

The role of routes in establishing and maintaining geographical, political, cultural, educational, economic, military, technological, religious and ideological linkages within and between regions is significant. An analysis of the politics of routes in an extended Asian neighbourhood is crucial for both a historical as well as a contemporary understanding of the relationship between 'security' and 'development.' The competition over routes between rival powers, adds another dimension to the politics of routes. Regional economic connectivity with an emphasis on 'energy', 'trade and transport', 'customs and border operations' along with a connect in the realm of ideas constitutes the nucleus of the 'New Silk Roads' project. Further improvisations and strategization on the 'New Silk Roads' are underway, being primarily undertaken by China and India. As multiple attempts to break the 'bottlenecks in Asian connectivity', make headway in the form of major infrastructural investments, unusual equations between the major players unfold, promising an era of regional reconfigurations. The (draft) paper will attempt to briefly comprehend the various dimensions and political implications of the routes which aim to establish and re-establish connectivity within Asia, its extended neighbourhood and beyond.

China's Han Dynasty embarked upon the creation of the Silk Road, a little over two thousand years ago. It was intended to be an extensive system of commerce that connected South and Central Asia with the Middle East and Europe. In contemporary times, the notion of a 'New Silk Road', an interwoven set of 'economic integration initiatives' seeking to link East and Central Asia, has absorbed the United States and China, for significantly dissimilar reasons. In 2011, the United States put forth its vision of greater Central Asian economic and infrastructure integration with the aim of promoting political stability as it withdrew from Afghanistan. Since 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping has been emphatically expressing his own vision for a China-led Silk Road that would restructure foreign trade, guarantee stable energy supplies, stimulate Asian infrastructure development, and strengthen China's influence over the region. Only time will tell if the United States and China will compete for developing energy resources in Central Asia's Turkmenistan, constructing infrastructure in Pakistan, or winning political influence with national governments through Asia. Other Asian powers particularly India and Russia, in the meantime, are in the quest for defining their own approach to regional integration. Even though these rather ambitious projects have the potential to restructure one of the world's least integrated regions, they have to deal with indigenous challenges, logistical barriers, security threats, and political uncertainty. (Rolland, 2017)

The Silk Road Initiatives

Ancient Silk Road

The original Silk Road came into existence as part of the westward extension of China's Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), which established trade networks throughout what in contemporary times comprises the Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan, as well as present-day Pakistan and India to the south. Those routes in due course stretched over four thousand miles to Europe.

Central Asia was consequently the pivot of one of the first waves of globalization, linking eastern and western markets, stimulating enormous wealth, and blending cultural and religious traditions. Expensive Chinese silk, spices, jade, and other goods moved west while China received gold and other valuable metals, ivory, and glass products. The route touched its zenith during the first millennium, under the Roman and Byzantine Empires, and the Tang dynasty (618–907) in China. However the Crusades, as well as advances by the Mongols in Central Asia, diminished trade. From the sixteenth century onwards, Asian commerce with Europe had essentially moved to maritime trade routes that were economical and quicker. For quite a few epochs the remarkable Silk Road was the most significant land route linking Europe and Asia. Encompassing multiple diverse routes and extending over a huge geographic space, the Silk Road was a distinctive trail that not only became a cause of affluence and trade relationships, but also encouraged interchange of information and knowledge in addition to cultural interaction among diverse communities. Land routes, in contrast to maritime routes, required caravans to intermingle with other communities and dissimilar cultures on the way to their ultimate destination. Consequently due to a trade-compelled interaction, even the smallest hamlets and settlements were exposed not only to the goods of advanced civilizations, but also to give-and-take of ‘ideas, knowledge, experience and beliefs.’ The importance of the extraordinary Silk Road lies in its spontaneous, inimitable nature as no authority or government could ever assert control over the conception and control of the Silk Road. There never ever was a blueprint or plan of the Silk Road simply because the Silk Road was so vast and multifaceted that its economic strength and proficiencies were unsurpassed by even its contemporary authorities. The Silk Road arose as a result of the multi-layered accumulation of countless demands, with supplies and anticipations stemming from innumerable sources ranging from the colossal empires to the smallest settlements and hamlets. The Silk Road progressively lost its importance and prominence in the modern period as a result of the progress in maritime transport and the fluctuating political situations in the region. (Rolland, 2017; Frankopen, 2015)

American New Silk Road

The American ‘New Silk Road’ initiative came into existence in 2011 in India when the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for the revival of the ancient Silk Road: “[Let’s build] an international web and network of economic and transit connections. That means building more rail lines, highways, [and] energy infrastructure, like the proposed pipeline to run from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan through Pakistan into India (TAPI). It means upgrading the facilities at border crossings. And it certainly means removing the bureaucratic barriers and other impediments to the free flow of goods and people.”¹ The purported aim of the initiative was to encourage trade liberalization, nurture economic cooperation, augment the volume of trade and create people-to-people connections between and within South and Central Asia. This New Silk Road initiative was focused on Afghanistan that constituted the nucleus for economic amalgamation and logistics. It was projected that the Silk Road initiative would assist in providing the support to Afghanistan that was essential in the aftermath of the proposed withdrawal of US troops from the region in 2014. The professed objective behind the US New Silk Road initiative was, “if Afghanistan is firmly embedded in the economic life of the region, it will be better able to attract new investments, benefit from its resource potential,

¹Hillary Clinton, “Progress Noted, but Questions Remain Over ‘New Silk Road’ Initiative”, U.S. Department of State, July 2011, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/07/168840.htm>. Cited in Vladimir Federenko, “The New Silk Road Initiatives in Central Asia”, Rethink Institute, Washington DC: *Rethink Paper* 10, August 2013.

provide increasing economic opportunities and hope for its people.”²The supposed objective apparently extended to include Afghanistan’s neighbours, the Central Asian republics. It was stated that the initiative had the potential to provide the much need economic fillip to the resource abundant Central Asian republics, which constituted one of the “least integrated regions in the global economy.” The emphasis was to be on the facilitation of modern infrastructure and impactful cross-border trade. However, it was evident that the interests of the United States was not confined to fostering economic trade and integration of the region. It aimed at “addressing transnational threats, building the infrastructure and connectivity necessary for regional economic development and cooperation, and providing space for civil society groups, rule of law and human rights concerns”.³ In order to realize these goals, the United States planned to employ “a combination of diplomatic engagement and bilateral and multilateral assistance”as well as “addressing transnational threats, building the infrastructure and connectivity necessary for regional economic development and cooperation, and providing space for civil society groups, rule of law and human rights concerns.”⁴Therefore the New Silk Road scheme also incorporated a political dimension such as endorsing democratic customs, beliefs and human rights andfor apparent political reasons, Iran, notwithstanding its vantage position, appropriate trade routes and sway in the region, was entirelyomitted from blueprint of the American New Silk Road strategy.

