

THE IMPACT OF THE NEW SILK ROAD INITIATIVE ON THE INTERNATIONAL BALANCE OF POWER

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Abstract

This article examines the effects of the new Silk Road initiative, known as the "Belt and Road Initiative," on the international balance of power. It addresses its impact on revitalizing trade and relations among world nations, both culturally and geopolitically. It also discusses the role of the road in cultural exchange, intellectual and cultural interchange, and its contribution to reducing Western dominance and promoting global peace. The study concludes that the new Silk Road holds strategic importance in reshaping global power balances and the existing international system.

The descriptive and analytical methods were employed to review the motives, causes, and challenges of reviving and re-establishing the Silk Road, along with analyzing trade-related figures. Additionally, historical methodology was occasionally used to recount the establishment of the Silk Road.

Keywords: Silk Road Initiative, Trade Exchange, Cultural Communication, International Balance of Power.

1. Introduction

At a time when the West was conspiring to tighten its complete control over the world, China was reweaving the threads of global economic and political relations for the 21st century in order to revive the Silk Road and reconnect severed ties between nations, just as it achieved when it was initiated during the second century BC. The network of land and sea routes linked China with Europe and the Middle East, spanning over 10,000 kilometers, through which China conducted trade with the world, primarily in silk.

The Silk Road had a significant impact on the prosperity of many past civilizations, influencing all aspects of human life. With its decline, China experienced stagnation, weakness, and subjugation to the West. Therefore, China is dedicating all its resources today to reviving the Silk Road by forging new partnerships with many countries worldwide, countries that wish to turn a page from their dark history of ideological conflicts and move from isolation to a world open to security, peace, and prosperity.

Study objectives

This research aims to present an analytical study attempting to grasp the strategic importance of reviving the Silk Road anew and attempting to economically connect many countries globally. This is done by delving into the history of the Silk Road, its key activities, routes, spaces, and its economic, cultural, and geopolitical impacts on the world.

Study problem

The problem of this study can be formulated in the following questions:

- To what extent does it contribute to revitalizing trade exchanges and international relations?
- To what extent does it assist weaker countries in economic recovery?
- Does it play a role in reducing Western dominance?
- Can the new Silk Road lead to a change in the global balance of power and the establishment of a new international order?

To answer these questions, the study starts from a fundamental premise: that the Silk Road is not just a corridor for the exchange of goods and commodities, but a source of intellectual and cultural exchange among different peoples, greatly contributing to reducing Western dominance in the world.

Study Structure

In an attempt to address the aforementioned questions, this article is structured into four main axes. The first axis examines the history of the Silk Road, tracing its historical evolution from its inception to its revival. The second axis highlights its importance in revitalizing trade exchanges and relations between nations worldwide. The third axis focuses on the role of the road in cultural communication and intellectual and cultural exchange between nations. Finally, the fourth axis discusses the extent to which the new Silk Road contributes to reducing Western dominance and establishing global peace.

Study Approach

In this research, we rely on historical and descriptive-analytical methods, as well as geopolitical analysis, to analyze and understand current international conflicts revolving around the revival of the Silk Road, given the complexity and multidisciplinary nature of the research topic (history, economics, and politics). These methodologies and approaches serve our research topic and help us address the problematic issues raised.

2. From Silk to Belt and Road: Between Establishment and Renewal

Over more than twenty centuries, the Silk Road has witnessed various stages and events that have changed the network of routes and the relationships between countries. Periods of prosperity alternated with periods of stagnation during times of war and epidemics (Wei, 2018).

2.1 The Origin of the Silk Road: The Silk Road began during the 2nd century BC, when Chinese craftsmen forged trade routes connecting northern China with countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa over a distance of about ten thousand kilometers. The northern branch passed through Eastern Europe and the Crimean Peninsula to the Black Sea, reaching Venice, while the southern branch traversed Iraq and Turkey to the Mediterranean Sea or through Syria to Egypt and North Africa. These routes became major trade arteries linking the East and the West, with silk dominating most of the trade volume. It was later named the "Silk Road" by the German historian Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, reflecting the flourishing trade of "Chinese silk" through an integrated network of interconnected land and sea routes used by ships and caravans between China and other countries.

