



中國傳媒大學  
COMMUNICATION UNIVERSITY OF CHINA



Institute for a Community  
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人類命運共同體研究院



## The Emerging Trends in the BRI Strengthening the Old Silk Route Traditions

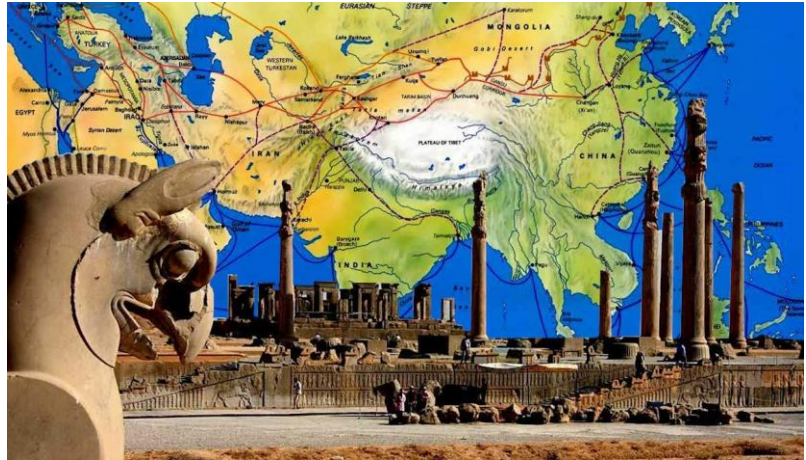


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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) announced by the Chinese government in 2013, is the re-emergence of the historical Silk Route. The ‘Silk Route’ was the route connecting the East and the West; it connected Asia, Europe and Africa. However, according to Man Hung Thomas Chan, the term itself is not much older, as it was coined in the nineteenth century. The route served as a conduit primarily for goods, however, ideas, religions, culture and



social values were also the secondary commodities of the exchange. These traditions of the Silk Route are finding their reinvigoration in the modern era. The BRI is reviving the exchange significance of the historical Silk Route; it is helping to exchange goods, values, cultures and ideas between the East and the West. BRI comprises 140 countries and 30 international organizations, so it enjoys a much wider outreach than its historical predecessor.

As the Silk Route in the classic period promoted the exchange of goods, that's exactly what the modern prototype is attempting to do. Cheap Chinese products are gaining wider acceptance

in the global market. The net worth of its investments consists of \$ 1 trillion in infrastructure investments comprising transport, energy, information technology (IT), mining, special economic zones (SEZs) and “smart cities. The Chinese government has also offered loans to developing countries to boost investment and shore up the floundering



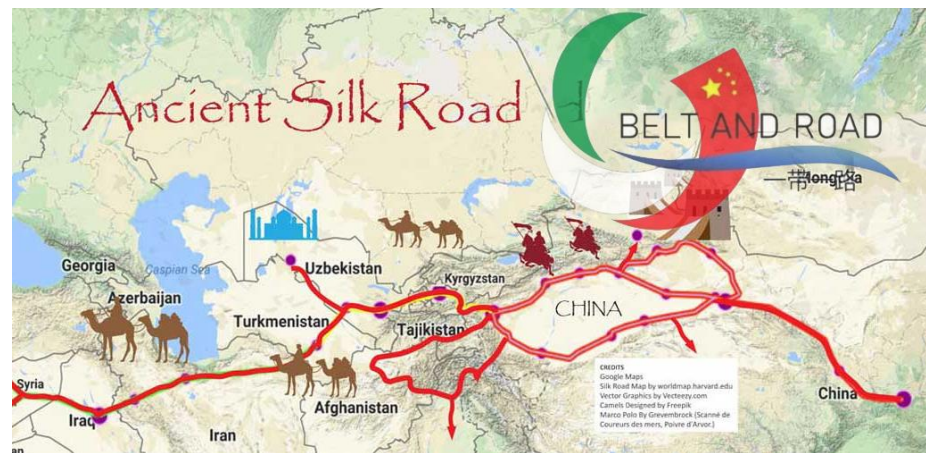
economies of these countries. However, as Keith Bradsher explains, due to the massive soaring of interest rates, the dollar rate has skyrocketed leading to difficulty in paying back loans and the Chinese Government has declined requests for forgiving loans, although in some cases it has extended payment deadlines. So, the investments of BRI are becoming a debt trap for the already miserable economies of developing countries. Saying this, the older Silk Route traditions of transferring goods and products is gaining much prominence as an alternative to expensive Western products.

Alongside the goods trade, religions were significant among the historical exchanges taking place via the Silk Route. To Encyclopaedia Britannica, religions were the one of the primary factors in defining the values of the era and the land. In the contemporary era marked by desperate struggles for democratic values and human rights, BRI is being criticised in some writings for promoting Chinese authoritarianism in the world. However, the modern BRI is strengthening knowledge sharing and creation among higher education institutions. In the classical period, various sanguine philosophies of the East particularly those stressing non-action and passivity found their way along these routes to the West leading to the emergence of Stoicism and Cynicism, as Will Durant has argued. However, these ideas emerged in the later Hellenistic period and their origins in the Taoism of China - much earlier than their Greek origins - particularly in the works of its flagbearers Lao Tzu and Confucius are evident.

Along with goods, ideas, religions and values, historically, the Silk Route has also been employed as the gateway for armies. Along the Silk Route, it is believed that while Alexander had lusted for blood, gold and power, Mongols spread like a disease throughout

Asia and started knocking on the gates of Europe in the verdant lands of Anatolia, modern-day Turkey. It is feared that along similar lines, BRI is also shifting from business to military dimensions. The Chinese military is stretching its muscles as it is gaining ground in various countries (Russel and Berger 19). So, in this sense, BRI is also fulfilling the historical tradition of the Silk Route as the road for armies to march on.

There is no dearth of literature about China's emphasis on using their soft power capacities, leading to the growth of Chinese campuses and institutions and awarding scholarships for students to study in China and acquaint



themselves with the native culture, people, ideas and system. So, the exchange of education and knowledge is taking place along the BRI as it used to be the case for two millennia along the Silk Route, before the downfall of the Silk Route during the colonisation of Asia and Africa by Europe. Due to its role in bridging communities across the swathes of continents, BRI is promoting globalization. However, through this initiative, China has emerged as an alternative leader to globalization as it challenges the world order spearheaded by the West –including the Western version of global economies, their ideology, sequences and consequences of globalization as these exist in the present context. As climate change is the death knell for civilization, it will be pertinent to scrutinize the role of BRI in it. BRI is financing the massive building of coal power plants across the



globe. Although, in 2023, the Chinese government has declared halting any such hazardous investments, but it is building fossil-fuelled power plants in mainland China. In recent years, BRI has promoted green energy and China has become the source of 80% of solar panels in the world. So, there is quite a mixed role of BRI in climate change initiatives.

It may be concluded that the Belt & Road Initiative is building its edifice upon the older traditions of the Silk Route, be these traditions of exchange of goods, ideas, religions and/or the march of armies. Along with that, it also exhibits the power of China in the global arena and serves as a much-needed counter to the ravages of the Western-dominated world. In a power-balanced world, it will be much more difficult for one bloc to savagely humiliate the world and run scot-free. Perhaps it is the lion of the East awakening itself, as Napoleon had declared China to be, or perhaps it is the power countering another power and BRI is just another cog in Fortune's blind wheel. Whatever it is, it is reigniting the traditions of the historical Silk Route and hence building on that structure which used to serve as a vital source of life, energy, goods, cultures and ideas in the ancient Silk Route times.