

THE NEW SILK ROAD STRATEGY REVISITED

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Abstract

The New Silk Road concept proposes to align the contours of the policy of United States with emerging continental corridors. The contemplated road passes through Afghanistan and Central Asia, and underscores development as the key to a positive long-term outcome of its policies in the region. It brings new option and approach for regional strategy alongwith the possibility of inducting soft power approach while leading the move. As new approach to political chemistry in the region, the New Silk Road initiative stresses the need for non-military cooperation with emphasis on building and developing trans-regional trade blocks. The strategy will diversify trade routes in one of the least connected parts of world, namely, Central Asia. For this purpose, Afghanistan will be the epicenter in connecting South Asia with Central Asia and then to Europe. This paper is an attempt to bring to light some of the merits likely to accrue from the new vision.

Keywords

Soft Power Approach, Political Economy, Post-2014 Dilemma, Strategic Partnership, East-West-North-South Axis, International Relations, New Silk Route Diplomacy, Afghanistan, Central Asia, India, US Withdrawal, NATO Forces, Economic Engagements.

Introduction

In the last few years, there has been emphasis on ‘New Silk Route Strategy’, a new diplomatic vision for building peaceful and stable Afghanistan after 2014 NATO withdrawal. The New Silk Road vision aims at knitting South-Central Asian region that would fix Afghanistan into a regional integration process. So far several connectivity projects have been conceived in order to realize the idea. The various actors of the project are being persuaded both by the functional and neo-functional type of bargaining. Such a route will also be a modern day manifestation of the historical Silk Road, through which South and Central Asian nations get connected with each other for trade, cultural exchanges etc. The visionary plan envisages, building more rail lines, highways as well as laying energy infrastructure. The proposed pipelines which constitute another dimension of this mega project, originate in Turkmenistan, running through Afghanistan and Pakistan, enter into Indian territory. The strategy is a regional vision of economic and energy connectivity consisting of both ‘hardware’ (infrastructure) and ‘software’ (trade, private sector, capacity-

building) linkages. It is a vision which purports a region economically better connected and politically stable and prosperous. These conditions are conducive to stabilization of democratic dispensation as well as institutions. The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) and the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan Cross Border Transit Agreement are two such examples.¹

Perspectives of New Silk Road Strategy

Although the idea was conceived long back² but it was only during the U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton's visit to India where she announced that stronger regional economic relations could promote stability in Afghanistan and Central Asia following the departure of American and NATO troops from Afghanistan.³ Here it seems that the intention behind the project was to boost trade and energy connections between the energy-starved South Asia and energy rich Central Asia. The proposal was part of a wider move, "from aid to trade" as Turkmen gas fields could help meet both Pakistan and India's growing energy needs and at the same time generate significant transit revenues for Afghanistan. Hillary Clinton's proposal of a "New Silk Road" aims at integrating markets from "Mumbai to Karachi to Kabul, and on to Tashkent and Astana and beyond."⁴ The project aims to facilitate economic integration and security in Eurasia with Afghanistan at the centre of this effort. The vision comprehends to build road infrastructure, reduce customs and border services, connect markets etc. for mutual advantage. In this context, one could interpret the NSRS as an economic tool to do the job that military means alone have failed to accomplish.

As a regional approach, the New Silk Road initiative stresses the need for non-military cooperation building and developing the trans-regional trade blocks. It will create transit facilities including progress in the field of energy and transport cooperation with the participation of regional countries and global organizations. A vision of regional trade and transport is likely to bring stability, prosperity, and some form of achievement pride for the Central and South Asian countries, and possibly beyond. Secondly, the evolving trend of trade in Asia and growing linkages has altered the role of the U.S. in the global economy. Redrawing of political alliances has sparked new geo-political rivalries. Stephen King called these new connections a 21st century version of the original Asian Silk Road that is set to revolutionize the global economy. It was proposed to align the US's actions with the emerging continental corridors, which pass through Afghanistan and Central Asia, and use that development as the key to a positive long-term outcome of its policies in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The hope is that boosting trade would lead to an improvement in the economic prosperity of the region and create links, which in turn, would build trust and provide incentives for peace and reconciliation. Another perception that has developed in the background of impending 2014 deadline for the drawdown of ISAF troops, is that the United States is touting its new-found awareness of the significance that Asian trade routes have its own global position as a superpower.⁵

