

The “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “China Dream” Relationship: A Strategy or Tactic

Xing Li^a, Wan Wang^a

Abstract

The “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “China Dream” are tightly linked together rather than isolated from each other. The essence of the construction of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” is to give equal considerations to both the East and the West, paying equal attentions to the North and the South, while balancing the land and the sea and connecting domestic with foreign. This is the innovation and priority of China’s peripheral diplomacy as well as a strategic support and tactical guarantee of the “China Dream”. The “Silk Road Economic Belt” is constructed to make history serve reality; it exchanges economy for politics, space on land for time at sea, and balances a weakness in sea power with superiority in land power. Instead of simply replicating the Silk Road, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” possesses a broader realm and a richer context. Moreover, this is China’s ultimate strategy and profound tactical conception facing toward the future.

Keywords

“Silk Road Economic Belt”, “China Dream”, the center of Eurasia, strategy, tactic

As the top party and state leader, Xi Jinping has put forward the concepts of “China Dream” and “Silk Road Economic Belt” ever since he took office. It occurs to us: What is the relationship between these two concepts?

“SILK ROAD ECONOMIC BELT” AND “CHINA DREAM” ARE CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER

In December 2012, Xi Jinping put forward “China Dream” for the first time when visiting the exhibition of “Road to Revival”. Later, he gave some explanation about the content, essence, and goal of “China Dream” in other occasions. In short, “China Dream” refers to the economic prosperity, national revival, people’s happiness, and social harmony.

The “Silk Road Economic Belt” was put forward

by the speech of Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University in September 2013. He stressed China’s hope to co-build the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, which is a grand cause for the people along the route, with other countries in an innovative cooperation mode so as to build closer economic relations, deepen mutual cooperation, and create wider development space between Eurasian countries. Thereafter, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” has become the grand strategy of China, and it is vigorously promoted.

“China Dream” is tightly connected to, rather than

^aBeijing Normal University, China

Correspondent Author:

Xing Li, Eurasian Center, School of Government, Beijing Normal University, Xijiekouwaidajie, No. 19, Beijing, China, 100875
E-mail: xingli530@sina.com

being isolated from, other countries and people in the world. “Different countries pursue dreams that are different in some ways, but similar in other ways. We need to recognize the consensus as well as the differences”. “China Dream focuses on peaceful development, cooperation, and mutual benefit. It achieves win-win result with people of other countries who pursue their own dreams. China Dream can be beneficial to both China and the world” (Tao 2014). “China Dream” is also related to the “Silk Road Economic Belt”. China is the starting point and key place of the Silk Road, whose name is also originated from a key product of China—the silk. The “Silk Road Economic Belt” involves activating the ancient Silk Road again and connecting Europe (West) and Asia (East). The “Silk Road Economic Belt” is the national strategy and tactic to achieve the “China Dream”.

The so-called grand strategy of a country refers to its overall planning and macroscopic arrangements within a certain time period, aiming to realize the ultimate interest of that country. The grand strategy is long-term, full-on, stable, macroscopic, and oriented, while its tactics are temporary, focused, interchangeable, flexible, and confidential. Strategy guides tactic, while tactic complies with and serves strategy, taking it as its core. Sometimes, the grand strategy and tactic can be cooperative and interchangeable. The propositions of the “China Dream” and the “Silk Road Economic Belt” have been determined by China’s particular stage of development, its rise as a superpower, changes of international economic and political patterns, etc.

The realization of the “China Dream” depends on the development of China domestically as well as its diplomatic success. China gives its diplomatic priority to its peripheral diplomacy, and therefore, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” is the innovation and prioritized direction of China’s peripheral diplomacy.

“SILK ROAD ECONOMIC BELT”: STRATEGIC SUPPORT TO REALIZE THE “CHINA DREAM”

Xi Jinping is a strategist. The “China Dream” is an ideal of China and the “Silk Road Economic Belt” serves as the strategic support to realize the “China Dream”.

