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The New Silk Road and Sino-Russian relations through the lens of Liberalism, Realism and Neocolonialism

Abstract

The rebirth of the Silk Road presents itself as a possible change in the status quo in Central Asia. China's presents and influence in the region has been increasing in the past decade in the detriment of Russian influence. This paper analyzes the New Silk Road and Sino-Russian relations through the lens of liberalism, realism and neocolonialism. The Belt and Road Initiative presents itself as a revolutionary project however the changes it produces in terms of trade are minimal. Strategic aspects trump the trade related ones. The paper demonstrates that China needs Russia to participate in order to make the project successful while Russia should participate in order to limit China from taking control over the region, thus realism is they school of thought together with neocolonialism.

Keywords: Trade Route; New Silk Road; Influence; Trade; Neocolonialism; China; Russia; Central Asia; Liberalism; Realism; Neocolonialism

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1. Introduction

The Silk Road was a channel for trade but also exchange of culture and technology that linked the East to the West. Once people began using ships to carry their goods the relevance of the Silk Road faded. China in its desire to increase trade has brought forward a project to revive the Silk road through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) a project that would provide a significant amount of foreign aid in order to develop the infrastructure in the targeted regions.

The aim of the paper is to analyze the New Silk Road through the lens of Liberalism, Realism and Neocolonialism.

Providing aid to other countries is part of a countries foreign policy. A definition for foreign policy (Vasa, 2020) can be: the sum of policies and approaches a state applies in its relationship with other international actors. Depending on the two main schools of international relations, international actors can be either be just states (according to the realist approach) or states, international organization, and non-state actors (according to the liberal approach). Realists consider states focus on power and thus put national interests at the core of their foreign policy and when providing aid actually do it based on the fact it can provide certain strategic or other

benefits.¹ The liberal school advocates for ethics, human rights and cooperation thus, from their perspective, neutrality and impartiality are the values behind aid, portraying it as interest-free.² Trade has played the most significant role for China when choosing to provide aid, while for instance the UK when providing aid to the Democratic Republic of Congo does not show signs of important strategic, political, or economic interests.³

The aim of this paper is to analyze the New Silk Road from the perspective of the main school of international relations, plus neocolonialism. Using the core principles of each of the aforementioned schools of thought, the research will attempt to explain the approach China and Russia have regarding the New Silk Road Project.

The hypotheses are as follows:

H1. Sino-Russian cooperation within the BRI cannot be explained using Liberalism.

H2. Realism is the theory that can fully explain the Sino-Russian relations and the BRI.

H3. Elements of Neocolonialism are present.

2. History of the Silk Road

Central Asia has always been the bridge connecting Asia to Europe. The manifestation of this link is known today as the Silk Road. The first version of the Silk Road is placed by analysts at the beginning of the westward expansion of the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD) however the trade routes have existed even before but have not been consolidated (Feddersen & Zucatto, 2013). Although silk was an important good, other Chinese products such as porcelain, spices and others were sought after in Europe while the Chinese imported precious metals, glass and other products in return. The Silk Road also paved the way for not only exchange of goods but also culture, knowledge and technology. Trade routes extended through most of Central Asia.

The pinnacle of the Silk Road was reached after the fall of the Han dynasty during the Mongol Empire. They developed its infrastructure to guarantee safe travel conditions (Waugh, 2000). The khans had under their control a trade network that extended from the Western Pacific all the way to Eastern Europe. Central Asia gradually became the epicenter of the first wave of globalization, which has made it possible for the area to connect remote regions, generate much prosperity and connect very complex cultural and religious traditions. (McBride, 2015). The glory days of the Silk Road ended once the Mongol Empire began crumbling apart into smaller khanates and as the Europeans became stronger, they took to the seas with their trade. These developments resulted in a drastic reduction in trade that left Central Asia on the periphery, vulnerable. The Junghar Empire managed to bring back prosperity in Central Asia, but it was quickly undermined by the Russians and the Manchu-Chinese who effectively destroyed the Junghars and partitioned Central Asia. In time the Russian Empire expanded and gained control over the whole of Central Asia with the exception of East Turkestan that remained part of China (Beckwith, 2009).