Trade initially began with silk and then diversified to include fabrics, spices, seeds, glassware, foodstuffs, birds, animals, and eventually to jewelry, wooden and metal products, and much

more, transforming it into the largest international trading market between the West and the East.

Interest in the Silk Road increased, and travelers flocked to it throughout the Middle Ages, remaining in use until the 19th century. These routes evolved over time with changes in political geography throughout history. However, they entered a decline by the mid-15th century when the Ottoman Empire imposed heavy taxes on trade with China, leading Europeans to halt trade routes passing from China to their territories, thus reducing trade flow through the Silk Road.

2.2 Reviving the Silk Road: Since then, China's attempts to revive the road have not stopped, but these efforts did not turn into real initiatives until the Chinese economy developed, leading to an increased need for raw materials and energy. It became imperative for China to change its strategy, including reviving the ancient Silk Road through an initiative known as the "Belt and Road Initiative." The surplus industrial production in China was cited as one of the main motivations behind the initiative, as reported by The New York Times in one of its articles. Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the initiative during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in September and October 2013, under the name "Belt and Road" with the slogan "One Belt, One Road," with expected investments ranging from 4 to 8 trillion dollars after its completion, to deepen reforms and openness and to push for neighborhood diplomacy.

In November 2013, this initiative was formulated as a comprehensive vision by the Chinese Communist Party leadership, with priority implementation by 2020. In mid-2014, this initiative was officially named "One Belt, One Road" (Matta, 2020, p. 08).

The new Silk Road represents ideas and proposals for cooperation and development, relying on existing bilateral and multilateral mechanisms between China and other countries (Embassy of China in Egypt, 2014). It consists of a network of ports and railways that will connect approximately 65 countries around the world.

The project received enthusiastic welcome both inside and outside China, giving a new and revitalized dimension to international relations (Al-Hawas, 2018, p. 17), especially given China's reliance on the ideas and theories of political geographers who have made China's location important within their theories. The most important of these is the theory of "Mackinder," which focused on the regions of rimland countries, stating that China falls within its scope, with most of its regions facing seas and straits. This prompted China to revive the ancient Silk Road and add a maritime route to it. The project covers an entirely different area from the economic belt of the Silk Road, reaching ASEAN countries and aiming to provide deeper cooperation with ASEAN countries on maritime issues, allowing China to manage, develop, and exploit land and maritime areas in Southeast Asia, in addition to areas and ports passed by the maritime belt through investment cooperation with related countries (Yuan, 2019, p. 92).

Today, the new Silk Road is a tangible reality officially known as the "Belt and Road," involving 123 countries, and is considered one of the greatest projects in the 21st century, carrying within it significant strategic and geopolitical aspirations. It can be likened to a geographical-political octopus with its center in China, aiming to establish an infrastructure that enables increased communication and exchange between participating countries and to transform the Eurasian region, stretching from Europe to East Asia, known to political geographers as the "heart of the world," into a stack of economic, political, and cultural activities, turning it into the world's gravitational center.

The new Silk Road aims to revive and develop the historical Silk Road by laying gas and oil pipelines, constructing road and railway networks, extending power lines, and internet connectivity. The new Silk Road consists of both land and sea routes, as well as a digital route and pipelines for oil and natural gas. China has made significant strides to enter another stage with its largest project in human history, the Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to modernize

the concept of the ancient Silk Road that extended from China to Europe for the exchange of silk and spices from the East with products from Europe and the Mediterranean basin. However, this time, the Belt and Road project is more modern and ambitious, aiming to change the world map with two routes, one land route extending from China to Central Asia to the Mediterranean Sea and Europe, and the other maritime routes passing through commercial and industrial complexes and free zones.

