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Abstract: Silk Road as the old Chinese trade road, which has been used for two thousand years, is still very famous in the world. Silk Road has played an important role as a bridge between China and European, Asian and African countries for material and civilian exchanges between the East and West. Silk Road was the road of China’s land trade with Southern and Western Asia, Europe and Africa through the Central Asia in ancient time. It was named the “Silk Road” since a lot of Chinese silk and silk fabrics were distributed to the West from this road. According to research results, this road was essentially created during the Han Dynasty of China in the first century BC when the Silk Road extended to Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Iran and "Alexandria" City of Egypt in the west. The other route of this road extended from Pakistan and Kabul in Afghanistan to the Persian Gulf; and from Kabul to the south or Karachi, Pakistan. If it was changed to maritime route, it would include Persia and Rome. The present paper sought to investigate the role and importance of the Silk Road in international trade with an emphasis on the new Silk Road and revitalization of this old road. Results indicate that this road will play a significant role in development of trade in Islamic and other countries if the Silk Road is revitalized.

Keywords: Silk Road, China, International trade, Trade route

Introduction:

From the 2nd century to the 2nd century BC, there were four great countries along the Silk Road from the west to the east. They were the ancient Rome of Europe, Persia in Western Asia, "Kushan" in the central Asia (governing the current central Asia and northern India) and "Han" dynasty in the Eastern Asia. Creation of the Silk

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Road led to direct and effective exchanges among these ancient civilizations. Since then, the progress of these civilizations was no longer without connection.

Exchanges between the western and eastern countries were very high through the Silk Road. In the historic records of China, some plants were named by "Hó"; for instance, "Hó táo" (walnut), "Hó jiāo" (pepper) and "Hóng luóbo" (Carrot). Most of these words originated from the Western countries. China and Western countries exchanges were significant through the Silk Road in the Tang Dynasty during the 7th to 9th centuries. Rare birds and animals, perfume, pearl, glassware, and golden and silver coins of Western countries, and music, dance, food and clothing of Western and Central Asia entered China. Meanwhile, Chinese products and techniques such as silk, paper making technique, typography, lacquerware, china, gunpowder, and compass were distributed to different regions through the Silk Road which played a major contribution to development of civilization in the world.

Cultural exchanges through the Silk Road were as extensive as the material trade. The Buddhist religion entered China as one of three religions of the world at the end of the Western "Han" dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD). In the "Cazir" cave temple of "Xinjiang" belonging to the third century, there are nearly 10 thousand square meters of murals indicating the spread of Buddhism from India to China. According to inferences, Buddhism was developed from India and through the Silk Road to "Cazir" City of "Xinjiang", and then to "Dunhuang" of "Gansu" province and other areas of China. The remained Buddhist caves along the Silk Road such as the "Mogao Caves" of "Dunhuang", "Longmen Grottoes" of "Luoyang" combine the eastern and western artistic styles and indicate the Eastern and Western cultural exchanges through the Silk Road. Nowadays, these caves are among the cultural heritage of the world.
After the 9th century, the maritime transport increasingly played a role in trading due to the changes in the political and economic structures of Europe and Asia continents and especially the advancement of maritime techniques. The traditional Silk Road was gradually destructed. During the "Sun" Dynasty in the 10th century, the Silk Road was seldom used as a trade route.

The Silk Road has a long history; and it has played an important role in the progress of civilization in the world. In recent years, the "New Silk Road Study Plan" of the UNESCO named this road the "road of dialogue" which helps to advance the dialogue and exchanges between the East and West.

The present paper sought to investigate the role and importance of Silk Road in international trade with an emphasis on the new Silk Road and revitalization of this old road.

**Importance of the New Silk Road**

There is not any acceptable common methodology for estimating the volume and value of trade which can be flourished by opening the road highways and railways at the heart of Central Asia and Afghanistan. The exchange corridors of "The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)" are among the vital exchange methods of region. These corridors are especially important since most member countries in the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program are landlocked and are inclusively dependent on the land routes for intra-regional transfer and trade. The Asian Development Bank is taking efforts to make a connection between the member countries of CAREC with other neighboring countries. (Habua, 2015: 5)