There is another perspective of this new silk route diplomacy. In common

parlance we call it Chinese version of new silk route diplomacy. In China's view, the New Silk Road concept consists of a "new Silk Road economic belt," which indicates stronger economic relations with Central Asia with special focus on trade. Recently, the Chinese leaders have also spoken about 'Maritime Silk Road' (MSR) which is perceived to be an attempt to ameliorate relations with South and Southeast Asia – In this case the emphasis is on maritime trade security.⁶ It is a strategy that has been around for quite some time but has been resurrected as part of post-2014 strategy for Afghanistan. The concept of new silk route initiative was proposed by Chinese premier, Xi Jinping, during his visit to Central Asia. In the 13th Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit held in Bishkek, Premier Xi presented a five-point proposal aiming at jointly building the New Silk Road Economic Belt to strengthen relations between China, Central Asia and Europe. Initiatives highlighted in the proposal are building trade connectivity, people to people contact, building road and rail connectivity, strengthening of economic and monetary cooperation etc.⁷ Increasing her stronger presence in Asia is also perceived as China's response to the U.S. vision of Asia-Pacific. Chinese endeavours are not limited to Central Asia. Beijing's ambitions stretch to Eastern Europe as well. It is also argued that China's high-profile diplomacy in the region is a response to India and its 'Look East Policy' (LEP). The New Silk Road slogans reiterated by Chinese leaders presented in drafts of this policy in Astana and Jakarta, are signals that Beijing treats the idea with seriousness. Bearing in mind the U.S. pivot to Asia-Pacific, including the TPP negotiations and strengthening cooperation with ASEAN states like U.S. support for democratic transition in Myanmar, closer security cooperation with Singapore, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei, as well as Russia's efforts to renew its influence in Central Asia, and a number of states maneuvering to not to be overly dependent on China, has created serious incentive for Beijing to engage more deeply in the region and with greater attention to soft language and positive references to history. So the New Silk Road seems to be a proper slogan for this endeavour.⁸

Another perspective is that the growing Indo-US partnership could be seen, as many strategists deem it as a counterweight to the rise of China in the Asia-Pacific region. Washington is pressing hard to involve India to create link between South Asia via Central Asia. Actually, Washington is grinding her own axe by isolating Iran, and restricting China's and Russia's growing influence in the region. However, India will serve her own interests so as to get her own ambitious plans materialized.⁹ India has a huge expertise in railway transportation, while Central Asian states lack it. Since the U.S. backs this project and contributes to it financially and technically, India can only be interested in coordinating its efforts with those of the Americans as it is the best way to maintain peace and stability in Central Asia and to fight the three evils of terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. They want India to emerge as a pole of attraction for Central Asian states, partly to counter the growing influence of China. Critics of the 'New Silk Road' point to an underlying geo-economic strategic intent. Connecting Central Asia with South Asia would weaken Russia's monopoly over Central Asian trade and transit and also facilitate India entering the 'game'. Both China and Russia are

suspicious of the Silk Road, feeling that it is an attempt by the US to shift the Central Asian region from the Chinese and Russian orbit and bring it closer to South Asian countries. The underlying geo-economic rationale of these roads is to exclude Moscow from new geopolitical configurations.¹⁰ Such a route will be a modern day manifestation of the historical Silk Road, through which South and Central Asian nations remained connected with each other for trade and cultural exchanges. That means building more rail lines, highways, energy infrastructure, like the proposed pipeline to run from Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan, through Pakistan into India.

India's Involvement and Achievements

India has always attached great significance to its relations with Central Asia but she has achieved very little progress owing to lack of direct physical connectivity and Pakistan factor. Besides this, Afghanistan's war-like situation has always proved troublesome for Indian policy makers whenever framing policies related to Central Asia. Therefore, India has given a serious thought to the construction of Chahbahar port in Iran as an alternative connecting link to Central Asia. India is neither a part of the East-West axis led by China nor the North-South axis led by the US.¹¹ In response to that, the international North South Transport corridor project initiated by India, Iran, and Russia which are at its different stages of implementation, helps India to sideline the importance of Pakistan. India is also interested in the proposed North-South trade corridor which if completed, would build road linkages from the Iranian port of Chahbahar through Afghanistan into Tajikistan.¹² Despite its 7,200 km long distance, the route is still 40% shorter and 30% cheaper as compared to Suez Canal route. This is one way to enter into trade with Central Asian states. The construction of Zaranj-Delaram road in 2009 facilitating the movement of goods and services from Afghanistan to the Iranian border and then to the Chahbahar port in southern Iran is a great achievement so far. Secondly, the reopening of the great East-West transport and trade corridors connecting Central Asian states with outside world started in 1991, and many of its components – rail, roads and energy pipelines – are already operational. Additionally, the US operation 'Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan' also made possible the opening of routes across Afghanistan, connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Russia with South Asia and from South Asia to Southeast Asia by land routes. These infrastructure projects underway are funded by the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and many individual governments. Here US have assumed the leadership role in removing roadblocks at border crossings promoting foreign investment and economic development in Central Asia.

