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Geopolitical Revival of the Silk Route: Prospect for India Central Asia Relations

Willayat Ali

PhD Scholar, Department of Strategic and Regional Studies
University of Jammu, J&K, India

Abstract:

This paper aims to demystify the revival of the historical Silk Route and insists that it has played vital role in the transformation of culture, trade, religion, philosophy, ideas, science and technology among the various destinations of Asia and Europe. Keeping in view, this paper focuses on India and Central Asia relations via Silk Route. India and Central Asia have deep historical ties common cultural and political values as well as similar economic tasks since antiquity. It implies transport corridors, international trade, oil and gas pipelines, tourism, diplomatic and strategic relations. It embodies a concept of outreach, based on mutual interest, peace and stability and to bring India and Central Asia closer to each other. Today, the growing process of globalization and increasing interdependence makes the concept of the revival of Silk Route more vital. The dynamic development of political, trade and economic relations needs to get strengthened if mutually beneficial partnerships are to be developed between all the states on the Silk Route. Since whole northern India was one of important part of Silk Route which connects rest of India with Central Asia and it can be reconnected now on new modern basis.

1. Introduction

The name Silk Route was first introduced in 1877 by German scholar, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen as “die Seidenstrasse” the Silk Route, to indicate the more than 7000-miles-long old trade route through Central Asia linking China to the Roman and Byzantine empires. The Silk Route was major highway for transporting material goods and knowledge between Europe, the near east, India, and China, the four major centers to civilization at the time from the first millennium B.C. This historical trade route served as a major conduit for the transport of knowledge, information, technology, religion and material goods between east and west, and resulted in the first global exchange of scientific and cultural traditions. The growing momentum behind the new Silk Route continental land-bridge development policy is drawing support from larger circle of nations of the region - including Turkey, the Central Asian states, Russia, China, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.ⁱ It opens the way towards gradually overcoming the various conflicts and hot spots in this part of the world, and realizing the common economic interests of the nations and peoples through concrete projects.ⁱⁱ Today, the growing process of globalization and increasing interdependence makes the concept of new Silk Route more vital. The dynamic development of political, trade and economic relations needs to get strengthened if mutually beneficial partnerships are to be developed between all the states on the Silk Route. Since whole northern India was one of important part of Silk Route which connects rest of India with Central Asia, hence, there is a need for focusing on the prospect of India and Central Asia relation. Moreover, the geopolitical revival of the Silk Route is a metaphor for reconnection. It implies transport corridors, international trade, oil and gas pipelines, tourism, diplomatic and strategic relations. It embodies a concept of outreach, based on mutual interest, peace and stability and to bring India and Central Asia closer to each other.

2. Prospect for India Central Asia Relation

Historically India shared civilizational heritage with Central Asian States which had been suppressed during the period of colonial rule in Central Asia. India and Central Asia have deep historical ties, common cultural and political values as well as similar economic tasks. The Indian sub-continent was historically linked to Central Asia through two major overland corridors, one across Kabul, Afghanistan, in the South and another through Kashmir in the North.ⁱⁱⁱ India's politico-cultural and economic linkages with Central Asia go back to antiquity and the great Silk route, considered to be the first trans-continental trade route of human civilization, played vital role in the transformation of culture, trade, religion, philosophy, ideas, science and technology between India and Central Asia. Throughout the ancient and medieval time, there had been uninterrupted exchange of population at different level. Traders, scholars as well as religious preachers of both the regions crossed the boundaries in spite of change in the political boundaries and climate. Their travels were certainly facilitated by large number of available routes from Kashmir in the north to Sindh in the south as well as on our north western boundary. These routes largely resulted in the regular flow of goods

and technology between the two regions.^{iv} It can strengthen its age-long historical, cultural and political ties with the Central Asian states to promote the cultural diplomacy and her interests in a region. At present the close and friendly relations and the cooperation between India and the Central Asian Republics is in the areas like, economic and commercial collaboration, cultural, education and technical training in diverse disciplines, information technology, science and technology, agriculture and civil aviation, energy and pipeline project, strategic partnership and peace and security etc.

