

Referring to the Idea of the Modern Great Silk Road in the Light of the EU - Central Asian Links

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the study of the contemporary approaches on Great Silk Road by analyzing historical preconditions to the development of relations between Europe and states of Central Asia. Paper sheds light upon the historical and contemporary significance of the Great Silk Road that fostered relationship between the two continents from medieval times until nowadays. The author provides his own proposals for re-discovering of the Great Silk Road referring to the Idea of the Modern Great Silk Road in the example of the EU and Central Asian states. Especially, it is argued that under the current globalization cultural component of a dialogue between the Eastern and Western countries should be reconsidered and be given more emphasis.

Keywords: Great Silk Road, relations between the East and West, Silk Road programs, the Idea of Modern Great Silk Road, integration processes, the EU and Central Asian states.

Ancient Great Silk Road as a historic trade route that combined the East and the West played an important role for the life of all nations living at the crossroads of Eurasia, especially for the people of

Central Asia and Europe. The idea of Great Silk Road once of course created in quest of Chinese “mysterious silk”, and it had been a good chance to the development of not only trade links, but also cultural, political and relations in other fields as well.

Starting with the historical phenomenon of the Great Silk Road, here we tried look through the relations of the EU and Central Asia within the framework of today’s integration processes. And as we believe, great changes relating with globalization in socio-political, economic and cultural life of the people of the world, especially Eurasian nationals, made states rethink their foreign policy objectives towards other states and societies. Contemporary multilateral relations between the EU and Central Asia and with other states in Asian continent like China, India, Japan, etc. might be well developed under the various Silk Road Programs. However, certain projects are too idealistic or have more geopolitical concerns; in the era of globalization it will once create chances to newly independent states gain the success and achievements of other world countries. On the other hand, we can not stop the processes of globalization, and then only we could turn them into more reliable, interdependent world. For instance, as Uzbek president Islam Karimov states that: “XXI century will be a century that engage whole world. In this case, it’s necessary to accept that to strengthen integration processes and the participation of sovereign states in international institutions and organizations not only as a historical fate, but also the key factor of consolidation and stability in a large scale of our planet” (Karimov, 1997).

So, what are the factors and historical background that could help EU and Central Asian states to build their relations on the base of

the Great Silk Routs? So that we combine those links with historical processes, we should have a good understanding of the ancient and medieval Silk Road itself. As it's known widely, the term Silk Road was invented by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877 (Waugh, 2007). But the history of this route goes back to ancient times, as far as the third to second millennium BC. There are different versions of using the term "the silk road" or "silk roads". So, one of the definitions is as following: "Silk Road" is a network of ancient overland trade routes that extended across the Asian continent and connected China to the Mediterranean Sea. For centuries, the "Silk Road" also enabled the transmission of knowledge and ideas between the Eastern and Western worlds" (Ercilasun, 2010).

For instance, the other definition could be explained in this form: "The Silk Road was a network of trade routes, formally established during the Han Dynasty of China, which linked the regions of the ancient world in commerce. As the Silk Road was not a single thoroughfare from east to west, the term 'Silk Routes' has become increasingly favored by historians; though 'Silk Road' is the more common and recognized name (Ibid).

Both terms for this network of roads were connected with the German geographer and traveler, Ferdinand von Richthofen, who designated them as 'Seidenstrasse' (silk road) or 'Seidenstrassen' (silk routes). The network was used regularly from 130 BC, when the Han Dynasty of China officially opened trade with the west, to 1453 AD, when the Ottoman Empire boycotted trade with the west and closed the routes. Here its is needed to note that, development of TRACECA transport road, NABUCCO pipeline or INOGATE projects should not

mean lessening of other traditional ways of transportation infrastructures that went through Russia. We have to argue those intentions of some misunderstandings by diversification of the routes for some Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan to open its trade with the world market.

As above mentioned, Silk Road is a general name of the network of trade roads between East and West. Here we may differentiate these Silk Roads very briefly as continental and maritime roads. Although, both routes have great impacts on sub-global interaction, the affects of the continental roads have been more intensive. And as this factor served positively during the historical periods, nowadays also we see its significance especially for Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan, which is geographically double-land-locked.