Expansion of trade in emerging transit corridors will have different effects on countries. These new lines enable China, Europe, India and Russia to efficiently exchange goods with high values by railways than the ship. Europe will finally achieve the advantages of starting the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRASECA) project. Ural region in Russia and the West Siberia will have access to efficient trade corridors in India, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan will become the important transit countries connecting the East to West through Iran and the Central Asia. Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan take the advantage of expansion of north-south routes which connect the
northern Europe and Russia to the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. Oil and gas producers in the Caspian Sea region gain the economic and security benefits of multiple transfer pipelines. Power transmission lines will soon enable Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to access to markets of Pakistan among the largest producers of hydroelectric energy in the world. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan will be able to export the valuable agricultural products and cotton to available markets in south Asia instead of exporting to Russia and traveling 7000 km and passing through the Baltic Sea; this will break the Russia's monopoly of exports among the regional countries. Turkmenistan will also have access to numerous oil and gas buyers. Afghanistan also benefits from revenues from transit and transport tax. Opening the East-West trade corridors from Pakistan route and opening the new corridors to China will eliminate the imposed isolation on Pakistan (Esteban and Otero-Iglesias, 2015: 28). Nowadays, a lot of countries especially the Central Asia have been along the old road.

The Historical Silk Road Trade System seems to be the only alternative to the growth and development. Developing industries demand for new markets. Technological inventions facilitate international cooperation; and better transport, increased trade and growth of energy demand need the international cooperation. (Clinton, 2011: 3)

**China's Silk Road Initiative**

In September 2013, Xi Jinping, China's President, introduced the Silk Road economic belt Initiative during his visit to the Central Asian countries. In Nazarbayev University of Kazakhstan, Xi Jinping suggested that China and Central Asia could cooperate and build the Silk Road economic belt for more regional cooperation in the region. He proposed the important aspect of this plan as follows: Political communication; road connection from the Pacific to the Baltic sea; and creation of a transport network which is connected to the Eastern Asia, and West and South of Asia; facilitating trade; turnover and barter. (Fedorenko, 2013: 20) He asked the central Asian countries to join the creation of a new Silk Road economic belt which had widespread economic benefits for the region. The aim of his offer was to help the Eurasian countries, especially the republics of Central Asia, as it led to the rapid economic development for them and China (Orolbaev & Steklov, 2008: 9-
20. China's Silk Road plan seeks to revitalize and develop the old Silk Road. This plan aims to apply friendly policies towards neighboring countries and provide the win-win returns for all regional countries and the world (Lin, 2011: 14). The President of China also introduced the Maritime Silk Road initiative and called both plans the "One Belt, One Road Initiative". New Silk Road of China will pass through the strategic center of Eurasia from countries with full energy and mineral reservoirs and significant population bases. This route will begin from Xi'an city in the South China to Urumqi City on the border of Kazakhstan, and then it will pass Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Another branch of the Silk Road will pass Istanbul towards the northwest including Bulgaria, Romania, the Czech Republic and Germany, and connect to Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Venice in Italy before heading the north where will be connected to the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century. This multifaceted complex project has unfounded and yet not entirely clear structure, parameters and mechanisms for its implementation.

Silk Road economic belt is above a transport corridor like the European project of "Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia" (TRASECA). It is not only a route of international trade and cultural exchange between the East and West, but it is also a large strategic long-term route. The 21st-century maritime Silk Road is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which covers the Bangladesh China-India-Myanmar economic corridor. (Habova, 2015: 64-65). The main focus of this route is to connect the transport infrastructures between Asia and Europe. This plan covers an extensive network of highways, high-speed rail, pipelines and optical fiber networks between the Eurasian countries. Implementation of this large strategy will help China to increase its economic cohesion with Western countries. It will be also a platform for designing the political influence of China in the Western turning at the heart of Eurasia. Beijing has announced itself as the main source of investment for implementation of various stages of this plan. Within this framework, the overall picture of the new Silk Road shows that China's long-term strategic goal is to strengthen the use of Yuan (the standard unit of money in China) for international transfers and reduce the financial reliance on the United States. (Fedorenko, 2013: 26)

China's approach to Central Asia is based on the development of economic and commercial interests. China considers the Central Asia as an important area which can develop its economic growth through the business routes and fulfill the China's
need for hydrocarbon resources. China gladly makes generous investment in infrastructures of the Central Asia. They recognize that these investments will be beneficial for the Chinese economy (Olsen, 2012: 16).

