

## **Geopolitics of Silk Road**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper will investigate the history of Silk Road in changing patterns of Geopolitics. Historically, it remained only a road or a route but a fragment of history that connects East and West. It consists of network of routes, trails and trading posts starting from China, scattered across Central Asia, penetrating South Asia and reaching across Europe. The term Silk Road was used for this route as Silk, which was before 7th century exclusively produced in China was the main product being exported to European lands. Empires like Persian, Roman as well as regions of Middle East, Central Asia, and Subcontinent and as far as Russia were involved in the exchange which reveals an earlier version of globalization. Knowledge, inventions and religions were the commodities which travelled through this route. In the contemporary world i.e 21st century China is treading through similar paths to ensure its sustainability and development. “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) Initiative announced in 2013, is the name of a plan to revive and better the spirit of the old silk road and a step towards realizing the prediction of the Asian century. The OBOR consists of various mega-projects, but the main two programs are “the Maritime Silk Road” (MSR) and the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (SREB).

**Keywords:** *Geopolitics, Silk Road*

### **Introduction**

Silk Road is not only a road or a route but a fragment of history that connects East and West. It consists of network of routes, trails and trading posts starting from China, scattered across Central Asia, penetrating South Asia and reaching across Byzantine (Constantinople), Damascus and beyond Mediterranean to Europe (Johnson). Limiting the Silk Road to a route for trade would be to highlight the importance of Silk Road. It was a channel to convey ideas, religions, culture, technologies, diseases and arts thus affecting the course of history and great civilizations like Chinese, Indian and Persian etc.

It passed through diverse terrains including mountains, deserts, steppes and oasis for thousands of kilometers and connected the East to West. The term Silk Road was used for this route as Silk, which was before 7th century exclusively produced in China was the main product being exported to European lands.

This Silk Road not only became a route and a travelling trail to promote economy but rather became a route that added a lot to the cultural exchange that took place before travelling through sea became more popular (John Masson Smith, 2015).

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Fast forwarding to 21st century China is treading through similar paths to ensure its sustainability and development. With Silk Road project including a land and sea route passing through multiple cities China is set to step up its geopolitical game (Joshi, 2016). Besides taking it as a route for economic expansion China understand the historical importance of Silk Road and the role it played in ancient times. Chinese government is ready to use the historical narrative and employ the same strategy to reap fruits which the earlier civilizations have reaped. The Chinese history shows that isolation has led to no progress thus an opening up of new avenues has been an answer to increase and expand China's influence in international world.

### **The geopolitics of Silk Road in past**

Being scattered chiefly cross Central Asia the Silk Road at various times was dominated by different Empire beginning with the Hans Empire and various geopolitical actors including Turkic and Khazar Khanates, the Arabic Caliphate, Mongols, Tamerlane's Empire and in 20th century the Soviet Empire (Ferguson, 2002). Although the imprint left by all of these geopolitical actors is however Hans Empire wears the crown of connecting Far East with far west by starting a steady trade between two distant parts of world. The Muslims conquerors have the most important impact as the land of Eurasia has inherited rich Muslim identity which cannot be stamped out by more than half a century influence of Russian Empire. The Mongols were the last whose rule was the golden era of trade through Silk Road whose importance slowly dwindled till it was revamped in 20th and 21st century.

The Hans Empire became powerful with Liu Pang as its monarch. Prosperity and peace prevailed in China with inventions like wheelbarrow, porcelain and paper taking place making China a civilized modern state at par with European states; a view negated by Eurocentric historians. However Chinese expansion towards west was only possible through Silk Road.

The Hans Dynasty emperors heard about wonderful land of riches and innovations in west which led to emperor sending an expedition headed by Chang Ch'ien along with 100 other men to search for these lands (John Masson Smith, 2015). This expedition returned thirteen years later with amazing tales of greener pastures and fertile land westwards although this expedition had failed to reach far flung areas of Persian and Rome Empires however this was an important step towards initiating Chinese westward expansion.

Hence ensued an era of "Silk diplomacy" as Chang Ch'ien embarked on a journey with gifts like silk and gold to forge alliances. During this time the trade route of Silk Road was used extensively with Chinese expedition reaching as far as Caspian Sea and trade items like ivory, exotic fruits, wool, precious metals, horses and other animals were imported to China. The silk became a passion of Roman

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elite and was much sought after by them thus trading along Silk Road had reached Europe by the 1st century. Due to the flourishing trade between Roman and Chinese Empire a number of delegations exchanged between both empires and trade agreements were established between them.