We see the geopolitical revival of the Silk Route as a way to strengthen regional economic integration and promote economic opportunity between India and Central Asia. The regional economic integration can be done by trade liberalization, which includes the reduction of non-tariff trade barriers, improved regulatory regimes, transparent border clearance procedures, and coordinated policies to accelerate the flow of goods, services, private investment, and people throughout the region. Though the moment of trade between India and central Asia is limited but the improvements in the geopolitical situation in the region by connecting roads would further improve this trade. Beside the geopolitical revival of Silk Route would be important step in the development of new Silk Road Strategy, Regional Economic Cooperation, intra-regional forums dialogue on trade and transport such as South Asian association for regional cooperation (SAARC), Central Asia regional economic cooperation (CAREC), economic cooperation organization (ECO), Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA) and Shanghai cooperation organization (SCO) and energy and infrastructure including building roads, bridges, electrical transmission grids, railways and pipelines etc.^v

Today India wants to establish direct link with Central Asian states that is why India supporting transcontinental transport corridors projects and North-South transport Corridor project and also air links with Central Asian states. The North-South Corridor, however, is a major opportunity to transport high volumes of goods at competitive prices, not only between India and Central Asia, but also between the European Union and South Asia. All the states along the Silk Route are constructing Railway Line with in their region and beyond. China already constructed rail link with Central Asian states and constricting rail link with Pakistan too. India is constructing railway line inside Kashmir and it can be further link with Pakistan, China, Afghanistan and then to Central Asia and Iran. The process of the construction of road and railway line in the border needs to strengthen further by opening all the routes especially in Jammu and Kashmir as it is main stagnant to geopolitical development in the region and the only near land access to reach Central Asia. But the major conceptual and physical challenges revolve around the revival of the ancient north-south land routes of the Silk Route and to overcome these challenges, require a stable geo-political environment and considerable investments.^{vi}

Apart from this, the growing importance of global trade concept also increased the importance of land routes among the nations across the Silk Routes. Remarkable opportunities have opened on the Eurasian continent spurring one of the most significant contemporary developments in the global economy. After revival of the Silk Route, not only will greater Central Asia benefit from this, but India, Pakistan, Iran, China, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Mongolia and Russia have similar gains to make by engaging the region in continental trade, including energy.^{vii}

Moreover the countries like Iran, China, Russia and greater Central Asia have made some modest gains in regional trade by reviving regional trade roads. India and Pakistan should also increase their participation by reconnecting the old routes as the linkage will definitely beneficial for trade, energy needs and inter regional peace and prosperity. But any failure to take advantage of this imposes a heavy cost, not only economically, but also with regards to the successful resolution of the border conflicts.

The Greater economic interdependence between Central Asia, India, China and Pakistan has the potential to be one of the most important confidence building components in this dispute. India is participating in the region but it is placed far behind from China, and what the need is that it should speed up in the process infrastructural development especially in the border regions. Thus, the road network from Central Asia to China, and shipping lanes from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, would herald a prosperous future and greater friendly and fraternal relationships among nations of the regions. As we know economic development of any region depends most importantly on its communication and trade routes.

The relation between India and Central Asian can develop further as it has many ways to connect with Central Asia. Central Asian entrepreneurs can make use of the considerable experience of Indian industry in areas such as textiles pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, information technology and processing of agricultural products. Indian businessmen have already shown interest in making investments in Central Asia in some of these areas. The Inter-governmental Commissions on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation established between India and the Central Asian Republics increase their efforts to enhance India's economic engagement in the region. It is still not too late to further explore these ties and potentials, and some recent events discussed in the chapter point to the fact that more efforts are underway. However, India needs to ensure that these agreements are implemented efficiently and effectively.

India considers Central Asia as its "extended neighborhood" with a high importance given to its geopolitical and geo-economic interests. Its enormous engineering expertise in downstream activities has to be effectively utilized so that Central Asian Republics acquire the capability to be exporters of high-end products. For many ongoing projects in Central Asia, European companies use India as the manpower base. Indian medium and large-sized companies do have the capability to execute large engineering projects. But they seek to reduce their risks by being sub-contractors to MNCs. This situation must change based on agreements between India and the Central Asian Republics. Other steps that need to be taken to facilitate the expansion and strengthening of economic cooperation between New Delhi and Central Asian Republics include the re-opening of a branch of the Indian Banks in the capital cities of the Central Asian Republics for efficient and cost-effective commercial transactions. India needs to change its approach to Central Asia and show greater pro-activity.