In fact, one belt, one road literally means the idea that "China's dream" is to find a better life for population with a dream of the global population with commonality. Along one belt, one road route, there are 65 countries of Central Asia, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Southern Asia, Eastern Europe, Eastern Asia and Northern Africa with 4.4 billion people and available income of 21 trillion dollars with 63% of a belt and 29% of a road respectively from the global capacity. In 2013, China's trade volume with countries around this route was over a trillion dollars covering a quarter of China's foreign trade volume. In recent 10 years, China's trade with these countries has increased at an annual average rate of 19% which is 4% higher than the average annual growth rate of Chinese foreign trade over the same period. There are a lot of spaces for future growth.

In the thirteenth innovative plan for five years, it is predicted that China will have the imported goods worth of 10 trillion dollars and investment of over $ 500 billion abroad. The neighboring countries of China and also the Silk Road countries will be also the first beneficiaries. In general, one belt, one road initiative is superior to the old Silk Road in three aspects: The current one belt, one road reaches Moscow in the north; the Pacific countries in the South; Latin America in the east; and Germany in the West and it is superior to the old Silk Road. One belt, one road initiative is not the only route for trading silk, tea, seasonings, pickled vegetables and china, but it also indicates the internal connection in the 21st century. This initiative connects the infrastructures, coordinates policies, promotes the trade and commerce, creates circulation of currency, and links the people's hearts and minds. On the other hand, the Silk Road enables Europeans to go to China and buy silk, seasonings, pickled vegetables and so on. One belt, one road initiative is a comprehensive product of China and actively points out the upcoming Chinese policy. This initiative helps the creation of a huge Eurasian market and a new model of globalization, and thus the East-West trade channels and cultural corridors beyond the concepts. (Yiwei, 2015: 94-100)

It should be noted that the main route of the Old Silk Road passed Xinjiang to Central Asia and arrived Iran after passing Merv in Turkmenistan and reached Mesopotamia (Iraq) from The Levant (Syria) and finally reached Palmyra (now
Tadmor in Syria) on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea and then joined the sea routes. Iran was at the center of this highway route. Now, Iran can be at the center of this highway and benefit from it by paying attention to this route and joining to this initiative.

**China's peripheral diplomacy**

Silk Road economic belt and the Maritime Silk Road constitute a comprehensive new model and framework of China’s neighborhood diplomacy (Yiwei 2015: 94). In the recent two decades, China has focuses on its national integrity and political stability as well as ensuring stable economic growth. China’s foreign policy emphasizes the foreign environment stability and peace leading to the economic growth and development (Habova 2015: 65). China is currently the largest global economy and has a growing global confidence.

China’s interest is increasingly becoming a diverse world. As the global environment is dramatically changing, the new Chinese leadership seems to be ready to apply more aggressive foreign policy and show stronger geopolitical ambition. (Liqun, 2010: 18)

Growing importance and support of China’s peripheral diplomacy over the past few years are among the most obvious signs of this change. In 2013, Xi Jinping announced that the main peaceful route is to select the party's strategy over time according to the country's core interests. The main goals of this diplomacy are the peace and stability in the region. Xi Jinping also specified the peripheral diplomacy strategies: "The principle of compatible friendship of China's diplomacy with neighbors and its honesty increase its friends and partners. Cooperation with neighbors should be based on the common interests and build a network for common interests (Fallon, 2015: 7). At the National People's Congress of China in March 2015, China's Foreign Minister, Wang Li, pointed out that the focus of China's diplomacy in 2015 would be on the belt and road and prosperity of the Eurasian region. Document of the Communist Party of China emphasized the global arena in March 2015. He also introduced the concept of the Soul of the Silk Road which was described as a common historic and cultural heritage of all countries in the world. Building the belt and road is beneficial for the international community and it reflects the common goals and the human societies' positive attempts and efforts to seek the new models of international cooperation and global governance in order to
In terms of global interests of China, the east and southeast of Asia are the most important strategic regions in the peripheral diplomacy of China. However, the security and stability in south-western neighbors are nationally and internationally important for the Chinese. In contrast, the background of growing tension in the east and southeast of Asia follows the "rebalancing strategy in the Asia-Pacific region" which was named by Barack Obama, the President of the United States. Development of China's influence on the southern and central Asia is an important strategic step as a significant part of the political elite approach in Beijing which aims to break the "containment strategy" of America. Silk Road economic belt is an important element of the "Go to West" strategy and the strategic peace and security of China. This is a complementary mechanism to ensure the supply of energy for China's economy, reduce the vulnerability of country mainly against the United States and finally preservation of national sovereignty. National sovereignty is an essential part of China's main interest including the type of government, political system and stability, national security, sustainable economy and social development, energy security and national unity (Ekman, 2015: 8). In other words, domestic issues such as Tibet and Xinjiang are at the forefront of China's foreign policy as the main interest. Autonomous Region with Uyghurs in Xinjiang is an important point in the "Go to West" policy.