International political scientists have already reached consensus on the crucial role of Eurasia in international politics. Halford John Mackinder, an English geographer, stated his theory as “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world” (Mackinder 1942). Nicholas John Spykman, an American political scientist, summarized his theory as “Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world” (Spykman 1944). Although the focuses of these two theories are different, they both stress on the significance of Eurasia as a heartland. The “Silk Road Economic Belt” is essentially consistent with the “Eurasian Heartland”. The “Silk Road Economic Belt”, as a strategic consideration, is proposed exactly at the right time.

First, from a global perspective, TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) and TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) reflect the competition in Eurasia between land and sea, land power and maritime power, as well as land route and sea route; there exist the trend and demand of globalization and regional integration, as well as rampant global protectionism contributed by the international financial crisis. China was ranked the second largest GDP (gross domestic product) in the world and maintains a rapid growth. The “Silk Road Economic Belt” is a platform for China to conduct great-power diplomacy and global governance.

Second, from a geo-economic (district level) point of view, the “Silk Road Economic Belt”—connecting Europe and Asia, promotes mutual, peaceful,

cooperative, and inclusive developments, interconnecting and cooperating on interactions to serve the people and countries along the route. The “Silk Road Economic Belt” connects the Asia-Pacific Economic Circle in the East with the European Economic Circle in the West, covering 18 countries throughout Eurasia, with the hinterland trading volume accounting for roughly one quarter of the total global trading volume. With a total population of nearly three billion, this route is considered to be the world’s most longest economic corridor, benefiting from the greatest development potential. Eurasia is a continental landmass containing the greatest number of countries and the largest population, as well as the most development opportunities and potentials. Constructing the “Silk Road Economic Belt” promotes Eurasian cooperation, South-South cooperation, and North-South cooperation.

Third, from China’s peripheral perspective, the US carries out TPP off of China’s Southeast coast, and Russia carries the Eurasian Economic Union in Northwest China. Therefore, China must have its own Eurasian strategy. Firstly, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” has the ability to integrate SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and comprehensively deepen Sino-Russian strategic coordination. Secondly, China, Russia, and India—the three BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries in Eurasia, are all covered by the “Silk Road Economic Belt”. The construction of “Silk Road Economic Belt” would strengthen economic cooperation and strategic coordination among these three countries, it would also promote the BRICS mechanism and improve the surrounding environment to the west of China. Lastly, in the heart of Eurasia, China and the US have higher cooperation potential in investments, energy, counter-terrorism, non-proliferations, regional stability, and other fields, almost all without the risk of military confrontation. Thus, China’s “effort to cooperate with the West” can also help to improve its relations with the US and Japan (Zhao and Li 2014),

in order to achieve peace and stability in the surrounding environments and internally balanced development between Eastern and Western China, improving the quality and quantity of China’s economy, and fostering a new economic growth pole.

Fourth, several countries that are not related to the Silk Road, such as the US and Japan, also put forward various envisions about the Central Asia-Eurasia named after the “Silk Road”. As the origin and an integral part of the Silk Road as well as a major contributor to the Silk Road that was named after a famous Chinese product, China shall propose its national strategy about Eurasia, to which the Silk Road must be connected. Meanwhile, the contemporary “Silk Road Economic Belt” is a grand strategy facing the future, referring to a broader realm and more meaningful content instead of simply a resurrection or duplication of the Silk Road (Wu 2014).

Fifth, “Xi Jinping mode”, which takes the construction of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” as the important content and guidance, is under development. Historically, land power was superior to maritime power at the very beginning. With the opening of new sea-routes, geographical discoveries, and advancements of maritime technology, maritime power overcame land power. With advances in transportational technology, the distance, time, and the cost of land power were greatly reduced, advancing the quantity and efficiency of transportation, which made the superiority of land power more distinctive. As a result, the rising proportion of land power and the declining proportion of maritime power reached a balance; moreover, land power is even likely to exceed maritime power. If China’s high-speed rail penetrates further into Eurasia, it will connect Asia to Europe and accelerate the integration of Eurasia, which presents great strategic value in breaking the maritime power blockade, establishing advantages of land power and the Eurasian Community.