3. Trade exchange, mutual cooperation, and economic project support

Since the 1990s, China has been striving to enhance its economic and trade relations with various regions worldwide, aiming to connect its economy with the global economy and achieve the ranks of regional and international economic powers. To this end, it has worked to reach all countries in the world, relying on a strategy of diversifying sources and relationships, aiming to gain new partners and not rely on a specific continent or region. China has worked to strengthen its ties with several countries, especially those possessing oil, mineral resources, and large markets, in order to market Chinese industrial and technological products.

In this context, China has made great efforts to link the world with a network of land and maritime routes to consolidate its economic relations with all regions of the world, integrate its economy with the international economy, and connect the continents of the world with a network of transportation routes and roads to promote trade cooperation and international economy (Al-Khatib, 2019, p. 111). Thus, China becomes the world's largest commercial empire through this project.

China believes that this road serves most of humanity and is based on developing a large number of regions, revitalizing global trade, maritime routes, and raising growth rates, according to what Chinese President Xi Jinping mentioned that China has allocated \$900 billion for the project, which raises the living standards of 71% of the world's population (Shar'an, 2019, pp. 11-13).

The main objective of the new Silk Road is to enhance China's economic and foreign relations, through which China seeks to replicate its economic success based on developing infrastructure facilities beyond its borders. By establishing land and sea corridors linking China and Europe via Asia and the Middle East and Africa, China aims to help these countries raise their growth rates, starting from raising growth rates in the Chinese domestic regions and other countries concerned with the "Belt and Road Initiative" (Katib, 2018, pp. 23-24).

China affirms that this initiative aims to enhance economic cooperation and the efficient distribution of resources, expand market integration, and thereby achieve economic development, benefiting all participating countries.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres praised China's efforts at the opening of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, acknowledging China's work on the new advanced transportation route, which he said could represent "another breakthrough in the field of renewable energy" (United Nations News, n.d.).

The UN Secretary-General emphasized that the world would benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative in "accelerating efforts to achieve sustainable development goals" because it relies on policy coordination among the countries through which the route passes and connects the utility facilities that emerge around it. He also mentioned that it facilitates trade without barriers and supports financial integration and people-to-people exchanges. Guterres urged for accelerating efforts to achieve sustainable development goals and fill financing gaps.

The economic and financial dimension of the Silk Road strategy will inevitably impact international relations related to trade contracts, making China the dominant player in trade exchanges. China has established about 50 economic zones in 65 countries, in addition to investing \$220 billion between 2016-2017 to build 2200 new passages in the West, Kazakhstan,

Tibet, and Nepal, and financing railroad lines for high-speed trains in Central Europe linking Belgrade and Budapest. The average annual direct investment of China in Africa reached nearly \$3 billion between 2015 and 2017. The volume of trade between China and France reached about \$47.5 billion in 2016, of which \$25 billion were Chinese exports to France, compared to imports worth \$22.5 billion. The trade volume between China and the United States in 1979 was estimated at \$2.7 billion and reached about \$500 billion in 2010. With this volume of trade exchanges, the Belt and Road project is one of the largest strategic projects established on the global level.

The new Silk Road project embodies the most ambitious geo-economic vision in our present era, covering more than two-thirds of the world's population, or about 70 countries, and Chinese investments in this initiative are approximately \$4 trillion. Through this project, China intends to enhance solid infrastructure with new roads and railways, infrastructure with trade and transport agreements, and even cultural relations with university scholarships and other exchanges among the peoples of the countries joining the initiative (Hillman, 2018, p. 02).

However, this exchange may not serve the interests of some parties or some countries, as it makes China the first dominant in terms of trade exchanges, which may create conflict with some major powers such as the US, as happened during the tenure of former President Donald Trump, which made him declare a trade war against China, considering it a threat to American dominance and influence worldwide (Farhat, 2018, p. 06).