Turkey’s Silk Road

Turkey’s proposal for a Silk Road initiative was initiated in 2008 at the ‘International Forum on the Role of Customs Administration on Facilitating and Promoting Trade among Silk Road Countries’ in Antalya, Turkey. The meetingemphasised upon the simplification of border crossing processes among Silk Road countries as well as the facilitation and unification of customs formalities and to reconstruct the historical Silk Road as a link between European and Asian markets.The Turkish Silk Road project was an important addition to the Silk Road projects aiming at its revitalization. Its primaryfocus was on ‘transportation, security, logistics and custom procedures at borders.’ The blueprint of this chapter of the multiple Silk Roadswas to revitalize the Silk Road by way of an inclusive railway network, transportation lines, customs gates, energy corridors and natural gas pipelines, thereby converting this region into a major player in the world economy. Countries that wereintegrated into the Silk Road Project were Azerbaijan, Georgia, India, Iraq, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Russia, Syria, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, China and South Korea. Moreover, multiple international organizations participated in the forum, such as World Customs Administration (WCO), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), European Organization for Forwarding and Logistics (CLECAT) and International Road Transport Union (IRU). In addition to the emphasis on upgrading and simplifying custom procedures and facilitating and integrating global and regional trade, the focus was also on curbing illicit activities, terrorism and human trafficking; and backing and facilitating both regional and global trade enablement efforts. The subsequent forums which comprised the Turkish Silk Road Project included the ‘Caravanserai Project’,deriving its inspiration from ancient ‘caravanserai’ or‘roadside

²Robert Hormats, “The United States’ “New Silk Road” Strategy: What is it? Where is it Headed?” September 2011, available at <http://www.state.gov/e/rls/rmk/2011/174800.htm>. Cited in Federenko, “The New Silk Road Initiatives in Central Asia.”

³Remarks by Lynne Tracy, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, Panel on European and American Policy Priorities in Central Asia, The George Washington University, Washington DC, April 16, 2013. Cited in Federenko, “The New Silk Road Initiatives in Central Asia.”

⁴Ibid

inns where caravans riding on the Silk Road did not only rest and recover to continue their journey, but also met with other people, exchanged ideas and built new business relationships', and attempts were also made to resuscitate the Silk Road by way of rail networks on the Silk Road and the initiation of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Silk Road Truck Caravan. Subsequently, there were proposals initiated by the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) as well as the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) to provide financial and technical support principally to the Central Asian region and to contribute towards the alleviation of poverty and encouraging sustainable development in collaborating countries. The accompanying narrative was reflective of a longstanding history of kinship and emphasis on the significance of 'its historic, ethnic, linguistic and cultural ties with Central Asia' that has in fact facilitated and translated into significant multilateral projects between Turkey and Central Asian republics. (Federenko, 2013)

China's New Silk Road Initiative

Geopolitics and geo-economics of BRI

The Chinese President Xi Jinping put forth China's vision for a "Silk Road Economic Belt" during a 2013 speech in Kazakhstan. The proposed objective of the plan was to cultivate closer economic ties, consolidate cooperation, and magnify development in the Euro-Asia region. It was in the early part of 2015 that the outline of the proposed New Silk Road began to surface as China's leadership made official the plans for this 'Silk Road Economic Belt' through Central Asia, and a '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' through Southeast and South Asia. China referred to both collectively as 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) and then the 'Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)'. Together they were depicted as an ambitious attempt to restructure the economic and political order in Central Asia and the Asia Pacific region by stimulating a system of trade routes, political collaboration, and cultural interchange. The emphasis was on improving and constructing an integrated regional infrastructure, greater regional economic policy coordination, eradicating obstacles to trade, and boosting cultural ties. For China 'transportation bottlenecks' was viewed as the primary hurdle in regional economic integration. In its preliminary stages, the Silk Road Economic Belt was formulated as a sequence of 'transportation, energy, and telecommunication infrastructure projects.' The proposal described the evolution and construction of a 'Eurasian Land Bridge' running from Western China to Western Russia, the 'China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor, running from Northern China to Eastern Russia, as well as 'China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor', running from Western China to Turkey, and 'China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridors', running from Southern China to Singapore, 'Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor', running from Southern China to India, the 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor', running from South-Western China to Pakistan and the 'Maritime Silk Road', running from Singapore to the Mediterranean. Conceptually premised upon the historical narrative of the old Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative is the contemporary, updated vision of the same, wherein camels are replaced by high speed rail lines which may be eventually followed by pipeline projects. The Maritime Silk Road that was pursued by Zheng He's ships and succeeded by Vasco Da Gama's Portuguese ships is contemporised in the Belt and Road Initiative. Though often characterised the New Silk Road(s), the BRI is much wider in range than its precursors, i.e. the ancient Silk Road(s) or the "Go Out" policy initiated by the Chinese government in 1999. While the original Silk Road (a term first used by German geologist Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in the middle of 1800s) encompassed land routes and sea-lanes linking Xian to Rome primarily through southern corridors, crossing Iran and Turkey, the BRI plans to cross Central Asia, Russia and Eastern Europe and culminate in Rotterdam. Moreover, in contrast to the ancient Silk Road, which was essentially an unintended, spontaneous consequence of the trading activities

between China and its associate nations, the Belt and Road project is a 'wide-ranging national development strategy' formulated by the government, with a hypothetically powerful international development effect. Similarly,, the "Go Out" policy intended at increasing and enabling outward foreign direct investment, in the anticipation that host countries would welcome Chinese investors with the expectation of profiting from the country's growth. (Amighini, 2017)

