

Independent Opinion Article

By Tridivesh Singh Maini and Manish Vaid

India's exciting but challenging ride on the Silk Road

From 200 BC to the 14th Century AD, India was an important link in the 'Great Silk Road', the incredible trade route, which connected Asia and Europe, and spanned 7000 kilometres.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant that India once again become a critical link and a frontline player in the modern day attempt to replicated the Old Silk Road -- dubbed the New Silk Road -- which though different from the Great Silk Road, is guided by the same sentiment of promoting greater trade, commerce and connectivity with Central Asia, despite a plethora of geo-political rivalries and tensions between nations.

From India's perspective, the Great Silk Road was also relevant as it was an important means of cultural and knowledge exchanges, apart from being a trade route. In the current context too, India has similar aims which include economic development and energy security in the Central Asian region and the Indian sub-continent. New Delhi has thus unequivocally distanced itself from what has been dubbed as the 'New Great Game'.

The biggest challenge for India, in the forefront in pursuing with this goal is the identification of key issues like economic, geopolitical and social, which are also of utmost priority to the development of Central Asia for other countries having stake in the region. Therefore, India's objectives and interests in Central Asia lie in its holistic development, besides ensuring its goal of infrastructural development which would help in strengthening its energy security. For this India is collaborating, coordinating and exploring different ways for engaging itself with countries like U.S., China, Russia and of course Central Asian countries. It would thus be pertinent to also have an understanding of projects which are being supported by the above countries and which India is actively participating in.

The Silk Road and India's role

TAPI gas pipeline

Recent developments in various Silk Road strategies of different nations like U.S. and China and the direct involvement of India in the same, significantly highlight India's goal and interests in Central Asia. The first step towards this strategy from India's perspective was the signing of Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline deal on 23 May 2012. This deal was termed as the new 'silk route' between Central Asia and South Asia by former Petroleum Minister of India, Murli Deora. Moreover, India's current External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna during a meeting of foreign ministers on the sidelines of United Nations General Assembly in New York on 22 September 2011, clearly backed the 'New Silk Road' in Central Asia in the presence of the United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. She in one of her later visits to India further stated that, "Together, we must continue laying the groundwork for the long-term vision of a New Silk Road that connects markets,

businesses and consumers from the Caspian to the Ganges and beyond." Recent Indo-US bilateral trade can also be seen as an extension of Washington's Silk Road Strategy Act of 2006, where it has included Afghanistan to be a part of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, with the objective of developing this region from a longer term perspective, including energy security.

Pakistan's relevance for the Silk Road

Approval and support of the U.S. for TAPI gas pipeline itself signifies the acceptance of the importance of a Pakistan in its Silk Road strategy. Recent trilateral engagements between the U.S., Afghanistan and India, seen as a threat by Pakistan, have been ruled out by Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Robert Blake, who encouraged Pakistan to take action against groups of Lashkar-e-Taiba, emanating from Pakistan territory. Further, with Pakistan's Federal Cabinet approval for restoring ground routes to NATO supplies in the aftermath of the U.S. apology for its raids conducted in November, which resulted in the killing of 24 soldiers, can further ease tensions between the U.S. and Pakistan. This clearly reiterates the fact that Pakistan's geo-political location makes it indispensable not only in the security context, but also as a vital component of the potential Silk Road. The strides made in the New Delhi-Islamabad relationship, especially in the realm of trade and commerce, will hopefully make the arduous journey towards the New Silk Road smoother.

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) platform to engage with China's Silk Road Strategy

In its endeavour to play a significant role in engaging itself in the development of Central Asia, a region treated as its extended neighbour, India is also willing to work with both Iran and Russia which have been excluded by the U.S. by pitching for a larger role in SCO. Interestingly all the important players namely, India, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan en-route the Silk Road are presently observers. In the recent summit held on June 6-7, the SCO again failed to break its expansion impasse, by not adding any countries to its list, including India. India however, is still hopeful of getting full membership of the SCO. It is important to mention here, that the former is already a part of China's Silk Road Strategy, in its 3rd Eurasian Land Bridge, one of the three main corridors across the Eurasian Continent, for a high speed network which also includes and Iran and Pakistan.

Conclusion

It is imperative that the New Silk Road Project does not get overshadowed by political bickering and rivalries, and sticks to the promotion of economic growth, integration and political stabilization. New Delhi has an important role to play since it is part of all the versions of the project, and has strong economic ties with important players in the project – such as China. It remains to be seen how it deals with the bumps on the road.

***Tridivesh Singh Maini is a New Delhi based writer and foreign policy analyst.
Manish Vaid is a Research Assistant with Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.***

**** This article expresses the views of the authors only. It does not in any way express the view of The New Silk Road Forum or any other person.***