

The New Silk Road

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Discussant: Arpita Basu Roy (Senior Fellow, Centre for Studies in International Relations & Development, Kolkata)

Arpita Basu Roy had three pointed suggestions to offer. The first suggestion was that the title of the paper should be 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) instead of the New Silk Road initiative. She mentioned some of the other New Silk Road initiatives to clarify her point. One of them was the New Silk Road initiative of the United States for Central Asia and Afghanistan, which sought to integrate the region and boost its potential as a transit area between Europe and East Asia. The US New Silk Road Strategy, initiated in 2011, aimed at advancing liberalization of trade, fostering economic cooperation, increasing trade volume, and establishing people-to-people connections between and within South and Central Asia. Basu Roy also referred to a similar proposal that was made by Turkey. Initiated in 2008 by the Ministry of Customs and Trade of Turkey, Turkey's Silk Road Project aimed at providing a simplification and unification of customs formalities and reconstructing the historical Silk Road as a link between European and Asian markets. In this instance the New Silk Road initiative refers to China's New Silk Road Initiative or the OBOR. The next suggestion that was offered by Basu Roy was to highlight the difference between rhetoric and reality. The Chinese rhetoric about the scale, magnitude and benefits of the OBOR should be weighed against the politics and economics of reality. The gap between what is feasible and what is in the domain of rhetoric should be taken into account while studying the OBOR. Basu Roy emphasised upon certain specific problems associated with the OBOR keeping in mind the scale of the project such as delays, interruptions, resulting in increased costs. She particularly stressed upon the issue of absence of security due to political unrest and insurgency in areas along the route of the Belt and Road. Moreover, as the project involves a number of neighbouring countries, it could further entrap China in the complex domestic politics of its neighbours. Other issues such as those of accountability, environmental pollution and community displacement, which are some of the problems associated with China's projects in the neighbourhood, may trigger local confrontation. Therefore the OBOR offers considerable domestic, economic and political perils for China. These aspects require a detailed examination before arriving at conclusions on the project. In the final instance, Arpita Basu Roy, an expert on Afghanistan elaborated upon the geostrategic significance of

Afghanistan in any connectivity paradigm including the OBOR but also cautioned about the practical problems associated with having Afghanistan as a part of any project on connectivity. She provided specific examples of bottlenecks and delays associated with Uzbek-Afghan and Kazakh-Afghan projects arising on account of both the difficult terrain and the security scenario.