The \$1 trillion strategic initiative, the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st century Maritime Silk Road/ One Belt, One Road (OBOR) or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), encompasses more than 60 states, around sixty percent of the world's population; thirty percent of the Global GDP and 75% of the energy resources. It is regarded by many as a possible path breaking proposal to initiate the next stage of globalization 'with the potential to make China the epicentre of regional as well as global economics and geopolitics', and as China's vision that takes one back to the ancient old Silk Roads albeit on its terms. As mentioned earlier 'Silk Road' refers to the ancient trade route used by Chinese merchants in the second century, connecting China with the West for movements of silk, spices and other goods. In other words, it refers to a network of historic routes across Asia. The contemporary version of the Silk Road consists of the land based Silk Road economic belt or corridor as it is commonly referred to that comprises a wide strip of central China, reaching through a large number of Asian countries and extending into the eastern European region. These countries are supposed to be connected by existing or planned railways and roads, with bridges and tunnels, airports, as well as pipelines, energy projects, industrial parks, free trade zones and logistics centres. The Maritime Silk Road or corridor is essentially a sea route from the South China Sea and Southeast Asia, through the Indian Ocean and the Middle East into the eastern Mediterranean. It also spreads in other directions. Its distinctive characteristic is port infrastructure projects, some connecting with parts of the land-based project. The professed objective therefore is to create a new economic belt of connective infrastructure westward into Eurasia and a new maritime 'road' connecting China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The accompanying narrative is one of 'a community of common destiny', of 'inclusive collaboration or globalization', of an Asian enterprise or project not merely a Chinese initiative; of an integrated developmental strategy, aimed at global peace and the pursuit of common prosperity. (Rolland, 2017, Federenko, 2013)

China's justification for the immensely ambitious 'Belt and Road Initiative' model is to enable and expedite trade route connectivity and efficacy, thereby cutting costs of transporting goods, improving the security of the country's massive import and export flows, provide additional work for Chinese construction companies on large-scale building projects as well as improving prospects for manufactured goods and exports from China in new markets. The aim of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' in the short term is to stimulate the sagging Chinese economy through construction and telecom contracts and the provision of capital goods while the long term goal is to open new trade routes for the Chinese products to fill the markets in the 'Belt and Road Initiative' countries in the coming decades. With the BRI, the means to maintaining and rejuvenating economic output lies in exporting excess manufacturing and industrial capacities, especially those linked to China's multiple State Owned Companies (SOEs). By transiting Xinjiang province, home to China's Ughyurs into Central Asia and farther westward, these infrastructural projects could also theoretically diminish the developmental gaps between the affluent coastal economic regions and China's backward and restive western regions, improving domestic and border stability. This combines a fundamental, incompressible interest (rejuvenating the economy to maintain political stability) with a seemingly maximal one (projecting China's influence globally). For instance though Afghanistan is mentioned intermittently in Chinese government statements on the Silk Road Economic Belt, the country is

very much apparent in the larger scheme. As China embarks upon its plan of economic integration with Central and South Asia to enhance development and stability in Xinjiang, it perceives a declining security situation in the region as one of the utmost potential threats to its strategies. There appears to be a consensus over the significance of stability in Afghanistan to the success of China's regional economic ambitions, but there is lack of consensus over the role Afghanistan should play in its plans. At the same time, China has evidently made the decision that it proposes to play a greater role in Afghanistan not merely in the economic sense, but also in a political and security capacity. China's attentiveness to Afghanistan is directly connected to its apprehensions regarding Xinjiang which is geographically critical to China's attempts to expand economic ties to Central Asia. Furthermore it is the only province that shares a border with Pakistan (or with Pakistan-held Kashmir); Xinjiang also borders Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia, Indian part of Kashmir, and Afghanistan. Safeguarding stability in Xinjiang is both an objective of and precondition for China's Silk Road Economic Belt ambitions. While most of the public discussion and attention have been devoted to the repercussions of the BRI in Central Asia, equally significant to the inclusive success of the initiative is the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Indeed, the MENA/WANA region is a strategic space where the Belt joins the Road, i.e. where the two major overland and maritime routes will ultimately come across, as the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor reaches Iran and Turkey and the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. This is also the justification behind the decision of many Middle Eastern countries to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the principal financing institution of the BRI. Among them, Oman and Turkey, are countries that possibly will be most impacted by the BRI corridors. (Amighini, 2017; Rolland, 2017, Federenko, 2013)

According to a paper by Clingendael, Netherlands Institute of International Relations in 2016, the Maritime Silk Route "is not aimed primarily at changing China's role in international shipping, but rather is part of a highly ambitious long-term programme for the economic integration of a vast zone...on the basis of infrastructure development", though the intent of "Belt and Road Initiative" is not on military dominance", however, "the initiatives...are accelerating the growth of its (China's) influence on maritime trade patterns as well as in Asia, Africa and Europe more broadly."⁵ According to a report by the Peterson Institute for International Economics in early 2017 the "Belt and Road Initiative appears to be entirely a mercantile endeavour designed to fortify China's economic interests around the world."⁶ The colossal scale of this programme entails an enormous financing requirement. The principal funding agencies are China's four state-owned banks (Bank of China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, China Construction Bank, and Agricultural Bank of China). In addition, there is the \$40 billion Silk Road Fund, the multi-national Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and so on. The Belt and Road Initiative basically intends to expend the surplus production, overcapacity and additional products and commodities from China, particularly with the threat of an economic downturn in the Chinese economy. BRI is buttressed by what is perceived as the new Chinese economic fortes such as the Asian infrastructure Bank (AIIB) that at the outset is funded at US\$40 billion dollars and in due course elevated to US\$450 billion (estimated to increase to around US\$100 billion). The preliminary funding of the BRICS bank is around US\$50 billion with the biggest contributors being India and China. In an economic sense,

⁵Van der Putten, Frans-Paul et al. (Edited) "Europe and China's New Silk Roads", ETNC Report, December 2016. See: <https://www.clingendael.nl/event/europe-and-chinas-new-silk-roads>

⁶China's Maritime Silk Road project advances, Jul 12, 2016. See http://www.cnss.com.cn/html/2016/DailyCNSS_0712/225822.html

fundamentally, the BRI can be looked upon as an attempt and an opportunity to create alternative funding agencies that would mirror China's increasing economic clout. Institution such as the AIIB, the Silk Road Fund, BRICS Bank are perceived as instruments to address China's lower voting rights in the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund(IMF) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Essentially, the BRI or the OBOR has been described as a new type of multilateralism representing the geo-economics of continental integration. In his 29 March 2015 speech at the BoAo Forum for Asia (BFA) annual conference, President Xi Jinping observed:

[T]he Chinese economy is deeply integrated with the global economy and forms an important driving force of the economy of Asia and even the world at large. [...] China's investment opportunities are expanding. Investment opportunities in infrastructure connectivity as well as in new technologies, new products, new business patterns, and new business models are constantly springing up. [...] China's foreign cooperation opportunities are expanding. We support the multilateral trading system, devote ourselves to the Doha Round negotiations, advocate the Asia-Pacific free trade zone, promote negotiations on regional comprehensive economic partnership, advocate the construction of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), boost economic and financial cooperation in an all-round manner, and work as an active promoter of economic globalization and regional integration.. Xi also asserted that, from a geo-economic perspective, the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank would nurture economic connectivity and a new-type of industrialization [in the Asia Pacific area], and [thus] promote the common development of all countries as well as the peoples' joint enjoyment of development fruits.⁷

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is being perceived as the determining foreign policy model of the current era. It is viewed as China's attempt to extend its influence into other regions. The de-Sovietization of Central Asia provided China with opportunity spaces to connect with the Central Asian region in the economic sense and with economic sanctions being imposed by the West on Russia, the latter appeared to be more incline towards leaning eastwards for trade and commerce with China and other east Asian states in a bid to lessen its dependence on Europe. It is the most recent in the series of the multiple 'Silk Road Initiatives.' The 21st-century interpretation of the Silk Road does not intend to bring back camel caravans but will take the form shape of a massive network of transportation (railways, roads, and port facilities), energy, and telecommunication infrastructure, connecting Europe and Africa to Asia and accompanied by reinforced financial cooperation and augmented people-to-people interactions. In the Chinese perception it is physical infrastructure that is the first step toward Eurasian integration, partly as a result of the creation of vast economic corridors that will facilitate greater regional policy coordination. Eventually, the BRI countries will be secured firmly to China in an effervescent and affluent 'community of common destiny.' The justification for emphasising the significance of physical connectivity is that the implication of growing and enhanced transcontinental links in the regional context could be colossal, not only by augmenting trade and commerce but also by furthering flows of energy and other resources, inspiring technological progress, influencing culture and politics as well as strategic choices. In this context, one can quote the Chinese scholar Gan Junxian who describes the importance of transportation connectivity as transforming "the way people live in their country and the mental map they have of their region."⁸ In the aftermath of the Cold War, numerous Western

⁷Wang Huning; et al. (29 April 2015). ["Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Representatives of Chinese and Foreign Entrepreneurs Attending BFA Annual Conference."](#) See http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1250585.shtml

⁸Gan Junxian, "'Sichouzhilu' fuxingjihuyayuzhongguowaijiao" [The Plan for "Silk Road" Revival and China's Diplomacy] Northeast Asia Forum 19, no. 5 (2010). Cited in Nadege Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017.

nations, including the United States, attempted to stimulate infrastructure interconnectivity and economic development in the anticipation that affluence would transmute post-Communist Eurasia into a democratized and stable region. With BRI, China has now taken the lead in stimulating Eurasian integration, by means of comparable arguments about the link between connectivity and development, but with very dissimilar economic, political, and strategic intentions. The Belt and Road Initiative is viewed as an attempt at reinforcing China's economic and geopolitical imprint, a reflection of its 'new self-confidence and a public articulation of its attempts to become the heart of Asia.' It coincides and conforms with 'China's strategic priorities in Asia that combines a partnership with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the strengthening of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization security group which it leads along with Russia. Together, they constitute China's three circles of influence in Asia.' The reality is that China, through this ambitious project seeks to reutilize some of its amassed foreign reserves, use its overcapacity in construction materials and basic industries, and enhance the fortunes of its state-owned enterprises by opening new markets. Encouraging regional development is being viewed as a way to inspire political liberalization but, on the contrary, as a way of consolidating and steadying the prevailing authoritarian regimes around China. Transcontinental infrastructure will help avoid against possible disturbances to maritime supply in case of a conflict. Expanding China's strategic space will aid in defying supposed U.S.-led efforts to contain the country's rise. In addition to these tangible intents, BRI is also intended to fulfil the greater regional ambition of constructing a Sino centric Eurasian order. The BRI intends to enhance connectivity among several hitherto separated spaces, Europe, post-Soviet space, Central, Eastern and Southern Asia, the Middle East, which are supposed to be integrated into a "Greater Eurasia", intrinsic to a longstanding global strategy to construct a centre of geopolitical stability and development. It mirrors China's contemporary inclination to play a prominent role in restructuring the world, starting with its 'extended periphery.' The immediate corollary of which is the regional configurations and reconfigurations that are taking place as nations along the route take sides. By and large, Russia has been overtly supportive of the initiative, at the same time; it has made it clear that it expects to have a role in discussions with Central Asian states, which would stand at variance to China's traditional preference for bilateral engagement. India, too, is evidently wary of China's regional ambitions, the development of OBOR, and especially China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as it extends through disputed territory. Although India is both the second largest shareholder in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and a partner with China in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) New Development Bank, she has at all times made it apparent that she does not consider the BRI as a genuine multilateral initiative.

The BRI is not a myth. It has multi-layered economic and political objectives. In the existing global geopolitical environment with increasing challenges to globalization and multilateralism particularly in the context of the recent economic and political developments in the United States due to President Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and his objective to implement major protectionist trade policies and immigration restrictions, there are misgivings regarding the future of American domination and US partaking in global governance. On the other hand, China has adopted a clear stance to preserve globalization and enhance new multilateralism, which apparently has been confirmed by President Xi's speech in Davos (17 January 2017). Nevertheless, China is still regarded as a developing nation with neither the capacity nor the commitment to preserve and lead globalization by itself. It is in this connection that pursuing

Europe as a partner could be vital. . Europe is the culminating point of the New Silk Roads, both by land and by sea. It is the final geographic terminus and political partner in the BRI. The initiative purportedly aims at facilitating economic and political relations between two major economic powers, at a stage when geopolitical strains in different parts of Asia and policy indecisions among major world powers, specifically the United States, pose a serious threat to multilateral cooperation. Even before the emergence of the BRI, the European Union and China had frequent dialogues on railway, maritime, aviation, customs facilitation, and other issues related to connectivity, through the EU-China 2020 strategic Agenda for Cooperation signed in 2013. However not all European countries are equally significant to the BRI. Within Europe, BRI projects are in fact concentrated in two particular regions: Central and Eastern Europe and the European Mediterranean countries. Meanwhile, in September 2015, the European Commission and the Chinese government signed a Memorandum on the EU-China Connectivity Platform to augment interactions between China's BRI and the EU's connectivity initiatives such as the Trans-European Transport Network. (Amighini, 2017)