Conclusion

The China's "New Silk Road" project, which has been discussed by experts in international political and geopolitical media fields in recent years, essentially consists of water and land branches. This road begins from the ancient town, "Xi’an", of China, and passes multiple countries through numerous minor and major routes, and finally, it connects three continents namely Asia, Europe and Africa. Competition in China and America in the international economy, the growing influence of China on Asia's economy, and the significant growth of economic and trade activities of China in Africa compared to other powers especially the United States indicate that China has facilitated the access to global markets and developed an international and reliable transport corridor by affordable expenses in line with its national interests through reviving the Silk Road and drawing an economic belt.
The China's investment of $40 billion in the "Silk Road Fund" and requests from other countries to join this fund indicate the importance of Silk Road revitalization in the Chinese perspective. According to the importance of this project, Beijing is going to connect this project to a broader project called the "Asia-Pacific free-trade and investment zone". Despite the fact that the Chinese have announced that the new Silk Road project will comprise 65 countries from Asia to Europe, this project obviously focuses on the neighborhood of China in order to achieve the possibility of development and stability in the western regions of China and also reduce the strategic capacities of other regional rivals such as America, Russia and India for influence on the surrounding environment of China. Despite the efforts by the Chinese to create the appropriate psychological space by extensive advertising in order to achieve the objectives of this plan, there is not still any comprehensive and shared measure by other countries to go along to this plan; and the reactions have only led to the bilateral agreement. Reaction of the peripheral countries of China has been essentially two-way; in other words, these countries are also trying to utilize the economic benefits of this plan, and create a balance between these benefits and their security and strategic concerns. The "Silk Road economic belt" initiative of China in both forms, land and sea, can provide the geostrategic, economic, and security benefits of Iran in the region by focusing on the pivotal role of Iran; however, the Iran's quest is very important for further inclusion in this project and playing a significant role in the construction, implementation and maintenance of the new silk road. The "Silk Road economic belt" initiative has a significant impact on deepening the economic integration, and consequently the regional security. The "Silk Road economic belt" initiative has the potential for realization of comprehensive security in the region. The realization of convergence is the key to achievement of this security in the region; and the Silk Road economic belt is a necessity for achievement of this convergence. China's desired Silk Road, which connects the Eastern Asia to the Central Asia, the Central Asia to the Western Asia, and the Western Asia to Europe, will also create the trans-regional convergence with Europe. According to the numerous provided projects by some countries such as the United States, and the Russia and India's concerns about the ambitions of China in the region and also the need for exorbitant costs, it seems that the revival of Silk Road in China will be faced with challenges in addition to its practicality in the future. Iran's seriousness in joining this initiative can be decisive both for China and Iran. The northern route to Europe from the Central Asia and Russia will be faced with delay and obstructions of
Russia due to the rivalry between Russia and China, but the traditional route, which passes through Iran, will shape a clear future for Iran and China by establishing stability and security in Iraq and Syria. The reconstruction of destroyed Iraq and Syria requires the investment. Russia and Iran as the main players of Syrian arena do not have sufficient capital. The Arab countries will also be reluctant to participate in it due to their opposition to Syria. Only China has enormous capital and requires places far outside its borders for investment in order to convert more than 3000 billion dollars of its foreign exchange reserves into the production and wealth. Syria and Iraq are important destinations for Chinese investment and they provide the access to their energy and commodity market in a two-way trade. The Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), Iran, and Iraq have fulfilled the China’s hydroelectric needs for decades. There is a large market for Chinese goods. In terms of human force provision and engineering services, Turkey and Iran can receive the export of China’s engineering services and investment and make the traditional Silk Road closer to the reality.

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