Economically, Central Asia will serve as a market for Indian goods and services. However, in order to materialize the same, India needs huge investment with pro-active policy approach based on strategic partnership programmes, official visits and comprehensive economic engagements toward Central Asian states. As per Regional Electricity Export Potential Study (REEPS), South Asia could be a major export market for surplus electricity from Central Asia. In this regard 'CASA-1000' project has been launched in

March 2012 with the purpose to transport the extra hydroelectricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. More than a hundred small and community-based development projects having direct impact in the field of agriculture, rural development, education, health, vocational training, and solar energy have been initiated.¹³ Two sectors identified by India for more intensified cooperation with Central Asia are health-care and education. Former Defence minister A. K. Antony visited Kyrgyzstan on July 4-6, 2011 to inaugurate Kyrgyz-India Mountain Bio-Medical Research Centre. E Ahamad, the then Minister of State for External Affairs, GoI, visited Bishkek to inaugurate the First India-Central Asia Dialogue in July 2012. India and Central Asian States have already started the process of engagements of varied nature and are planning to reactivate the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The main opportunities of the new Silk Road lie in creating new networks independent of the traditional land routes. India's proposal involves the use of new technologies to create an electronic network connecting Central Asia and India, to deliver tele-medicine and tele-education services, on the lines of India's pan-African e-network project which currently connects India to 47 countries in Africa. These would supplement the already functioning satellite and internet based links connecting Central Asia with India.¹⁴

India has played a pioneering role in funding and facilitating the human resources of Central Asia, using India's Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme. The programme provides training in the areas of banking for running small and medium enterprises, diplomacy, information technology and engineering in Indian institutions. Possibly the new silk road strategy will open new opportunities independent of traditional ones and India's proposed plans to use the new electronic technologies by connecting Central Asia and India, to deliver tele-medicine and tele-education services. These are the basic priorities of India's Central Asian policy, launched in 2012 with a focus on promoting cooperation in education, medicine, IT and energy.¹⁵ India's growing interest in becoming the full-fledged member of the SCO also reflects the growing concern of India's policy makers in Central Asia. This is also due to the projected SCO Free Trade Area initiative which could probably integrate the region economically and is also appealing India as well. The opening of India-Pakistan trade as well as Indian trade with Central Asia and Afghanistan through Pakistan could be a game changer for regional peace and stability. Although, there are still huge security and political challenges, particularly, between India and Pakistan as well as between Afghanistan and Pakistan, however, signing of Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade and Transit Agreement are some positive indications. India and Pakistan in 2011 agreed to improve trade relations after years of deadlock and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's neighbourhood concern and India's soft policy approach may accelerate the process in coming times. What India will have to concentrate upon is investment or financing of small to medium size industries across Central Asia. This would help India in her commercial interests in Central Asian region. Creating viable atmosphere for business and entrepreneurship and financial incentives are bound to give fillip to joint ventures in Central Asia.¹⁶

Afghanistan and Pakistan signed a transit and trade deal in 2010, while

the US and Afghanistan signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2012. The proposed TAPI natural gas pipeline (linking Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India) and CASA-1000 project to bring electricity from Central to South Asia, are in progress. Dushanbe has hoped the 400-kilometer railway line would help it to bypass troublesome Uzbekistan, through which all its Soviet-era rails pass, and which has established a de facto economic blockade of its smaller, upstream neighbours. Tashkent is using hardball tactics in an effort to prevent Dushanbe from building the world's tallest hydropower plant.¹⁷ Currently, the official two-way annual trade between India and Central Asia, including Afghanistan, is above US\$1 billion (with about US\$700 million exports this region has the potential to alter the nature and character of South Asian continental trade and it is expected that India's trade with Europe, CIS countries plus Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan would be in the range of about US\$500 billion in 2014-15. If political economy in the region improves and even if about 20 percent of this trade is conducted through road, about US\$100 billion of Indian trade will pass through this region by 2015.¹⁸ The basis for the "New Silk Road" vision is that if Afghanistan is firmly embedded in the economic life of the region, it will be better able to attract new investment, benefit from its resource potential, and provide increasing economic opportunity and hope for its people. We also believe that the New Silk Road Initiative will be of particular importance to Pakistan, and can be an important way for Pakistan to further develop its economy and provide jobs for its people.¹⁹ Hence, the New Silk Road projects are instrumental in laying the foundation for regional cooperation, creating political flexibility, improving economic growth, offering trade diversifications, investing in transportation, mining and energy sectors.²⁰