It also seems that there is a hidden and undeclared conflict between these two poles (Eastern and Western global powers) led by China and the United States, as each seeks to impose its influence and overthrow the dominance of the other on the world and obtain the largest possible gains. So, how will the "New Silk Road" work to shape political relations between the East and the West?

4. Ending Western dominance and establishing values of peace and cooperation among nations worldwide

While the shifts in political and military power balances have influenced the prosperity or decline of the New Silk Road, there is no doubt that the current global power dynamics towards Asia, the balance of power in Asia, and its alliances against Western powers and their global interests witness attempts to revive the "Silk Road" as a model for organizing economic interests among different political powers (Mustafa, 2015, p. 377).

The revival project of the Silk Road marks a qualitative leap in China's strategy aimed at enhancing and developing its relations with various countries worldwide. It works on strengthening Chinese economic relations with numerous countries across continents, linking the economies of these countries, and China has managed to find many countries that support and are willing to achieve this project.

During his visit to South Korea, Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his desire to revive the ancient Silk Road and connect it through a railway network between Asian countries reaching Europe.

The New Silk Road has become the main engine of Chinese domestic policy and its diplomacy abroad. It was officially included in the government's agenda in 2014, occupying large spaces in media reports and analyses and hosting many international conferences. In this context, China hosted a special summit for the project attended by approximately 28 heads of state, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, World Bank President Jim Yong Kim, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva, and more than 1,200 representatives from about 60 regional and international organizations, company executives, entrepreneurs, financial experts, and journalists from 110 countries (Shahrour, 2017).

This initiative aligns with Russian cooperation policies for the development of the Siberian region and supports South Korean companies' participation in the trilateral project between Seoul, Moscow, and Pyongyang to establish a railway connecting them. The project received wide consensus at the Shanghai Cooperation Summit, based on reviving the ancient Silk Road and creating a new economic development zone (The Eurasian Rift, 2016).

The New Silk Road project is an important source and symbol of unity for many countries and their commitment to cooperation. It focuses on global peace and prosperity, preserving the distinguished status of peace and development in the world. It aims to build comprehensive consensus among participating countries. The project initially started with 60 countries and expanded to include more than 140 countries, including countries in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and South America. Thus, it has become a significant driver of the global economy and a key player in shaping the international stage.

China is attempting to change the rules of the international economy, which have been largely dominated by the United States, into a system based on multilateralism in managing this economy through the diversification of economic blocs. Among the strategies proposed by China to enhance international economic and trade cooperation is the New Silk Road project, which takes several land, sea, and even digital routes to create an alternative globalization system and international economic management method and to enhance and intensify cooperation between continents (Al-Khatib, 2019, p. 111).

In conclusion, the strategic importance of the New Silk Road lies in its being a smart plan that allows China to gradually control the world peacefully without political or military tensions with competing powers, ensuring a smooth transition of dominance from Western to Eastern powers, particularly China, without war.

In 1996, delegations from 40 countries, including China, Russia, Turkey, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, gathered in Iran to revive the Silk Road strategy. After systematic and silent work, China announced a massive initiative to enhance communication among participating countries. The consultations and negotiations led to the achievement of many projects in the same context. The most important of these was the establishment of the Asian Investment Bank, which represented a significant Chinese step to reduce the role of international institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, which were established under the Bretton Woods agreements, with Western influence. Especially in light of 57 countries joining the agreement establishing the bank and signing it, which clearly indicates the growing Chinese influence and power within the global economic system.

There are many indicators and factors in the current stage that strongly indicate that China has become a global pole in many strategic, political, and economic fields. This position is reflected in its strategic, geopolitical, and economic importance, as well as its pivotal role in international arrangements and transformations, in addition to its high population density, the highest economic growth rates in the world, and its rich historical, cultural, and civilizational heritage. As a result, China has reached a stage where it has the ability and potential to adopt and propose regional or international initiatives and strategies to enhance economic development, guarantee its national security and multiple interests, and bear real international responsibilities. China's proposal of the New Silk Road project under the slogan of "joint construction" is a geo-economic strategy that raises the banner of peaceful development based on the history of the ancient Silk Road, and the initiative for partnership and economic cooperation among countries in the three continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa.