The BRI is expected to have enduring and profound repercussions for international economic and political relations, although trade is the mainstay of the project, the BRI intends to stimulate economic development over vast areas of land extending from the least-developed inner and western provinces of China to the so-called STAN countries in Central Asia and the rest of developing Asia, but also to the Middle East and Eastern Africa, where many countries require infrastructure investment to develop their connectivity with the rest of the world. Furthermore, all Central Asian countries except Pakistan are landlocked, a major drawback in terms of export value. Even more significant, the BRI is likely to fundamentally alter the major routes of international trade, which currently travels mainly by sea, in favour of overland routes. The shifting network of international trade routes will have deep repercussions on the geopolitical relations between China and Europe, between China, Central Asia and Russia, and also within the whole Pacific region, to the extent that the key corridors of current seaborne trade of goods, mineral oils and gas will possibly move westwards away from the South China Sea towards the Middle Eastern lanes. "The BRI is the Chinese move on the global chessboard to shape the future international balance of power. It remains to be seen if and to what extent the other major chess pieces – from the EU to Russia – will be able and willing to play the same game."

Selected Readings

Pepe Escobar has reported extensively on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since its initial One Belt One Road (OBOR) days. In a series of articles Escobar has described China's Silk Road Initiatives in diverse ways, terming it as the unleashing of a 'Chinese dream', intended at challenging the hegemony of the Americans both regionally and globally; of China's practised and nuanced manoeuvring with West Asian nations such as Syria (creation of a Syrian hub incorporating various logistical aspects) and wooing Iran, immediately after the lifting of sanctions, keeping in mind that it is situated at the intersection of the Arab, Turk, Indian and Russian worlds, accentuated by its role as vantage entry and exit point to the gigantic Caucasus-Central-Asia collective, which also includes Afghanistan and geostrategically, as the critical Eurasian crossroads, Iran is matchless, connecting the Middle East, Caucasus, Central Asia, Indian subcontinent and Persian Gulf; between three seas – Caspian, Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman; reasonably close to the Mediterranean and Europe; and at the threshold of Asia. In one of his more recent pieces of analysis, covering the BRI conference in

⁹Alicia Amighini, *China's Belt and Road: A Game Changer*, Milan: The Italian institute for International Political Studies, 2017. See file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/NEW%20SILK%20ROAD/China_Belt_Road_Game_Changer.pdf

Beijing (14-15 May, 2015), Escobar, using Jinping's vocabulary remarked that the flight of the swan geese is in progress but the next big question is how ardently the New Silk Roads will rephrase the rubrics of the global trade game without displeasing 'ultra-sensitive' actors like India, but then again, he contends that is the point where soft power moves in. 'Beijing's swan geese will now work to seduce the Global South into an irresistible partnership that transcends mere commerce.'¹⁰

The Economist in its economic analysis of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative states, "As Chinese manufacturers move inland, getting their products to European markets has become more complicated. The journey back to the coast and halfway around the world by sea takes up to 60 days—an eternity for the latest iPads and 'other fashion' products. Kazakhstan offers a backdoor route. Trains from Chongqing in south-west China to Duisburg in Germany, 10,800 kilometres (6,700 miles) via Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus and Poland, supposedly take just 14 days."¹¹ This account is one of the earliest in the international media that emphasises the linkages between the Silk Road and China's Go-West policy, moving manufacturers from costly first-tier Eastern coastal cities inland to the west where labour costs are inexpensive. It also focuses on the viewpoint that European markets (along with west Asian, Central Asian and South Asian markets) will progressively become vital for Chinese exports. Dragan Pavlicevic's essay on the initial phase of OBOR observed the likelihood of Central and Eastern Europe reaping advantages from the overland route between China and Europe and identified the two points of links between the two regions: the Greek Port of Piraeus and railway between Belgrade and Budapest in addition to a southern China-Europe land-sea express line.¹² Akshande Alwis in the *Huffington Post* echoing Leftist sentiments, candidly remarked that he wishes that the Sri Lankans would vote against Chinese control in the military structure of the country. It throws light on the local responses and reactions in South Asia per se towards Chinese presence in their midst. It identifies Thailand as the primary recipient of Chinese largesse, contends that Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is bigger in scale than the Overland Silk Road, the expression, 'patron' was used to define the Chinese Silk Road initiative, in all probability associating it with the notions of 'Zheng He's vassal state diplomacy, or implying a patron-client relationship' indicative of Chinese ascendancy, territorial aggrandizement and economic domination, remarks how the Chinese initiative can be an 'economic catch-up opportunity' for the remaining parts of Asia to realise the criteria of the four tiger economies of Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, signifying understandings of uneven economic development in Asia and also the probability of an

¹⁰Pepe Escobar, "China's Wild Geese Chase", Asia Times, May 29, 2017, See <http://www.vineyardsaker.co.nz/2017/05/29/xis-wild-geese-chase-the-silk-road-gold-by-pepe-escobar/>. Other articles by the same author include, "China is Building a New Silk Road to Europe, And its leaving America Behind", See: <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/12/chinas-new-silk-road-europe-will-leave-america-behind>; Pepe Escobar, "Go West, Young Han: How China and the New Silk Road Threaten American Imperialism", See http://www.salon.com/2014/12/31/g0_west_young_han_how_chinas_new_silk_road_threatens_american_imperialism_partner/; Pepe Escobar, "The New Silk Road will go through Syria", Asia Times, July, 13, 2017, See <http://www.atimes.com/article/new-silk-road-will-go-syria/>; Pepe Escobar, "The New Silk Road and the Rise of the Chinese Dream", See <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/The-New-Silk-Roads-and-the-Rise-of-the-Chinese-Dream-20160224-0017.html>; Pepe Escobar, "Iran: The New China", See <https://www.telesurtv.net/english/opinion/Iran-The-New-China--20160129-0011.html>

¹¹*The Economist*, "The New Silk Road Hardly an Oasis", dated 15 November 2014 in *The Economist*: <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21632595-kazakhstan-turns-geography-advantage-china-builds-new-silk-road-hardly-oasis> in LIM Tai Wei, "The One Belt One Road Narratives", in China's One Belt One Road, edited by LIM Tai Wei, London: Imperial College Press, 2016.