3. India- Central Asia: A Way Forward

In the rapidly changing scenario, India can look at the Central Asia region with fresh thinking within the following framework. The importance of the Greater Central Asia region for Indian trade should not be seen merely in the context of the very modest regional trade. Even if only 20 percent of this trade is conducted by continental land routes, \$ 100 billion worth of Indian trade will pass through the region. For this to happen, a massive effort is needed to rebuild Afghanistan's transport network and economy. An immediate first step is for India's efforts in Afghanistan's reconstruction to be greatly expanded. India should present its own design for linking its rail and road network with the Afghan economy and beyond. The difficult relationship between India and Pakistan is a major impediment to continental trade across Eurasia. The impressive emerging possibilities in the Greater Central Asia region suggest that the cost of conflict between India and Pakistan is going to be much bigger in terms of lost "opportunity cost" for both countries than was thought earlier. Ideally, the Greater Central Asia area needs a regional economic initiative consisting of all GCA countries, China, India, Iran, Japan, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, and the United States. These countries should in their interaction cooperate on an *a la carte* basis. Unless all these players are accommodated, suspicions and tensions will continue; and all important players in the region have good relations with India. It maintains "strategic partnership" agreements with the United States, Russia, and China and has good relations with Iran. In cooperation with all these countries, India could work seriously for an entirely new regional economic organization for the GCA.^{viii}

India has come up with a "Connect Central Asia policy" declared in 2012, which includes elements such as high level visits, strategic partnerships, comprehensive economic engagement, partnership in the development of energy and natural resources, Development of potential in medical field, education, e-networks, land connectivity etc. beside it also suggested; Relaxation of visa regimes, Establishment of a Central Asia university, Multilateral engagements, India Cultural Centre in Bishkek, Investment in International North South Transport Corridor, Cooperation in IT sector, Strengthening of tourism, Investment in agriculture sector, A trade route through Karakoram highway, Joint science and technology projects, Full membership of the SCO, Doordarshan should be pro-active in airing cultural programmes, Joint expeditions in archeology. The implementation of the policy needs to be speeded up. This will require allocation of definite resource for the implementation of the policy and there must be an institutional mechanism for implementation.^{ix}

Moreover, the Connect Central Asia policy 2012 should be pragmatic and the dealing with Central Asia not only at the bilateral level but also at a collective level. India could consider setting up an India-Central Asia Forum to deal with the region in a holistic fashion, to engage with them periodically with regularity and to identify projects which are of common interests. Monitoring an implementation mechanism should also be set up. It would be desirable to set up a Central Asia fund to seed the various projects.^x In the present times the energy is universally recognized as one of the most critical inputs for economic growth. Central Asia's rich natural resources, including significant reserves of oil and natural gas, and its location in the center of Eurasia have attracted immense global attention. In the changed strategic scenario, India seeks to reconnect with Central Asia and to play a constructive role there. The energy security is emerging as vital issue in the era of fast economic growth. In fact energy security is paramount to sustain India's growth and rapid development, and the Central Asian Republics could provide India with a modicum of energy security.

All The major countries establishing strong relation with central Asia for energy security as it is described as the New Great Game of 21st century. It is important to note that this kind of economic interdependence is an important affiliate of regional peace and stability. Therefore, India's interest in Central Asia apart from historical and political factors would continue to revolve around economic diplomacy, where oil and gas are the key propositions for the makers of India's foreign policy.^{xi}

It has been indicated that energy trade between India and Central Asia that is regarded to be the revival of the Silk Road in terms of energy trade has constructed a state of interdependence among the parties. It is also observable that the interdependence under discussion that has been established through the use of energy trade is so strong that its effect and influence cover other issues. Cooperation on the field of energy trade transcend to other political and economic issues. Both are careful not to deteriorate the well-functioning of the ongoing cycle that is beneficial for all sides. It is therefore the challenge is to create a stable and competitive energy supply networks along the Silk Route for the supply of oil from the Caspian Sea, gas from Uzbekistan, or hydro-electricity from Tajikistan to India. The viability of such north-south energy supply networks will have to take into account the fairly recent creation of east-west energy supply networks connecting Central Asia to China. The Tran's Afghan gas pipeline projects will open new avenues of cooperation and mutual trust between Central Asia and India and also with Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan as well. It will not only resolve the dilemma of energy dependency but ensure energy security for the concerned states.^{xii}