Thus, the New Silk Road represents a radical shift in the nature of the global system from a unipolar world to a multipolar and multicultural world, placing China and other world powers on the map of international interest and decision-making. Therefore, both Eastern and Western powers alike need to realize the reality that it is not in the interest of humanity for one camp to dominate at the expense of the other, but rather it is in the interest of humanity to cooperate and

accept the other with all its religious, cultural, and intellectual differences, reject monopolies, desires for control and ownership, and gain the wealth of nations without just cause.

Therefore, the New Silk Road project is considered a great strategy for revitalizing Chinese relations and trade exchanges. It aligns with the current trend characterized by peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit, painting a beautiful picture of interaction between the North and the South, and the exchange between the East and the West, through policy coordination and facility linkage. Mutual complementarity of needs, confronting common challenges, and achieving mutual prosperity contribute to this (Wei, 2018, p. 07).

In the context of the Sino-Russian strategic alliance and the continuation of complex international and regional environmental features, the New Silk Road has become more strategically important and valuable as a symbol of peace, cooperation, openness, and knowledge exchange. If our ancestors managed to deal with each other with respect and equality, working for mutual benefit and transcending superficial rivalries thousands of years ago, then it is the duty of the international community today to embrace the spirit of the ancient Silk Road and infuse it with greater dynamism, thereby creating a new material and cultural wealth for humanity.

5. Civilizational Communication and Intellectual/Cultural Exchange

If the Silk Road was one of the greatest trade routes in the world, it may also be the most strategically important as a conduit for civilizational communication and intellectual and cultural exchange. Thanks to this route, many sciences and technologies traveled around the world, such as writing, the wheel, weaving, agriculture, horseback riding, and more. It contributed to the transfer of knowledge and cultures between different civilizations, with religions and philosophies like Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Confucianism passing through it (Gaber, 2017, pp. 161-162).

Buddhism is a prime example of religions that journeyed along the Silk Roads, as Buddhist artifacts and temples were discovered in distant locations such as Afghanistan, China, and Indonesia.

The Silk Road also played a crucial role in spreading Islam and the adoption of Islam by many Chinese, leading to the establishment of many mosques in different regions of China during the Yuan (1206-1368 CE) and early Ming (1368-1644 CE) dynasties. The number of mosques in China exceeds thirty thousand, some of which are historic dating back to the 7th century CE and others from different historical periods.

Travelers absorbed the cultures they encountered and brought them back to their homelands. For example, Hinduism and subsequently Islam entered Indonesia and Malaysia through Silk Road traders who traveled via maritime trade routes in India and the Arabian Peninsula.

At the same time, the Silk Road facilitated a different kind of exchange, with many flowers and fruits, considered indigenous plants, originating from China and spreading to the West through the Silk Road. Likewise, China gave the West grapes, wine, clover, figs, sunflowers, and more. With silk trade, products from around the world reached China, such as pepper, carrots, onions, and watermelons. Since the beginning of the Han dynasty, some plants and glassware were transferred from Rome to China (Husseini, 2016, pp. 4-5).

While Europe suffered the woes of backwardness, prosperous China sent some of its most important contributions to the West, including paper and printing, along with new scientific developments in medicine, astronomy, engineering, as well as weapons like bows, siege equipment, gunpowder, and war chariots (Frank & Brownstone, 1986).

One of the most significant achievements facilitated by the Silk Road was the technology of papermaking and the development of printed press, leading to a major breakthrough in human

history. This contributed greatly to the progress of humanity, preserving the memory of humanity from oblivion, and transferring social systems.