“SILK ROAD ECONOMIC BELT”: TACTIC ASSURANCE TO REALIZE THE “CHINA DREAM”

Xi Jinping is also a tactician. The “Silk Road Economic Belt” serves as the tactic assurance to realize the “China Dream”.

First, the development of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” is beneficial to eliminating the imbalance between Eastern and Western China and realizing domestic synergy and optimization. For example, of the following five western provinces—Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai, Shanxi, and Ningxia, Xinjiang becomes the breakthrough and core region for its geographical location, land mass, resources, potential, and influence. By connecting China to the outside world, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” can stimulate reform and development in China, paving the way for resolving the “Eastern Turkistan” issue.

Second, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” is helpful for China to enlarge foreign demands, and transfer part of surplus capacity to other countries. In this way, China and other countries can be mutually beneficial and supplementary to each other. In addition, it can explore China’s domestic demand, achieve co-development, and reduce its dependency on the Western countries in terms of resources, energy, and markets. Consumption, investment, and trade act as the troika for economic development. In the past, China attached more attention to its east coasts as well as the US, Japan, South Korea, and the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries. However, China is putting increasing priority on its west inland as well as the developing and transition countries to the west of it, which possess the huge potential markets and serve as the promising investment targets. For instance, the New Eurasian Land Bridge, which starts from Lianyungang in Jiangsu Province of China to Rotterdam of Netherlands, is some 10,000 km shorter than the

Indian Ocean water passage and free from extremely cold areas. The ports with large capacity are not frozen, and keep running all year around.

Third, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” deepens opening up and reform in Western China, expands domestic demand, strengthens endogenous growth momentum, and creates new sources of economic growth. Besides, it enables Western China to exert its edges in resources, energy, tourism, and humanity to narrow the gap between Eastern and Western China, share internal and external information, and achieve balanced and sustainable economic and social development. The path from Xi’an city to Urumchi city constitutes the major route of the Silk Road, and covers many poverty-stricken areas. The focus of China’s northwest development strategy will shift from “development” to “openness” through the “Silk Road Economic Belt”. By introducing industries and talents, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” can stimulate the development of Western China, providing great opportunities for the provinces in Central and Western China to export their distinctive agricultural products, local food, mechanical and electrical products westwards.

Fourth, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” covers the developing countries in the Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Caucasus areas, and the developed economies such as the EU (European Union). And it will not exclude other developed and developing countries. In this regard, China will shift its economic focus from much dependency on the US, Europe, and Japan, to the North-South cooperation and South-South cooperation. This transformation meets China’s positioning as a developing economy as well as reflects its rise trend as an emerging economy. The “Silk Road Economic Belt” can also be seen as a cultural belt. It would be conducive to the cultural exchange and blending among different nations, religions, and countries along the route as well as effectively undermine the foundations of the three vicious forces.

Fifth, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” meets the global trend featured by social and economic development, progress of high-speed rail technology, and land power elevation. The past experience serves the present, and the history serves the reality. It exchanges economy with politics and land space with time sailing on sea, and balances sea power disadvantages by relying on land power advantages. The “Silk Road Economic Belt” resolves the problems that different regions in the Eurasia are adjacent but not connected, connected but partially obstructed, unobstructed but not spacious, inclusive but not cover-all, and close but not concentrated.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHINA’S “SILK ROAD ECONOMIC BELT” AND THE US “NEW SILK ROAD INITIATIVE”

The US, currently the world’s sole superpower, has always attached great importance to Eurasia and its heartland. In July 2011, Hillary Rodham Clinton, then United States Secretary of State, put forward “New Silk Road Initiative” when visiting India.

The Similarities

- (1) Both of these two concepts are named after “Silk Road”. Both of them are designed to construct interconnected regional networks and are overlapped in some countries and regions;
- (2) Both of them are aimed at economic development and people’s livelihood, including aspects of software and hardware;
- (3) Both of them stress on initiatives of regional countries, and cooperation on infrastructure construction and energy.