Central Asia was and it is still mostly inhabited by Turkic and in the Southern parts by Iranian people. The overwhelming majority of these peoples adhere to Islam. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the successor of the Russian Empire, most of Central Asian became independent. The republics of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan emerged while East Turkestan remained part of China. Although the new republics were independent they still shared important ties with Russian, leading some theorists to argue that they belong to the Russian sphere of influence (Page, 1994).

Impressive economic growth and increased openness to the external environment that China registered in the latter part of the twentieth century and in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, focused on exports, brought to the general attention the need for some adequate trade routes, a new silk road.

3. The New Silk Road

Paradigm shifts have occurred at the political level, China's top leadership publicly presented in 2013 the concept of «New Silk Road» as a complex and ambitious project seeking to create a

¹ See: Walt, S. M. (2016, January 8). What Would a Realist World Have Looked Like? Foreign Policy.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/08/what-would-a-realist-world-have-looked-like-iraq-syria-iran-obama-bush-clinton>

² See: Weber, C. (2013). International Relations Theory: A critical introduction. Routledge.

³ See: Willits-King, B., Bryant, J., El Taraboulsi-McCarthy, S. (2018). Humanitarian action and foreign policy: balancing interests and values. Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London. <https://odi.org/en/publications/humanitarian-action-and-foreign-policy-balancing-interests-and-values>

logistics network on land, sea and air. Railways, highways (many of them high speed), or expressways as well as oil or natural gas pipelines are planned to be built or improved in order to better connect China with the states of Europe, further deepening the already considerable economic ties (Tiezzi, 2014).

As in ancient times, this logistics network runs through Central Asia. The region is seeking to modernize its infrastructure by investing in physical infrastructure such roads, oil and gas pipelines, rail networks. The economy depends on infrastructure and for the economy to grow the physical infrastructure together with soft infrastructure (rules and regulations) need to be developed, which generates numerous effects on the economies of the states in the region.

According to discussions held, some of the routes of the New Silk Road pass through Russia while others bypass it. These are the potential routes of the New Silk Road:

- China-Russia-Europe;
- China-Mongolia-Russia-Europe;
- China-Kazakhstan-Russia-Europe;
- China-Central Asia-Iran/Caucasus⁴ - Turkey- Europe (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2018).

The New Silk Road, according to a quantitative research, has the potential to bring USD 1.6 trillion in 2030 in global welfare gains, out of which 90% would be retained by the partner countries. However this is a mere simulation and in order to reap the benefits heavy investment into infrastructure is required together with finding solutions for finding solutions for serious challenges (Zhai, 2018). A major increase in share of trade by land routes is unlikely since the price of transporting by land cannot compete with the costs of shipping by sea. Other factors that undermine the project are the decrease in economic growth and decrease in trade that China has been experiencing since 2010.

It is already visible that from an economic point of view the Belt and Road Initiative is not necessarily viable as a transit route. Diversifying export flows can be connected to non-economic factors such as the increased presence of the U.S. military in the Indo-Pacific region, dependence on Singapore and Egypt for the passage of goods through the straits. By diversifying China can reduce its vulnerabilities (Makarov & Sokolova, 2016).

As it can be seen Russia is a key partner in this project. The Russian authorities perceive this complex architecture specific to the new partnership with great attention since the exclusion of Russia from the trade routes involved, can represent a significant loss. The biggest losses that the Russian leadership speaks less about, but seriously considering, are those in terms of its influence in the region and the vulnerability of the expansionist tendencies thought by its foreign policy planners. The model of economic growth promoted by China as, by the way, by the other East Asian states is one focused on exports and investments. Although they are beneficial to emerging economies, these development fundamentals also contain areas of vulnerability due to international developments that lead to demand compression and reduced imports. Economic as well as extra economic events (such as the corona-virus period) can profoundly affect economic development. For several decades, China has recorded annual growth rates of over 10%, but these extremely favorable times were severely short-circuited with the outbreak of the global economic and financial crisis in 2008 (Li, Willett, & Zhang, 2011). Since then, Chinese authorities have had to resort to public investments and at the request of the internal population in order to maintain the pace of economic growth at satisfactory levels. The events of the last two years have seriously affected the internal macroeconomic balances of this country, and there has to be a revision of the growth model successfully promoted for many decades.