During this period Silk Road flourished and many cities grew along the route. However it was not always the trade motives which made people travel the length of the road. Artists, craftsmen, missionaries and delegations for their own particular reasons travelled these routes hence became agents of exchanging and spreading cultures, religions, ideas and knowledge with different areas.

Paper making technology transferred from East to Westward by Chinese inventing it in 3rd century (Johnson). First arriving in Samarkand and then later travelling to Europe through Muslim portals of trade. Similarly Chinese had invented woodblock printing earlier than Gutenberg in Europe.

China not only exported ideas along the road but also imported culture, religion, language and even mixed race ruler later in Tang Dynasty due to the presence of Silk Road. An invention which can be seen spread across the length and breadth of Silk Road route is the waterwheel or karez. It was invented in Roman Syria and invention travelled along the road to China. The famous example of this is Toledo Spain and along upper area of Yellow River in China. The Polo game introduced in China in 8th century was inspired by Central Asian nomads.

Religion however was the main commodity which travelled through Silk Road to various areas and took great advantage of the increased mobility. Buddhism was able to extend its branches beyond the place of its origin in Northeastern India. Initially it spread through the areas now known as Pakistan and Afghanistan and monks had built shrines and temples along the northern route of Silk Road.

By the mid of first century the imperial court had officially recognized the presence of Buddhism and number of religious documents were translated into Chinese (Johnson). It spread from China to Japan and Korea however with advent of Confucianism it became a private religion rather than being patronized by the officials. On the other hand Daoism which gain popularity in 3rd century spread to Central Asian states through Silk Road.

The Christian faith also made inroads along with other sects like Nestorian sect and Manichaeism. Nestorians were outlawed by Roman Catholic Church and they were driven along the Silk Road where they found fertile minds to embed their ideology and it was able to remain till 14th century. Nestorian documents have been found in areas of Dunhuang and Turfan region of China.

The Silk Road's popularity dwindled with Turkic Khanate establishing its control over the Central Asian region and political chaos in Chinese Empire. Sporadic warfare took place between Turkic Khanate and Chinese Empire with the later spreading influence as far as Manchuria and Xinjiang. However the route became dangerous to travel and continuous warring along the road discouraged many travelers.

A century later (7th Century) Khazar Khanate came to unite different ethnic tribes

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in the same region but a new Empire was rising, the Arabian Caliphate. A decisive battle between Chinese and Muslims took place at the battle of river Talas, which ended Chinese influence and ushered in an era of Muslim rule over the Silk Road routes.

Muslims were able to capture Chinese prisoners and among them were people who had knowledge of Silk cultivation technology along with paper making workmen. Hence the knowledge transferred hands diffusing in Persia, Anatolia and Byzantium. This led to Muslims absorbing large Silk producing areas and spread knowledge as far as North Africa and Southern Spain.

Islam was the main religion which spread rapidly in Middle East, North Africa, Persia, and Central Asia and by mid-8th century was a dominant force. Mosques were built in China, India and many other areas along Indian Ocean. Islam is principally responsible for end of Manichaeism, Buddhism and many other faiths along Silk Road. Sufism eventually travelled along the same road and made inland routes in Central Asia, China, India and Islam spread in the Xingjian province of today's china.

Muslims paid attention to commerce with Chinese weavers being influenced by Islamic faith featuring motives of trees, saddled horsemen and other symbols of Islam (Johnson). The technology related to glassware production was unknown in eastern parts of Silk Road however high-quality blown glass formation methods were passed from Egypt and Arab cities. Gold and silver metalwork from Middle East was also highly popular commodity in China. Many of the excavations from Chinese tombs bear testament to this fact as gold and silver cups and other cutlery bear Middle Eastern motifs.

Looking through the historical achieves the Mongols who invaded Eurasia (1236-42) after establishing their empire under Changhiz Khan turned their attention towards establishing commerce through Silk Road. They not only wanted to import silk from China but also to make profits by being part of the trade. The Mongols took factories of Silk production in China and also made collaborations with local Muslim weavers in order to increase Silk trade. They also facilitated different traders by providing them yams, fresh provisions and lodgings to different trading caravans on Silk Road.

The Silk Road flourished under the rule of Mongols. Previously trade with any outsider was considered trading with enemy and different prohibitions acted as hurdles in trade. The Mongols made steppe route through Central Asia less dangerous (Smith, 2015). Also spying and missionaries also started travelling though the route to various cities and empires.