¹²Dragan Pavlicevic, "China's New Silk Road Takes Shape in Central and Eastern Europe, dated 9 January 2015" http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=dcf45d3bf99b47d32fcb982a34e81371.

alternate archetypal that had made the four vibrant economies prosperous. The tiger economies are often linked to Japan's rapid growth model, once appreciated by the World Bank and strengthened by Western notions of 'capitalism, political and corporate governance as well as the impulses of democratization.'¹³

BRI has been depicted as an alternate structural model of development for Asian countries different from the four tiger economies or Japan, greater attention was paid to the periphery of China particularly South Asia and Southeast Asia (Thailand). The end result of these multiple analyses is a global scenario that is complicated, ruthless and intensely multi-layered. A contentious global canvas is put forth by these accounts and descriptions that are predominantly ambiguous rather than steady and distinctly articulated as far as Chinese objectives of geopolitical and economic dominance are concerned. By and large it seems it is difficult to ascertain whether the Maritime Silk Road or the Overland Silk Road will be given priority in Chinese policy making. Issues of fund dispersal also come to the forefront. The key word appears to be "connectivity," that is linking the entire belt of countries along both Overland and MSR so as to give trade a fillip. Responses varied from the use of official and track II channels to gain access of greater details so that the states in the precincts of the Silk Road initiative can respond accordingly in order to reap economic benefits to the fullest extent, to forestall any question that is irreconcilable with national interests by opposing the institutions allied with the scheme, for instance opposition to the AIIB, notwithstanding the nature and system of the Silk Road Initiative which is projected to be gradual and vibrant both in enactment and development, to convince the Chinese authorities to adopt greater transparency and observe international norms by incorporating into the international community. These questions have been debated within China as well amongst an 'internationalist' section that is eager to see the Silk Road initiatives as part of China's aim at liberalization with greater openness and synchronisation with international rules and customs contrasted with those elements who are eager to craft an international trade and commerce system with greater control.¹⁴

For C. Raja Mohan, OBOR is a mechanism through which China intends to construct soft and hard maritime infrastructure across the Indo-Pacific, comprising new ports and special economic zones around them. Mohan's suggestion to the Indian policy makers is that India should collaborate and compete with China on regional connectivity otherwise she will be sidelined from the process of economic transmutation that is taking place within Asia and the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵ R.K. Sahay's book *China's Maritime Silk Route and Implications for India*, is a compilation of routes and it contends that China's plan of a Maritime Silk Route has been a matter of theoretical and verbal contestations. The contention of the author is that China's entry into the Indian Ocean will impart a degree of equilibrium to the region.¹⁶

Anoushiravan Ehtesami and Navi Horesh's book *China's presence in the Middle East: The Implications of the One Belt One Road Initiative* is of the opinion that BRI aims at consolidating West Asia's economic connections with China through the vast network of imposing infrastructural projects. It deals with the aspect of the implications of BRI and its financial institutions such as the AIIB on West Asia;

¹³Akshan de Alwis, "The New Silk Roads: A True "Win-Win" or a Perilous Future?", dated 31 December 2014 in the Huffington post.com The World Post website: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/akshan-dealwis/the-new-silk-road-a-true-win-win-or-a-perilous-future?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-silk-road_6400992.html.

¹⁴Lim Tai Wei, "The One Belt One Road Narratives", in *China's One Belt One Road*, edited by Lim Tai Wei, London: Imperial College Press, 2016.

¹⁵See Raja Mohan's columns in the Indian Express for his views on OBOR.

¹⁶R.K. Sahay, *China's Maritime Silk Route and Implications for India*, New Delhi: Vaj Books, 2016.

the strategic constraints on China's policy in the region due to the political undercurrents involving Xinjiang in the context of transnational terror groups such as the Islamic State; debates on the effect on other powers such as Russia with regard to China's entry in the region and also focuses upon China's growing influence on certain nations such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, the Palestinian perspective on an emergent China and the envisaged role of Iran in OBOR.¹⁷

According to an International Crisis Group Report on *Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries*, two contemporary regional initiatives have been launched in the region, China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) that provides for multi-billion dollar investments in transport and industry and envisages free trade across the region and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), established in 2015, that forms a customs union among former Soviet states positioning their economies toward Moscow. They have contrary objectives, but Russia and China have agreed to collaborate politically and economically. Their initiatives offer funds and greater teamwork in a region plagued by economic and political difficulties. If it is dealt with poorly, however, these initiatives could inspire and engrain local responses and reactions that jeopardies stability and peace and could instigate violence. Russia has an advantage of a multi-faceted and deeply entrenched cultural, political and economic bond with the region and while Chinese funds are widely welcomed by the elite in the region, incidents of xenophobia arising out of popular suspicion against the Chinese have been reported.¹⁸

Constraints and Critiques

The Belt and Road Initiative is replete with intrinsic complications that could lead to contestations. Central Asia which is the focus of BRI has been the traditional domain of Russian influence, therefore alienating Russian national interests could be perilous. Economic cooperation with the Central Asian nation at present appears to be the manifest inclination and strategy of the Chinese dispensation while retaining close ties with Russia geopolitically. This balance is crucial at this juncture as the Chinese financial mechanisms are economically sounder than the Russian regional initiatives. Similarly, the prospect of choosing between the United States and its institutions with its concomitant geopolitical influence and the Chinese initiative with its mounting economic strength is an uncomfortable experience for most Asian nations. In the South Asian context, the rivalry between India and China has come to the forefront with the former not inclined to be a part of the BRI, the consequence being an uneasy existence for the smaller players within the region. Still more, the invasion and availability of cheap Chinese products and labour that accompany the Chinese infrastructural expansion constitute another area of concern for many Asian nations. There are trepidations regarding the displacement of the local population with the influx of Chinese labour and anxieties regarding the misuse of labour laws. Along with the apprehensions regarding Chinese competitiveness are the accompanying fears of the creation of a neo-colonial variant whereby the Chinese are viewed as going after raw materials in the guise of building and developing infrastructure. The deepest concern is with regard to Chinese involvement in regional and local politics. In other words, there is a dearth of conviction between China and the regional and fringe powers. As far as maritime disagreements are concerned, China is at loggerheads with Japan in the East China Sea with regard to the Senakaku/Diaoyu islands. In the South China Sea region, there

¹⁷AnoushiravanEhteshami and NaviHoresh, *China's presence in the Middle East: The Implications of the One Belt One Road Initiative*, London and New York: Routledge, 2017 See <https://books.google.co.in/books?id=ENewDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT13&lpg=PT13&dq=Anoushiravan+Ehteshami+and+Navi+Horesh>

¹⁸ International Crisis Group Report on "Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries", Europe and Central Asia Report N°245 | 27 July 2017. See <file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/NEW%20SILK%20ROAD/245-central-asias-silk-road-rivalries.pdf>

are disputes primarily with Philippines and Vietnam who have often courted the United States and Japan for support. In West Asia, which is another region within the ambit of the BRI, the political mayhem, social discontent and the transnational character of insurgency that transgresses borders and has evolved into a global notion, the contemporary manifestation being the Islamic State, is a potential threat to the functioning of BRI.