The experts of the International Monetary Fund forecast for 2021 an increase of the Gross Domestic Product of China not more than 8.4% (IMF, 2021), a level significantly lower than in the glory periods of this country's economy. Because investments were permanently the engine of the development of the Chinese economy, the intensification of investment placements in the neighboring economies represented a strategic concern of the decision makers in the field of economic policies but also of the Chinese corporate environment. China is somehow taking over the Japanese model of development, according to which, in many cases, the periods of economic downturn have been exceeded due to the launch of important infrastructure or infrastructure investment projects (Rodrik, 2015). One of the reasons for a decline in the economic growth of the Chinese economy can be considered to be the slowing down of the development of the manufactured

⁴ Via ferry

production which led both to the decrease of imports of intermediate goods and to the decrease of exports of processed products. The Chinese authorities hope that by activating the New Silk Road project the economic growth process can be restarted. Collaboration with the states of the Caspian Sea region can stabilize the flows of energy resources and raw materials to the Chinese economy.

The strategy designed to operationalize this impressive infrastructure and industrial network envisages the realization of several components:

- A first component is dedicated to the infrastructure dimension transiting the Central Asia region, this being called the «Silk Road Economic Belt»; it has a central component that transits the opposite area to the Caspian Sea, using the ports of Aktau and Baku and continues to Turkey through Azerbaijan and Georgia. In its entirety, this first component also concerns the south wing passing through Turkmenistan and heading for Iran.
- The second component is the maritime one and links the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf. The operationalization of both components involves impressive investments, most of which are expected to be built by the Chinese state which will attract major private investors.

An important role will also play the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), set up in 2014 by China along with 37 states in the region and 20 states outside the region, and is expected to make available over USD 100 billion to fund the important investment goals, investments in this complex network of objectives. By the time it becomes fully operational, this hub and spoke mechanism will facilitate large Chinese companies that have significant production capabilities of complex machines and machines, steel products or construction materials, access to a very large retail market. There will be an increase in the total volume of trade with the states located on these trade routes, but also a significant decrease in transaction costs and an increase in the speed of movement of goods to their end users. The Silk Road will facilitate the arrival of Chinese products to European markets under higher safety conditions, lower costs and much faster travel speeds. The same infrastructure networks that make it easier for Chinese consumers to reach their end consumers will make it possible and efficient for the Chinese economy, from neighboring countries, to buy much higher volumes of raw materials, energy resources and intermediate goods, contributing to switching from «trade in goods» to «trade in tasks», which will facilitate the inclusion of China, but also of the states in the area, in the new techno-industrial paradigm.

In order to prepare an integrated economic landscape, the Chinese authorities have announced since 2010 a strategy that aims to acquire the status of international currency by renminbi (Park, 2016). Efforts to operationalize a banking-type architecture in which the states grouped under the acronym BRICS can participate, may contribute to the redefinition of the Chinese national currency at the level of the international monetary system. Despite the efforts of the authorities in Central Asian states over the past 30 years, the economies of these states still have a long and long way to go to achieve normal levels of mutual interdependence, macro and microeconomic complementarity and openness to the regional external environment. All these states are subject to specialization schemes in a small range of products, usually with a low degree of processing, which diminishes their aggregate added value, makes them fail to capitalize on all the sources of competitive advantage they have and maintain their dependence on economic powers in the vicinity or more from a distance (Abramov et al., 2018). Even if, after more than two decades, their dependence on the Russian economy has not diminished much, the announced strategy of the Moscow authorities to reintegrate these republics into the sphere of influence of the great regional power can only cause concern in both the capitals of these states as well as in the cancellations of the other major geo-political and geo-economic powers (Stanojevic, 2016).

4. The New Silk Road and Russia

«We are broadening our cooperation with the People's Republic of China in the interest of creating a common economic space. This May, we signed a joint statement on combining the development of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt. In essence, we are talking about new approaches to cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union and China, about broadening cooperation and implementing major joint infrastructure projects, about simplifying trade, and strengthening cooperation through various financial instruments.» (Putin, 2015).

The Eurasian Economic Union was mandated by most of its member states, including Russia, to begin negotiations on an agreement with China. This demonstrates that Russia does not oppose the New Silk Road.

