emirates to transform Horgos into a powerful logistic centre.

Kazakhstan develops transit corridors on its territory based on two routes: the “Northern” route, leading to Russia and further into the European markets, and the “Southern” (Transcaspian route) going through Aktau, with exits to Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey.

¹³ In 2015, the global crude steel production was approximately 1,672 million metric tons (mmt). The biggest steel producing country is currently China, which accounted for slightly over the half of global steel production.

¹⁴ In 2015, the global cement production was approximately 4,250 million tons. The biggest cement producing country is China, which accounted well over the half of global cement production.

¹⁵ In 2015, the global aluminum production was approximately 49,300 thousands of tons. The biggest aluminum producing country is China, which accounted for almost half of global aluminum production.

Since the mid-1990s, Kyrgyzstan also developed plans to incorporate itself into the Eurasian transport corridors. Out of eight possible alternative routes for “China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan”, two have taken the dominant position so far: the “Northern” route, going through Kashgar-Torugart-Arpa-Uzgen-Karasu-Andizhan, favorable to Kyrgyzstan, and the “Southern” route, going through Kashgar-Irkeshtam-Sary-Tash-Osh-Andizhan, and favorable to Uzbekistan¹⁶. Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked country, with no outlet to the sea. Consequently, Kyrgyz officials are eager to develop railroad projects connecting Russia to the Persian Gulf. It is possible that this highly mountainous and resource-poor Central Asian country may become one of the important hubs on the Silk Road, where roads from the East to the West and from the North to the South would meet.

By 2020, the volume of cargo transportation between China and Europe may reach considerable proportions. It is important therefore to take into consideration the fact that basic shipment from the Far East to Europe through the Suez Canal takes approximately 40-60 days. On the other hand, transportation overland would shorten that period to a mere 13-14 days.

Evidently, the initiation and development of this Eurasian transport corridor will require coordination of the foreign policies of the involved parties, and there are already solid signs of possible cooperation. To this end, for instance, Kazakhstan, together with Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia and China, have founded a consortium regarding the transportation of cargoes from China to Europe (and in the opposite direction), bypassing Russia. This route in question goes through Kazakhstan, all the way to the Caspian Sea, then by Transcaspian ferry to Azerbaijan, and by rail to Georgia. On December 13th, 2015, the first train from China arrived in Georgia within the expected time limits, bypassing Russia (Kindgebaev, N., and Nurbekova 2016).

However, the China-Turkey-Europe alternative is just one of the main transit corridors, and many other branches are in consideration in the western regions of the former Soviet Union, such as Belarus/Baltic States, and the adjacent Eastern European countries. According to the plans of the participant states of this consortium (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus), in 2016, 2 to 3 thousand containers from China to the Western Europe will go through this corridor. In this strategic thinking, China is trying to increase the number of alternative Eurasian transport corridors so as not to put all its eggs in one basket and in order to have freedom of choice.

CONCLUSION

¹⁶ There are only two double landlocked countries in the world—Uzbekistan and Lichtenstein—which means that even countries surrounding those countries are landlocked. This geopolitical reality is very significant in terms of economic relations and trade policies. Consequently, from the Uzbek point of view, Eurasian transport corridors represent an immense opportunity to connect the country to the global markets.

The main goal of this article is not only to explain the past approaches with greater precision but also to look at possible futures in the evolving politics of the Silk Road. I aim to develop visions vis-à-vis the future of the Silk Road, firmly rooted in a realistic assessment of the political, economic and institutional factors. Subsequently, the article addresses the ongoing changes and challenges by taking in consideration institutional heritage, historical legacy, internal politics, economic situation, geopolitical significance and foreign policies. It is important to understand not only major political issues and challenges on the Silk Road but also to identify the major political institutions, political culture and foreign policies in each of those countries. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia, China and the Central Asian countries of the Silk Road have established a degree of solidarity with respect to interpretation of the current contemporary international system. Their main goal is to forge alternative models to the Western liberal-democratic international system. All parties want to show the real possibility of a “Eurasian integration” model that is independent from, and an alternative to, its political dialogue with the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

In conclusion, it is possible to make a number of observations in respect to the Eurasian initiatives on the Silk Road:

1. The Eurasian transport corridors in question would preserve the sovereignty of each state at the highest level, which in turn would stand in stark contrast to European Union’s integration experience.
2. Progress regarding the transportation corridors on the Silk Road depends to some degree on the political stability and the consolidation of societies in each respective state, along with conflict prevention against separatist or extremist movements.
3. Development of these transportation corridors would provide a window of opportunity to facilitate the integration process of Silk Road countries as a well-functioning geopolitical unit.
4. The Silk Road would be an important trading venue contributing to the economies of the countries in question and the well-being of their populations. Moreover, it would also create a cultural exchange platform between the East and the West.
5. The Silk Road initiatives would turn the geopolitical weakness of Central Asia — being confined to a landlocked status at the heart of the largest continent — into a geographical advantage.
6. The Central Asian region and Siberia is very well endowed in terms of energy resources and raw materials, which in turn are very important for energy-poor countries of the East and the West. The accessibility to those resources through Eurasian transport corridors would be mutually beneficial in terms of promoting sustainable economic development for all parties involved.

Although there is much remaining to be done vis-à-vis Eurasian transport corridors in and around Silk Road countries, future research should also include the geopolitical perceptions of other regional powers (e.g., Pakistan, India, Iran, Turkey, South Korea and Japan) and global actors (e.g., the European Union and the United States of America).

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