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Old Silk Route and Belt & Road Initiative (BRI): Past to Present

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The history of the Old Silk Road can be traced back to the rule of China's Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 BC). Originating from East China's coastline, this ancient trade route traversed Central Asia and extended to Europe. Serving as a vital artery for commerce and cultural exchange, it connected South and

Central Asia with Europe and the Middle East. Notably, modern-day India and Pakistan were integral parts of this network. Consequently, during that era, Central Asia became a hub that united the East and West



through vibrant trade, commerce, and shared values. Over time, various empires like Tang Dynasty (618-907), Byzantine Empire, and Roman Empire contributed to extending and expanding the Old Silk Road. However, new historical developments eventually led to its decline. Firstly, it was badly affected by Mongol invasions as well as the Crusades in terms of disrupting trade routes. Secondly, in the 16th century, the emergence of maritime routes gained prominence, and Asian and European countries increasingly relied on sea-based trading. Thus, the Old Silk Road played a pivotal role in connecting diverse regions, cultures, and economies across vast distances. Its significance is deeply rooted in history, bearing witness to centuries of exchange and shaping civilizations along its path.

In 2012, Xi Jinping introduced the concept of the "China Dream". This vision aimed to promote economic prosperity, national rejuvenation, people's happiness, and social harmony (Wang, March 2015). The realization of the "China Dream" is embodied in two key components: One Belt One Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt along with Maritime Silk Roads. These components are integral parts of this ambitious dream devised by Xi Jinping.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is a part of China's global economic strategy comprises two primary elements. Firstly, it involves reviving China and developing the Old Silk Route known as the Silk Road Economic



Belt. Secondly, it encompasses a sea route starting from China's east coast that extends to India before continuing via the Mediterranean Sea towards Europe. China is actively working towards the creation of a free trade area in Central and South Asia, similar to ASEAN. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), six corridors connect various countries, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) being one of them. Through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China had invested an initial capital of 100 billion dollars in this endeavour. The estimated cost of the BRI is around 4 trillion dollars, and it is expected to be fully operational within a decade, facilitating a trade volume of approximately 2.5 trillion dollars for China.

The Silk Road Economic Belt primarily focuses on the advancement of infrastructure in Central Asia, intending to foster an environment conducive to economic integration and



connectivity. This encompasses the construction of roads, energy facilities, and railways. Consequently, it has greatly contributed to the growth of China's economy while also facilitating access to major trade hubs in Europe. President Xi has made substantial investments in countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan to support this initiative.

The Maritime Silk Road encompasses the expansion and alternative sea routes that traverse the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf regions. In 2013, President Xi unveiled plans for this ambitious project during a forum held by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As maritime trade continues to thrive in the 21st century, it becomes imperative to establish new ports across various nations. To fulfil this need, China has made substantial investments in developing ports along the Indian Ocean route, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Maldives.

From the perspective of Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) holds immense significance as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Pakistan has the potential to play a crucial role in this geo-economic development. CPEC serves as one of the viable solutions to prevailing economic issues in Pakistan, and its implementation will contribute significantly to regional connectivity, economic integration, trade expansion, and overall prosperity. It is important to note that CPEC is not merely aid from China but an investment. This signifies the presence of economic returns as well as geopolitical and geostrategic objectives for the Chinese government in the region. For Pakistan, it presents an opportunity to redefine its role in regional politics by fostering trade partnerships and promoting economic stability.