With the fulcrum of geopolitics shifting quickly to Asia, India and the greater Indo-Pacific region plays an increasingly important role in U.S. strategy. In a region undergoing rapid change, India stands out as an anchor of both economic dynamism and democratic stability. In essence, this new Silk Road consists of two complimentary components which will serve the interests of India's growing market. The first is energy and infrastructure - roads, bridges, railways and pipelines, connecting goods, services, and people. The second is trade liberalization which includes the reduction of non-tariff trade barriers, improved regulatory regimes, transparent border clearance procedures, and coordinated policies that accelerate the flow of goods and services throughout the region.²¹ This is exactly the same vision which the previous Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, outlined recently at SAARC summit when he referred to the imperative of greater regional integration of a regional economy without boundaries which is an objective to which India is fully committed. With the rapid economic expansion of China and Japan to the east, Russia to the north, and India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to the south, there is unprecedented opportunity for India's landlocked northern neighbours, including Afghanistan, to evolve into a land link for Eurasia. Central Asia just happens to be sitting on some of the world's largest energy and mineral reserves, has the expertise and will supply to energy-hungry markets in India and Pakistan, where new energy resources are desperately needed to for economic growth and development. Afghanistan lies in the middle of that nexus. India is looking

to increase its involvement in the region under its strategy of “going north”, which in 2010 saw it begin development on the TAPI pipeline along with Turkmenistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.²² This process of normalization in both directions, including the eventual extension of Most Favored Nation (MFN) status by Pakistan and the reduction of non-tariff barriers by India, will lead to expanded economic opportunity and stability for the people of both countries. Indeed, a 2007 World Bank study estimated that if all these barriers were removed, trade could jump to \$5-10 billion per year. But this will be a long-term, step-by-step process, that if fully executed will establish India-Pakistan ties as a driver of region-wide growth.

Besides trade, India's primary concern is her political security and, therefore, both the regions should be an integral part of this strategy, because regional and internal problems in the five post-Soviet republics can jeopardize plans for stabilization in Afghanistan. In fact there are many common interests that drive their foreign policies, especially, in state building and political stability. USA also urges India to expand its influence, saying India has the potential to positively shape the future of Central Asia. India could capitalize this opportunity as her peace is closely linked with Afghanistan's stability. Security in that part of the world is strongly linked with economic growth and social development. The “New Silk Road” is one project that has the potential to bring more economic activities in Central Asia. It aims at developing links between South Asia and Central Asia and onwards to Europe. Since the US backs this project and contributes to it financially and technically, India can only be interested in coordinating its efforts with those of the Americans as it is the best way to maintain peace and stability in Central Asia and to fight the three evils of terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. They want India to emerge as a pole of attraction for Central Asian states, partly to counter the growing influence of China. The situation could be exploited in revitalizing the age-old relation with Central Asia. First, its cultural and linguistic influence in these ex-Soviet republics is still quite prominent and will remain so for many more years. Second, it badly needs to remain a transit country for the export of Central Asian hydrocarbons.²³

According to Stephen Blank, “Washington's presence allows India to play, or at least aspire to, a greater Central Asian role than it could achieve on its own. Washington also counts on New Delhi playing an expanded role in Afghanistan and Central Asia as its troops depart Afghanistan.” Kaplan goes further and avers that “As the United States and China become great power rivals, the direction in which India tilts could determine the course of geopolitics in Eurasia in the 21st century. India, in other words, looms as the ultimate pivot state. In particular, India's approach to Central Asia is conditioned by its profound distrust of, and tensions with, Pakistan. India's ability to access Central Asia is vulnerable because Pakistan's geography, and at times its deliberate policy of obstruction, cuts India off from the region.²⁴ At the same time, Afghanistan requires a secure and friendly regional environment to support its integration and economic development. The New Silk Road strategy gives Afghanistan and Central Asia a chance to remain relevant to the United States and retain US presence that is vital for balancing the external