Moreover, the oil and gas potential of the Central Asian region need to be exploited more, though the western world has already stepped up in helping the region in this field. Beside, other resources that are attracting are the gold and uranium. This is likely to be commercially viable in the near future to make these products in the trade and this will certainly extract the foreign interest including that of India.^{xiii} In this regard the geopolitical Revival of Silk Route can ply vital role in order to bringing Central Asian oil and gas to India.

In Indian strategic thinking, Central Asia is considered part of its strategic neighbourhood. What is of prime importance for India is the stability and security of the region. Inextricably linked with India's concerns in Central Asia is Afghanistan, for the latter is part of the Central Asian geopolitical construct as it shares boundaries with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In fact The Central Asian region also forms a critical component in India's security calculus, both for establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan and countering Pakistan's strategy in creating centrifugal forces in Central Asia. China's economic and security engagement with Central Asian Republics would change the geopolitical and geo-economic landscape lying north of India, and it is high time that India factors China into its central Asia policy. As such, the current politico-economic scenario in Central Asia presents both challenges and opportunities for India. Given the geographical inaccessibility, India could focus on having

Production Sharing Agreements both in hydrocarbon and hydroelectricity sectors with the Central Asian Republics. India needs to play a pro-active role in the prevailing geo-political situation in Central Asia by engaging in economic cooperation in a more sustained and coherent manner. New Delhi fears that a resurgent Taliban integrated into Afghan power structures post-withdrawal will be counter to India's interests. The security concerns are compounded by the proliferation of drug-trafficking in Central Asia. It also sees the region as a source of religious extremism and concerned to check the rise of radicalism which may present a terrorist threat.^{xiv}

The increased cooperation and dialogue between specialized agencies and the armed forces of India and Central Asian region over the past few years has placed emphasis on cooperating against the threats emanating from the region. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have entered into strategic partnership relations with India. India has a significant capacity building programme in the defense sector with Tajikistan, which is separated from the Gilgit and Baltistan regions of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir by the narrow 50-kms wide Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan. The main threat to such political and strategic cooperation comes from the ideologues of violent extremism and the current scenario in Afghanistan. The unstable situation in Afghanistan and a highly problematic India-Pakistan relation have deprived India from the benefit of relations with Central Asia. The knowledge that developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan will have an impact on the entire region has spurred greater cooperation between Central Asian region and India. Iran which provides alternative access to Central Asia is an important but unspoken factor in India-Central Asia relations. However, India-Iran relationship for the last decade or so has not progressed well. India will require making substantial investments in Iran to make the INSTC as well as Chabahar Port to provide short and effective access to Central Asia. This must be top priority in India's foreign policy. Connectivity through the Chabahar Port could become an important route linking India to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The Central Asian States have also been expressing their support for greater Indian participation in the region. For instance, the leaders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan proposed India's membership to the key Central Asian grouping the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Events in Afghanistan have a spill-over effect on the CASs, and an unstable and unfriendly government in Kabul could create serious security implications for India, both internally and externally, as they would impact on the country's secular fabric. Undoubtedly, Afghanistan posed the principal challenge to the 'Connect Central Asia' policy. The stable state is necessary for the success of any new Silk Road strategy. This was the reason India planned to increase military training, counter-terrorism coordination and close consultations on the future of Afghanistan. Therefore, stability in this region is in both India's as well as the Central Asian states interest.^{xv}

Moreover, the prime importance for India is the stability and security of the region is inextricably linked with India's concerns in Central Asia is Afghanistan, for the latter is part of the Central Asian geopolitical construct as it shares boundaries with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. It is also based on the transformation in world order, regional developments and India's relation with countries in its neighborhood. India is trying to establish a strategically significant position at the global level for which India has to integrate with western formulated new world order and maintain autonomy.