The Europeans discovered a new land route to East with the stability of Mongols rule in Central Asia, China and as far as Russia. Previously the dwindling importance of Silk Road came to forefront. Silk Road was once again revived under the rule of Mongols however soon the importance of Sea Route soon diminished travelling through the difficult terrain of Silk Road. Also as the Ottoman Turks took control of the western part of the Silk Road and Portuguese and Spanish started looking towards travelling by sea in Europe and Asia the

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importance of Silk Road lessened over the period of time.

However the most important lesson that Silk Road provided was transfer of disease from one part of the world to another part. The bubonic plague that spread through entire Europe in 4th century was thought of to be carried through the routes of Silk Road. Thus showing the world that once the doors have been opened it is difficult to control what travels through these routes.

### **Geopolitics of Silk Road in 21st century**

In 21st century China has emerged as a power to reckon, with many political scientists predicting a shift of power from West to East. Today China is looking towards new channels in order to sustain and develop its economy (Ferguson, 2002). With the current step of Silk Road project China has announced its presence as a unilateral economic power willing to step up to the next level of establishing its power at international stage.

The Silk road project is mainly a land route as well as a maritime route providing greater connectivity to China. The land route was part of the ancient Silk Road used for economic as well as various other activities. Including infrastructure and economic corridors spanning across various hinterland and Asian states, railroads and industrial areas along with pipelines to transport energy resources to resource hungry mainland China.

However it is not only an economic initiative China is an ancient Empire that believes in tradition and ancient philosophy. Therefore the above sequence of events have served as a lesson to Chinese leadership today. The Silk Road project taken up is not an economic initiative alone but the benefits reaped in by rulers, travelers, empires and generally the ancient world.

Sifting through the historical narratives Silk Road in ancient times was part of initiative to take action to extend economic activity or travelling beyond the borders of one ancient empire. Today the Chinese government is employing the same narrative of an initiative rather than terming it as grand strategy. Initiative is an action taken with for a purpose that serves interest of multiple parties and is taken by willing cooperation of others. On the other hand strategy aimed at achieving certain goals. China understands the importance of the lessons it has learned through ancient Silk Road of involving the interest of other party and soft diplomacy rather than using coercive power to gain the support of others. It is only through mutual interests that ones' interests can be served (Joshi, 2016).

Similarly the ancient Silk Road was not a fixed route or included specific countries rather the road took people destined for different destinations. Today's China's initiative also does not have fixed boundaries but rather a flexible plan available to many countries and neighbors who are willing to join.

Another key issue that needs to be addressed by the Chinese is to promote its image. In this advanced age where image or branding is important China needs to promote its soft image abroad and beyond. The Silk Road proves to be an important tool in this regard. The American centered culture can be seen spreading rapidly among the developing countries in the name of democracy and liberal

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society (Joshi, 2016). Americanization has easily spilled into areas adopting democracy as a political system. In such a scenario China needs to build its own brand by reaching out to as many countries as possible. Silk Road initiative is a broad step towards achieving this objective. Silk Road will thus not enable a trading route but will also promote exchange of Chinese ideas and practices.

During ancient times the cities or the oasis which passed on the route of Silk Road became established civilized centers surviving till today like Bukhara and Samarkand. China aims to employ the same strategy to build and flourish cities thus developing the underdeveloped regions in China and Asia. China realizes that its future endeavors can only be successful with a developed and well connected Asia. In 1980's China policy of liberalized economy shows that China understood the importance of flow of information and communication.

The ancient world shows that despite various claims Asia was a continent having its own distinct culture and traditions before being colonized by the Europeans. The shift was made many years ago due to Euro centric historians however the advent of 21st century brought Asia again to the lime light (Ferguson, 2002). China is working to maintain that shift by developing Asia which would further consolidate the power of China in the region and the international world.

Despite various claims made of exchange a creation of a new status quo through this Silk Road project cannot be denied. A status quo where Chinese dictated norms and rules will prevail or the consequences may be in form of economic privileges being taken away. A regional order will prevail as a result of this project that will take dictation from the Chinese rather than from the pacific based power.

## Conclusion

The geopolitical endeavors of China still rises many questions. The foremost being does the dynamics of geopolitical context in 21st century with multiple powers competing for power allow co-existence? China being a closed society that shuns changes and has government control over information. With projects like Silk Road these limitations are bound to change: is China ready to end its isolation opening doors to the changes with greater freedom of communication and information?

Similarly the European states which have exhausted their cycles of development can found new avenues opening up with the development in Asian regions taking steps towards global peace and an international society.

The OBOR is meant to establish new routes linking Asia, Europe and Africa. The idea of "One Belt and One Road" is based mainly on economy, but has political and strategic components and implications as it aims for the joint development, common prosperity and energy security.

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