power struggle over the region and improving regional cooperation. US commitment to the region is also critical for continuing political reforms that would eventually lead to more stable participatory political systems. To boost the same the New Silk Road Strategy needs more vigorous US and European efforts to support economic and democratic reforms. The United States should not pursue the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline at the expense of the Trans-Caspian pipeline from Turkmenistan. The two projects should be properly sequenced i.e. Trans-Caspian followed by TAPI, because Europe needs both additional volumes and availability of supplies to move away from overdependence on Russia. International institutions and Western governments should encourage regional development through emphasis on infrastructure and investment. Promoting transport facilities along the corridors; modernizing customs and border crossing; speeding up cross-border agreements as well as creating a “single-window” trade system that can be coordinated in the region. The long term goal of transport corridor expansion should be building logistic corridors that can then become development and economic corridors. The Central Asian republics must take up their share of the burden in implementing a strategy that will benefit the region. They must put past rivalries behind and seize the opportunity afforded by greater integration to bring many of these plans to fruition. The regional governments must work to build stable political systems based on democratic principles and rule of law. Carrying out these projects and reforms will not be easy, but they alone will ensure that Central Asia will enjoy both security and prosperity in the decades ahead. Overcoming conceptual and barriers require a stable geo-political environment, and considerable investments. Afghanistan plays a central role in this context. India is already one of the biggest investor which constructed and has undertaken various projects including 218 km road project from Zaranj to Delaram in south-western Afghanistan which was inaugurated in January 2009 to facilitate movement of goods and services across the country.

Taking the hard and soft power strategy into consideration China is and could be the major beneficiary in the project, helping it to link Central Asia, West Asia and Africa with a series of gas pipelines as well as road and rail networks.²⁵ As a part of the above strategy, the Chinese have already built rail network linking China with Europe via Central Asia which is very easy as the country is sharing vast borders with central Asian States.²⁶ China is gaining both economic and strategic advantages out of this game plan reaching out to the different markets of the world, supplying energy resources to her vast market. The New Silk Road would also focus on removing bureaucratic barriers and other impediments to the free flow of goods and people. Today, an Indian businessman has to import cement from Southeast Asia instead of from the flourishing cement industry next door in Pakistan, while a traveler moving to India and Pakistan not only has a difficult time getting a visa but often has to be routed through airports a thousand miles away just to get across the border. The NSR produce an ideal condition for economic climate and give boost to the collective economic atmosphere. This hope of boosting trade among Afghanistan and its neighbours will build prosperity

and promote peace. The strategy focuses on bolstering north-south trade, linking India and Pakistan via Afghanistan to the formerly Soviet republics of Central Asia. Robert Blake, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia while speaking at a conference organized by the Jamestown Foundation held at Washington focused on South and Central Asia, because they are the immediate neighbours of Afghanistan and, therefore, that is where the greatest effort lies for improving trade and other linkages.

The New Silk Road strategy should not be taken only Afghanistan-centric. When Western grand strategy in Central Asia took shape two decades ago, Afghanistan was not a central element. Internal conflict, weak governance, terrain challenges, skimpy economic infrastructure, narcotics activity and corruption explained this omission. Today, these problems remain a heavy burden on Afghanistan. The strategy ought to be sustainable even if Afghanistan's participation falters. This probably means that Central Asia, rather than Afghanistan, should be the more important focal point of the strategy. The US should simultaneously focus on reforms in Central Asia. Cooperation among Central Asia countries, in contrast, is often harmed by weak and misgovernance and the tendency of authoritarian leaders to resent or envy neighbours. The New Silk Road strategy will yield disappointing results without more democratic reforms and an open economy. With exceptions in the energy and mineral industries, US firms will not be the main foreign investors or traders in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Strategy implementation should start with modest and practical cooperation among regional powers. It should leverage momentum from the Northern Distribution Network and OSCE programs that foster regional cooperation.

The Central Asian states are also facing serious security, economic and political problems that are likely to deepen after US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The pending withdrawal from Afghanistan raises concerns among the Central Asian republics and this Silk Road strategy is vital for balancing external power interests, supporting political reforms, and preserving the sovereignty of the young Central Asian states. The US administration's New Silk Road initiative for the stabilization of Afghanistan and economic development of the wider region is welcomed by all states in Central Asia. Although financial constraints will limit US spending in the region, American leadership will be critical for the success of the New Silk Road strategy. This strategy must focus on the development of continental trade between Asia and Europe along with eliminating and bridging barriers to trade and encouraging private investment. The New Silk Road initiative needs to become a full-fledged strategy for economic development of the Central Asian region and its integration into the global economy. The strategy must focus on developing mechanisms to enable continental trade between Asia and Europe, including transport corridors through the South Caucasus, and transportation links with South Asia. The strategy should focus not only on economic development and stabilization of Afghanistan and its integration with Central Asia, but on developing Central Asia and integrating it with Europe and South Asia.

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