4. Conclusion

Thus Central Asia gives a lot of opportunities for India as a priority area and India want to establish direct governmental link with each of these states. India should strengthen her security in a geo-politically volatile region for promoting regional balance and avoiding social conflicts and regional-military security grouping. India should also immensely contribute to the regional cooperation among the South Asian neighbors including China, Afghanistan and Pakistan to ensure over all development and stability in the region at large. It is therefore the below table is sum up of the geopolitical revival of Silk Route to develop India Central Asia relation.

India central Asia trade 2012-2013. Future Potential 2015.	\$746 million. \$450-500 billion in trade that India could conduct through Central Asia and Afghanistan by 2015 which could be achieved if the political economy of the region shows improvement.
International north-south transport corridor (INSTC).	7200km long. It can provide short and effective access to Central Asia. It is 40% shorter and 30% cheaper as compared to Suez canal. On 12 September 2000, India inked an agreement in St. Petersburg with Iran and Russia on creating an International North-South. This corridor will enable the movement of Indian goods from Indian ports to Bandar Abbas in Iran and then on to Central Asia via rail and road linkages and the Caspian Sea route, thus, bypassing Pakistan Transport Corridor.
Chabhar port located in Markand cost of Sistan and Baluchistan province of Iran.	India proposed to invest \$100 million. The significance of Chabahar Port is that it will facilitate a transit route to land-locked Afghanistan. And then to central Asia.
Reconstruction of Afghanistan.	India has supported the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan, providing extensive humanitarian, financial, and project assistance. India's commitment to Afghanistan's reconstruction adds up to over \$600 million, including one million tons of wheat as food assistance. Major initiative in silk route project and influence Central Asian regions. Reconstruction of the Zaranj-Delaram road. 218km started in 2009.

	Afghanistan can be seen as an extension of the Central Asian strategy.
TAPI pipeline project.	1680 km long. Estimated cost \$76 billion. 30 billion cubic meter gas from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan, Pakistan to India.
IPI pipeline project.	1700 km long. \$4 billion cost. Peace pipeline and CBM between India and Pakistan.
“Connect central Asia” policy 2012. The policy declared in 2012.	The policy includes elements such high level visits, strategic partnerships, comprehensive economic engagement, partnership in the development of energy and natural resources. Development of potential in medical field, education, e-networks, land connectivity, IIT etc. The establishment of a new Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement to integrate its markets with those of Central Asia.
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).	India Observer in 2005. Applied to full member.it one of the most important political organisation to reach central Asia. Needs to link SAARC with SCO. In the absence of any other organization linking Central and South Asian regions, the SCO may fill this gap.
Indo- Kazakh civil nuclear cooperation.	Astana will supply 2,100 tons uranium to India by 2014. India needs 8000 tons of uranium a year if it is to feed its estimated 40 nuclear power plants.
India ONGC Videsh energy cooperation.	India acquired 15% ownership stake in Alibekmola (kazakh) oil field, 25% Satpaev exploration bloc, \$15 billion investment in join Russian – Kazakh Kurmangazy oil field in the Caspian region. India is the world’s fifth largest energy consumer and is likely to become the third largest by 2030. India is also actively looking into importing oil and gas from Central Asia.
India-Pakistan-China triangular cooperation.	India opened the border roads, for instance, Uri-Muzaffarabad road opened in 2005 and in 2006 Poonch-Rawalakot also opened. India is also thinking to open all other routes like Jammu - Sialkot, Kargil-Skardu and Leh-Manasarovar. China is constructing railway line in Gilgit Baltistan along with Karakoram Highway to link China with Gawadar in Pakistan. India is also constructing railway line in Kashmir which can be further link to Pakistan and china. India- China reopened Nathula Pass in 2006. Leh- Yarkand, and Turtuk- Khapulu can also be open for trade and tourism purpose.

Sources: Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.

The table shows few projects of the geopolitical revival of silk route which could be identified as strong way to connect India with Central Asia. Various types of engagements between India and Central Asian states should be regarded as the formation of a two way road. It is obvious that more economic engagements provide a stronger ground for economic dependence. Inclusion, rather than exclusion would harmonize the best interests of all relevant parties. However, the success and the strength of every project are linked to the behaviors of the parties, as it is the case in almost all international engagements.^{xvi}

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