In the Indian neighbourhood, the much talked about 46 billion dollar China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, an integral component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been subject to a considerable degree of analysis within Pakistan whilst it has been a matter of considerable consternation within India. Even as the official narrative exalts it to the point of reverence, as the prized pivot of the colossal project, with the potential of being the harbinger of the 'defining moment' for Pakistan in the region particularly with regard to India, in contrast, there exists a significant cluster of critics who continue to consistently articulate concerns pertaining to feasibility, transparency and sovereignty. The official retort to the expressions of dissent is best summarised in the statement of Nadeem Javed, Chief Economist, Planning Commission of Pakistan '...CPEC enjoys the support and backing of all political parties and segments of the establishment and that its popularity among the public will grow when gains start touching their lives.' The Chinese then again, refer to it as 'a corridor of prosperity, long-lasting peace and inclusive development.' Economics, development and prosperity emerge as the catchphrases of the official narrative both in China and Pakistan. The thrust of the economic corridor according to the master plan, which was revealed in the Pakistani Daily *Dawn*, appears to be on 'agriculture, large surveillance system for cities and visa-free entry for Chinese nationals.' The purported use of vast agricultural expanses as 'demonstration projects' by Chinese enterprises, an exhaustive network of 'monitoring and surveillance' across cities, thoroughfares and marketplaces, the construction of a 'national fibre-optic backbone for internet traffic', as well as 'terrestrial distribution of broadcast TV' with the intent of collaborating with the Chinese media in the 'dissemination of Chinese culture' has evoked a sense of disquiet among sections within Pakistan regarding the extensive nature of the Chinese penetration both economic and societal. It has harboured misgivings about the supposed plan for the 'redevelopment of Pakistan' with Senator Tahir Mashhadi, chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on Planning and Development, terming the initiative as 'another East India Company in the offing.' While this could be dismissed as 'fear-mongering rhetoric', there does seem to be an element of genuine concern regarding the possibility of an 'undermining of Pakistan's sovereignty' considering the intensive penetration that it entails, which in turn is a prerequisite keeping in mind the scale of the project. There is scepticism among both economists and political analysts in Pakistan who advice a degree of caution. However, ostensibly, CPEC appears to be a plan that would comprehensively transform Pakistan's economy: creating and modernising existing infrastructure that would facilitate connectivity and enhance productivity; providing an estimated 700,000 domestic jobs, approximately 10,000 MW in hydro energy and an expected 1.1 percent rise in GDP by 2018 itself. The bilateral relationship between China and Pakistan has continued to intensify in recent times and if the CPEC initiative does become a reality despite scepticisms concerning its rationale and achievability; the manifold serious challenges and flaws inherent in the scheme and the various forms of resistance that it faces and is likely to face in the foreseeable future within Pakistan and the greater neighbourhood, it could indeed, at least in conjecture help Pakistan contend with some of its key 'developmental issues.' Though in recent times, beset by multiple concerns and obstacles, it is being labelled as a case of a 'game over' rather than a 'game changer.'¹⁹

¹⁹Khurram Husain, "Exclusive CPEC Master Plan Revealed", *The Dawn* June 21, 2017 See <https://www.dawn.com/news/1333101>

The Sri Lankan experience with the BRI in recent times has been far from smooth sailing. The Sirisena-Wickramasinghe Government had handed over Hambantota Port to China in a \$1.1 billion deal leading to widespread resentment among trade unions who viewed the move as the sell-out of a national asset as well as causing a considerable degree of concern in India. To counter and allay India's concern, Sri Lanka has handed over the adjoining Mattala Airport to India. Similarly in Thailand, while two Chinese rail projects have been agreed upon at the same time it has asked Japan to modernise its railway system. These episodes can be interpreted as instances of 'playing one Asian power against the other.'²⁰

In the final analysis, the Belt and Road Initiative is essentially dependent on the individual appraisal of what constitutes national interests for each nation. The deciding factor lies in the intricacies of how a nation state will evaluate its national interests in keeping with circumstances, geopolitical connotations, national political scenario, external considerations and national assets as well as how the BRI, the BRICS Bank in comparison to the prevalent established institutions such as ADB (Asian Development Bank) best meet their requirements.

Alternative visions

The Chinese President Xi Jinping's trademark foreign policy endeavour, BRI may be considered as extraordinary for its inscrutable quality as well as its aspiration. Apparently, it envisages a future Eurasia where all routes lead to Beijing. As an undefined structure, however, the initiative is less comprehensible. It merges new and older projects, spreads across a tentative geographic scope, and comprises efforts to reinforce hard infrastructure, soft infrastructure, and even cultural bonds. India's vision is primarily focused on increasing connectivity within its own borders. Beyond its borders, by developing the Chabahar Port in Iran, for instance, India intends to circumvent Pakistan and access overland routes to Europe and Central Asia. After a considerable period of seclusion, Iran is reasserting itself as a bridge between East and West. With the lifting of sanctions and with investors once again exploring Iran, the country aims to add almost 2,000 kilometres of railway every year for the next five years. By way of its central position in the North-South Transport Corridor that operates from Moscow to Mumbai, Iran aims at becoming a transit hub. It also envisages new east-west connections with its neighbours, Iraq and Afghanistan. To make possible trade and transport with Central Asia, Iran has become a part of the Ashgabat Agreement. Realizing the importance of Eurasia in its connectivity ambitions, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has also extended Japan's diplomatic footprint, becoming the first sitting Japanese leader to visit all five countries of Central Asia. Russia's vision amalgamates soft and hard infrastructure. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is Russia's main medium for regional economic integration, and officials have hinted that it could be connected with the Belt and Road Initiative. Extending its economic and diplomatic fulcrum to the east, Russia is taking advantage of the Chinese energy market with a string of projected natural gas pipelines. To its south, Russia hopes to enhance connectivity with Azerbaijan, Iran, and India through the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC). To its north, Russia is preparing additional projects to further its energy and defense interests as the Arctic becomes within reach. South Korean President Park Geun-hye's Eurasian Initiative is extensive, including railways from Seoul to the heart of Europe, shipping lanes through the Arctic, and improved fibre optic networks such as the Trans-Eurasia Information

²⁰AkshandeAlwis, "The New Silk Road: A True " Win-Win" or a Perilous Future? ", Huffington Post , See <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/akshan-dealwis/the-new-silk-road-a-true-b-6400992.html> in Tai Wei, Lim et.al (Edited) *China's One Belt One Road*, London: Imperial College Press, 2016.