China is an important partner for Russia, especially after the EU imposed sanctions for the crisis in Ukraine, and the same can be said vice-versa. China has done a great deal in order to appease Russia so as to receive its support. Some important achievements on Russia's side in relation to China:

- privileged status within AIIB;
- a gas deal worth USD 400 billion;
- Moscow Kazan high-speed rail infrastructure investment;
- a part of the Silk Road would pass through Moscow;
- inclusion of the Trans-Siberian railway as part of the New Silk Road and chance of developing Russia's East (Stanojevic, 2016).

In recent years, the dependence of the Central Asian states on Russia has diminished somewhat economically, this ambitious infrastructure and commercial network hoping to contribute to the continuation of this trend. The New Silk Road can contribute to solid progress in the development of this region, allowing China to maintain its high growth and investment dynamics. Several analysts believe that there are real premises for China to become the dominant power in this region in the long run, surpassing Russia. Statistical data show that, in recent years, in more and more states in this region, Russia no longer holds the position of principal investor, or that of a strategic trading partner. Continuing in this direction, the prevailing status of Russia will be lost in virtually all states in the region. For the republics that have important sectors of raw materials and energy resources (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), China has already become the major importer of these products. The reality shows that the strategy used by the Russian authorities on the relationship with Central Asian states «is not focused on new developments and investments in infrastructure, it is focused rather on securing Soviet legacy» (Fedorenko, 2013). This attitude leads to the realization by Russia of small investments, focused on the maintenance of the existing infrastructure, and only the one that connects these countries with Russia. Focusing most efforts on gaining and maintaining dominance over these economies has paved the way for other powers, especially China, to gradually gain prevalence in the economies and societies of this region however politically it did not challenge Russia (Stanojevic, 2016).

In Tajikistan, China has created a military base with the purpose of providing aid in patrolling the Afghani border (DoD, 2020). A Chinese military base in the Russian sphere of influence, as well as in a country with an already present Russian military base, is a first. When looking at the maritime path of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has been continuously developing its military assets along the path in order to provide assistance in the event of disruptions to the trade flows (DoD, 2020), a similar strategy can also occur throughout Central Asia along the New Silk Road, Tajikistan being the first country that accepted a Chinese military base on its soil in Central Asia.

Although China is gaining ground with regards to influence in the Central Asian region undermining Russia's position economically, recent developments in the region, specifically Xinjiang, have the potential to disrupt any future plans China may have in the region. The inhabitants of Xinjiang, the Uyghur people and in smaller number Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, are Turkic peoples of Islamic faith, and their persecution by the central government gave rise to increased anti-Chinese sentiment in Central Asia (Battaglia, 2017). Official sanctions have not been applied against China by any of the Central Asian states, however anti-Chinese manifestations have occurred (Putz, 2016). The Belt and Road Initiative also aims at developing Xinjiang in order to raise the standards of living in the regions and as a result lower support for separatism and terrorism (Tukmadiyeva, 2013). In order to achieve diversification of trade routes China needs to cooperate with Russia, especially if anti-Chinese sentiment would grow because in the event that the Central Asian states would boycott the New Silk Road, China's only option to reach Europe on land would be through Russia.

The Belt and Road Initiative does not represent a significant increase in trade since it is significantly more costly to deliver shipment by land than by sea. Yet the Chinese government is keen on developing infrastructure but any loans that would finance this venture coming from China could lead to a handover of control of important assets if the governments fail to pay back the loan according to the agreements. Such events have occurred in 2017 when China took over a port in Sri Lanka (Birnbbaum, 2021). China taking over control over strategic assets in Central Asia is a loss for Central Asia but as well a loss for Russia since China would increase its power in the region.

The New Silk road if it is merely analyzed as a route that would connect China to Europe depends on cooperation with Russia otherwise the narrow corridor through Central Asia is not viable for the success of the Silk Road as a route. However, the New Silk Road can also be analyzed as a method to increase China's influence and gain access to important resources (such as oil) in the targeted countries, in the detriment of Russia (Morozov et al., 2018).

5. Results

Theories of the International Relations and the BRI

Liberalism is the theory of international relations that has at its core democracy and ensuring the rights of individuals to life, liberty, and property. Authoritarian regimes do not support these principles. In liberalism the actors include states, international organization that cooperate within the framework of international law in order to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome (Meiser, 2017).