The Differences

- (1) China’s “Silk Road Economic Belt” has a profound and long history, rooted in the traditional relationship between China and the Eurasian zone in

terms of economy, history, and culture. However, the US was unrelated to the Silk Road in the history, for it had not been founded during the heyday of the Silk Road. The “New Silk Road Initiative” of US and China’s “Silk Road Economic Belt” are greatly different;

- (2) The “Silk Road Economic Belt” involves the whole region of Eurasia and centres on the heartland of Eurasia. The “New Silk Road Initiative” covers Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia, and centres on Afghanistan;

- (3) The “Silk Road Economic Belt” is economy-based, diversified, and open. The “New Silk Road Initiative” is led by the United States which is based on security and politics, but emphasizes participation, employment, and the role of women;

- (4) Compared with the “New Silk Road Initiative”, China’s “Silk Road Economic Belt” is more inclusive but not exclusive, connecting Asia and Europe, including Russia. It does not exclude the participation of the US while the “New Silk Road Initiative” excludes China and Russia and weakens the role and position of China and Russia, which is centered on Afghanistan geographically and connects Central and South Asia;

- (5) The “Silk Road Economic Belt” is an East-West development path and the “New Silk Road Initiative” is a North-South development path. The objectives, schemes, and scales of them are obviously different.

CONCLUSIONS

The construction of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” needs to carry forward the contemporary “Silk Road Spirit”. What is the contemporary “Silk Road Spirit”? Contemporary “Silk Road Spirit” focuses on the economic fields, with mutual benefits and win-win results as well as common, balanced, harmonious, and coordinated development. It seeks common ground, includes different opinions, promotes mutual learning,

improves interactions home and abroad, combines righteousness and benefits each other without any political strings. It advocates information sharing, shares each other's properties and difficulties, boosts equalities in benefit distribution and does not engage in a zero-sum game. China plays a major role, rather than seeking single dominance in regional affairs, building its sphere of influence, directing against any third parties, or getting engaged in an exclusive systemic design. It is the most inclusive, feasible, and sustainable Eurasian development strategic conception to promote a benefit community with common destiny.

The development path of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" is characterized by the combination of soft (policy) and hard (transportation) as well as the incorporation of high (agreement and system) and low (trade and investment) levels (Vinokourov and Liebmann 2012), with gradual institutionalization.

In November 2014, the Dialogue on Strengthening Partnership in the Area of Interconnection was held in Beijing. Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed that China would establish the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, to promote the development of "One Belt and One Road" (which refers to the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road"). Following are five suggestions: First, to focus on the Asian countries and achieve interconnection in Asia. "One Belt and One Road" is of, by and for Asia. China is willing to provide more public goods to its Asian neighbors by interconnection and allow its neighbors to get benefits from China's development. Second, to rely on the economic corridor to establish the basic framework of the Asian interconnection. Third, to take the transport infrastructure as a breakthrough point and give priority to deploying the railway and highway projects among China and its neighboring countries. Fourth, to regard the construction of financing platform as the starting point

to break the Asian interconnection bottleneck. President Xi announced that China would contribute 40 billion US dollars to set up the Silk Road Fund. The fund is open to both Asian and non-Asian investors. Fifth, to take cultural exchanges as a link to cement the social foundation of the Asian interconnection. In the next five years, China will provide training projects in the field of interoperability for 20,000 trainees from neighboring countries (Xi 2014). Its essence is to combine the East and the West, lay equal stress on the North and the South, balance the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road", interconnect home and abroad, and practice the new concept of "closeness, sincerity, sharing in prosperity, and inclusiveness" so as to construct innovative contents and priorities of China's neighborhood diplomacy.

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Road'." *Northeast Asia Forum* 1:112.

Bios

Xing Li, Ph.D. in history, professor, Director of Eurasian Studies, School of Government, Beijing Normal University,

China; research fields: Russia and Eurasia studies, national strategy, international relations theory, and diplomacy of contemporary China.

Wan Wang, Ph.D. in politics, School of Government, Beijing Normal University, China; research fields: Russia and Eurasia studies, international relations, and diplomacy of contemporary China.