The strategic importance of the Silk Road and its impact on trade exchange, intellectual dialogue, and cultural interaction prompted UNESCO to urge global communities and member states of the United Nations to conduct research, investigate, and monitor the effects of the Silk Road across the world by land and sea. UNESCO hopes to open a new cultural dialogue that contributes to the convergence of peoples and nations, the advancement of human society, economic prosperity, and the strengthening of various relationships between countries (Zahidi, 1991).

UNESCO believes that the Silk Road was not just a trade route, but it evolved and developed over time, according to changing geopolitical contexts throughout history. It represented a cultural river where cultures and religions mixed, and peoples intersected to reveal each other's cultures. It facilitated the transmission of knowledge, ideas, cultures, and beliefs through continuous movement of people, deeply impacting the history of European and Asian societies and their civilizations. Travelers attracted intellectual and cultural cross-fertilization prevalent in cities along these routes, to the extent that many of them turned into centers of culture and learning (Amer, 2019). The societies along these routes witnessed exchanges and spread of sciences, arts, literature, crafts, and technological tools, leading to the flourishing of languages, religions, and cultures and their fusion.

Based on the above, it becomes apparent that the Silk Road plays a strategic role in the convergence of cultures and peoples and facilitates exchanges between them. Traders are forced to learn the languages and traditions of the countries they travel through. Many travelers dare to traverse these routes to engage in intellectual and cultural exchange, which was thriving in cities along these routes. These routes witnessed exchanges of scientific, artistic, and literary knowledge as well as handicrafts and technological tools, leading to the flourishing of languages, religions, and cultures and their fusion. The mutual simulation links across the Silk Road, enabling the exchange of goods and knowledge, can enhance economic, cultural, and social progress in many countries, facilitate dialogue and integration between different civilizations, and leave bright pages in human history.

Conclusions

The New Silk Road is a massive strategic project that presents the vision of Chinese foreign policy, encompassing an international outlook guided by mutual cooperation, gains, and development. This results in a strategic vision that connects more than two-thirds of the world's population and opens windows for revitalizing global business, peace, and infrastructure development worldwide.

Therefore, this research concludes that the New Silk Road is a strategic project that highlights China's regional and global power, demonstrating its strategic importance in three main aspects. First, it connects many countries worldwide with the aim of trade exchange and enhancing economic cooperation and efficient resource distribution, leading to the expansion of market integration. It also focuses on supporting economic projects, thereby achieving economic development that benefits all participating countries without intervening in their internal affairs. Second, the strategic importance of the New Silk Road lies in its role in fostering civilizational communication and intellectual exchange, linking the past with the present. It has connected China with many countries worldwide, helping these countries and their communities to transfer their cultures and beliefs through the exchange of goods, as well as transmitting the latest developments in sciences, philosophy, and languages.

The enduring and continuous legacy of the Silk Road is evident in the interconnected cultures, languages, customs, and religions that have developed over thousands of years along this route.

The passage of traders and travelers of different nationalities not only generated trade exchanges but also led to widespread cultural interaction.

Third, the third and very important strategic importance of the Silk Road in the contemporary world lies in its role in ending unipolarity and Western dominance over third-world countries. China has become a major power driving the world economy and pushing for multipolarity in the world. Through the Silk Road, it plays a pivotal and growing role in shaping the international arena. At the same time, it faces multiple challenges, old and new, including growing pressures to remain vibrant.

China operates in its regional and international arena to achieve its interests in the context of competitive relations with other major powers through the New Silk Road. This aims to build partnerships with many countries worldwide, enabling economic development and providing China with options to expand its dominance and increase its power in these regions, thus increasing the likelihood of China achieving its goals of shaping a new international system based on mutual cooperation.

As we enter the twenty-first century and continue to witness the complex features of the international and regional environment, the Silk Road has become more strategically important as a symbol of peace and unity for many countries committed to cooperation, openness, and knowledge exchange.

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