Realism is the theory of international relations that suggests that the state is the principal actor in an anarchical world system that is in constant pursuit to satisfy its self-interest using power to ensure its existence (Antunes & Camisao, 2017).

Neocolonialism is main instrument of today's imperialism that replaced classical colonialism that used mainly military means to control the colony. Control is now exerted through economic or monetary means that aim to exploit the subject state (Nkrumah, 1965).

The Belt and Road initiative could easily be explained by either Liberalism or Realism. For instance, the Sino-Russian perspective of the Belt and Road initiative could easily be explained using liberalism since both parties claim that they wish to engage in a multilateral partnership in order to facilitate the transportation of goods from East to West. However, when analyzing more in depth we see that behind this alleged win-win situation some of the core values of liberalism, democracy and human rights, are not present since both countries are considered as led by authoritarian regimes according to the democracy index⁵ and that both countries fair poorly in the field of human rights as well (Roser, 2016). Even if those principles would be overlooked and analysis would focus on the relationship as a strategic partnership for coordination on global security issues and mutual support, the question remains as to why is there no military alliance between the two states and why is China creating military bases along the routes. Furthermore connecting China to Europe on land is more expensive then by sea, thus other reasons must be behind the decision. Having mentioned that the theory of Liberalism is not applicable in this context, hypothesis H1 is valid.

Since military bases are involved, it is obvious that the main aim of the New Silk Road is to increase China's power, regionally and globally. China's behavior in the region as well as Russia's can be both explained using realism. China wishes to consolidate itself as a power in the regions by providing financial aid, military aid and other tools to the respective countries as well as alleviate tensions in Xinjian. Russia, on the other hand, cannot really compete with China on the same level since, for instance, China's economy is much stronger and thus has more funds available to develop projects in the Central Asia yet Russia is still attempting to maintain a certain balance due to its strategic importance as a partner in the BRI. The search for power and fulfillment of self-interest fall perfectly within realism although there is another element can realism leaves asides, colonial ties.

Central Asia is made up by independent states that were under the Russian Empire and if we consider Xinjian as part of Central Asia, since culturally it does belong to the region if not geographically, it can be said that China rules part of Central Asia. Russia attempts at maintaining its influence in the region using soft-power while China is gaining influence using soft-power. China provides significant aid to the states and through it consolidating its position in the region as eliminating any unrest in Xinjian. China's approach towards Xinjian can be considered as colonialist since it indoctrinates the Non-Han Chinese people (communist values, speaking mandarin, etc.) even though it does also invest in order to increase living standards to eliminate separatism. Using Xinjian as a template it can be understood that China will only have a similar attitude towards the rest of Central Asia, using neocolonial tactics through BRI. Realism does indeed explain well the position Russia and China have towards BRI however if Neocolonialism would be part of Realism and not Marxism then it would truly explain the events. Thus, H2 falls while H3 stands.

⁵ The Economist Intelligence. (2020, January 22). Democracy Index 2019. https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=democracyindex2019

6. Conclusion

The New Silk road represents an opportunity for Russia to develop its infrastructure and its connectivity with China and Central Asia. Strategically the project is more important for China however Russia is a key player for the success of this project since without the cooperation of Russia, China would be restricted to a narrow corridor that passes through several countries that can at any point become hostile towards China due to its alleged persecutions of Muslims. The New Silk Road cannot be viable for China without Russia, due to Russia's remaining influence in region that can either provide support or opposition but as well it being the most transit country since most routes go across Russia.

Russia is in a very favorable position because without its support China will not be able to diversify its trade routes by more than a narrow corridor that is anyway passing through a region that has the potential to become unstable. However, in order to strengthen its position Russia should also become active within the project in order not to allow for the Chinese to gain too much influence in Central Asia that would at one point undermine Russia's position. The search for power and satisfaction of self-interest clearly demonstrate that liberalism is not as relevant of a school of thought as realism and if we take into consideration the colonial aspect neocolonialism is also present.

Although the Silk Road was in history an important route for international trade the New Silk Road would have a minimal increase in international trade and its main purpose is to diversify China's trade routes towards Europe. The New Silk Road makes Russia a key player and as such Russia needs to take advantage of its position and become involved just as much as China so as not to lose ground. Central Asia is stuck between two great superpowers fighting for power using neocolonialist means.

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