Network (TEIN) throughout Southeast Asia. By way of heightened diplomacy, South Korea is setting up the foundation for closer relationships in the region and intensifying its commercial relationship with Kazakhstan specifically. In view of the contemporary geopolitical hurdles, President Park's initiative seems to include both diplomatically motivated and realistic plans. Keeping North Korea in mind, this encompasses an envisioned rail line through the demilitarized zone and a substitute undersea route for avoiding the North and linking Russia's rail network. Traditionally, Turkey has been a strategic land bridge linking Asia and Europe while circumventing Russia. At present, Turkey is augmenting this arrangement with significant domestic, sub-regional and trans-national transportation projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway. Turkey also intends to construct thousands of kilometres of new roads and railways under the Vision 2023 initiative that will observe a century of its independence. Together, these efforts would enlarge Turkey's transportation systems and reinforce their links with Asia and Europe.²¹ The politics and economics of routes continue to occupy centerstage.

India in the Connectivity Matrix

Regional connectivity corridors could not "override or undermine the sovereignty" of nations.

Narendra Modi

Second Raisina Dialogues, New Delhi, 17 January, 2017

In the wake of the euphoria surrounding the BRI, the words of Evan A. Feigenbaum, strike a chord for those who have been studying connectivity in India. Feigenbaum stated "China did not, in fact, invent Asian connectivity, which has been developing for some two decades as a product of the actions and choices of many Asian states and firms, both on the demand side and the supply side."²² The dialogue regarding Asian connectivity as yet has predominantly concentrated on the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative that intends to connect the two sides of the Eurasian landmass both through land (the Belt) and sea (the Road). The Chinese leadership has demonstrated remarkable political drive and financial will towards pushing the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time India too has begun to emphasise upon its geographical centrality in South Asia. It has pursued to convert the region into a 'loose economic confederation', starting with its leadership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc); articulating its desire to form a Bay of Bengal economic forum, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec) initiative is one such instance; as well as its outreach to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Physical connectivity comprising 'pipelines, highways and sea routes' is only one facet of connectivity. In order to acquire efficacy, physical connectivity has to be grounded on policy connectivity, that is, a series of institutions and formal and informal rules that expedite and synchronise the 'flow of labour, capital and goods. Accordingly, the tangible geo-economics rivalry that will shape Asia in the 21st Century will be between the 'two drivers of connectivity in the region: the actors who shape norms and the ones who provide the infrastructure.'²³

²¹ *Reconnecting Asia*, See <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/competing-visions/>

²² Evan A. Feigenbaum, "China didn't invent connectivity", June 26, 2017. See <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/26/china-didn-t-invent-asian-connectivity-pub-72668>

²³ Abhijnan Rej, "Asian connectivity is more about the 'balance of power' than bringing people together." Raisina Files, March 01, 2017

China has been emphasising on and giving precedence to physical connectivity rather than policy connectivity. If connectivity is the final calling then, according to geostrategist Parag Khanna,²⁴ it will be moulded by ‘the push and pull between its hardware and software.’ A professed objective of the Belt and Road Initiative is physical connectivity that strives toward the construction of alternate global value hubs where China becomes the focus of creation. As China continues to aggressively promote the BRI, the inadequacy of policy connectivity underlying the same will imply that any Chinese ‘hard intervention’ to secure the Belt and Road will be perceived autarchic and differing from the image that China has been projecting so far of self-restraint and non-interference.²⁵

Since India’s economy looks at a greater degree of incorporation into the world it becomes imperative that it is connected, equally in the physical sense and by way of moulding the rules and practices of global trade. Plurilateral policy connectivity as a corridor to greater multilateralism which incorporates India’s economy selectively then becomes the only way out. From the energy security point of view, it becomes important that India routes some of its energy needs through land pipelines such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline which can also become the forerunner for improved relations between India and its immediate neighbours, though the prospects do not appear to be very bright at the moment. As the financial capabilities of India and China are not comparable, India’s has very little option but to promote plurilateral physical connectivity in the Indian Subcontinent, bolstered by choosing regional components of BRI that does not compromise its core national security interests. The Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) initiative is one such instance of a physical connectivity initiative based on policy convergence. Another entirely policy connectivity initiative, notwithstanding with very little ambitions, is Bimstec. Often regarded as “Saarc sans Pakistan,” it could function as a ‘natural entity’ to enable further trade in the Bay of Bengal region. If environmental concerns are met, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has been posited as a regional shipping hub for Bimstec in the future. There have been suggestions that India should ‘creatively reimagine BRI and sell it to China ‘so that their connectivity aims remain unharmed. (such as the offer to develop an Indian port through the Sagarmala initiative and link the port by way of a land based economic corridor, centred around a highway that connects the west of India to Kolkata as well as give the go ahead to Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar constituent of BRI to link Kolkata-Kunming.²⁶ India also has been developing its other regional cooperation initiatives such as ‘Mausam’ and the ‘Spice ‘Route’ in the Indian Ocean region and beyond, The ‘Mausam’ project envisions the restoration of India’s ancient maritime routes with its traditional trade associates along the Indian Ocean The ‘Spice Route of India’ envisages the India-centered connect of historic sea routes in Asia, Europe and Africa.

One can employ David Dollar’s allegory of physical infrastructure as the “hardware” of connectivity and policy connectivity initiatives such as free or preferential trade agreements as the “software” in the Indian context. In a computer, the hardware and software interface at the ‘middleware,’ which

²⁴Parag Khanna, *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization Hardcover*, New York: Random House April 19, 2016 in AbhijnanRej, “Asian connectivity is more about the 'balance of power' than bringing people together.” Raisina Files, March 01, 2017

²⁵AbhijnanRej, “Asian connectivity is more about the 'balance of power' than bringing people together.”

²⁶ Raisina Dialogue, “India in the Connectivity, ‘New Normal.’”

links the operating system that pushes the hardware to more intricate software uses. India should aim at being a 'middleware' in the 'new geo-economic architecture.'²⁷

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²⁷ RaisIna dialogues, "India in the connectivity 'New Normal.'"