Thus, the origin and ending points of the Silk Road vary from different point of views. In the broadest sense, Silk Road stretches from Japan to Britain. However, if we consider Japan, together with China, as a part of East Asian regional trade routes, and Britain as a part of European regional trade routes, then we can say that Silk Road is a network of roads between Xian (ancient Chinese capital city of Changan) in the East, and Crimea and Anatolia in the West. Silk Road is not a trade route between East and West only. The emerging of this route also made the relations of different cultures possible. Besides, there was another direction of cultural and economic interactions along the Silk Road: the interaction between North and South. So, the Silk Road region can be defined mainly as a sub-global region covering Eastern Turkistan (Xinjiang), Central Asia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey (Major et al., 2001).

So, along the way, branch routes led to different destinations from the main route, with one especially important branch leading to northwestern India and thus to other routes throughout the subcontinent, to westward end-points at Byzantium, Damascus, and other cities of the Middle East. Beyond these end-points, other trade networks distributed Silk Road goods throughout the Mediterranean world (Europe) and the Eastern Asia. This gives us an idea that we must consider the whole of Eurasia as its geographical context in the light of the relations between the East and the West. For this reason, the geographical shape of the Silk Road might be thought of in the broadest terms, which is possible both maritime and continental ways.

In dealing with the context of the Modern Silk Road, it is important to remember that the nation-state is a modern invention, and clearly defined and bounded countries did not exist before modern times. Scholars, for example, are reluctant to use the word “China” in talking about pre-Han dynasty, because no concept corresponding to a nation called China existed then. Similarly, when we talk about the Silk Road passing through Afghanistan, it is with the understanding that there was in some sense no such place; the land and population existed. Throughout history, boundaries shift, peoples move from place to place, countries and kingdoms come into being and vanish, cities change their names. It is hard to avoid using modern geographical names for convenience, but it is necessary at the same time to avoid projecting modern concepts, such as the idea of the nation-state, back into a past where they do not belong (Ziyoyev, 2012).

Nevertheless, we may assume that the nations of the world, especially when Central Asian people, after declaring their independence,

once had a chance to look through their history, based on national identities and peculiarities. Here, we argue that one should not be analyzed narrowly common ideals, achievements of common science and culture. Instead it would be true to search for common interests. When we talk about the relations between Europe and Central Asian countries, there are many historical facts, documents, official letters that used during politico-diplomatic exchanges. For example, we may see the villages with the names like “Baghdad”, “Paris”, “Qahira (Cairo)”, “Damascus” surroundings of Temur the Great’s capital of Samarkand (those names also used nowadays). It means that Amir Temur once tried to show its good relations with the Western countries. And proving this, President Karimov explains it as follows: “When there were no telephones, telegraph, communication facilities, Amir Temur tried to unite the East and the West by means of peace, trade, and ambassadorship. And today our policy is the continuation of the good jobs of Amir Temur” (Karimov 1997).

So, there are many historical factors that laid down in building strong bridge for all Central Asian states (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) with European countries and at the same time to develop regional integration by this way. Due to its special geopolitical placement (the region borders China, Russia, Afghanistan, and Iran), as well as its rich natural resources, Central Asia is of particular strategic importance for the EU in terms of security and stability. For the regional states itself, sectors including trade, energy, transport, and education are also vital for progress. Of course, Central Asia with its 61.9 million population (according to 2011 estimate, CIA World Fact book) is also well known as one of the historic-cultural

regions with ancient culture where for hundreds of years has gained high developments, particularly, in various fields of science. Today, after the independence, all 5 states of Central Asia formulated their own path to the development and according to their national interests, are building multilevel foreign relations. The EU-oriented vector in much more depended on rapid integration to the world community and to save state sovereignty (Fazilov & Ganiev, 2010).

And for the EU Central Asian states remain geographically and geopolitically crucial because of their historic role as transit routes for trade between the Far East and the West and for their relatively recent role as home to some of the world's largest known energy and mineral deposits. From security prospective, the region is supposed as the most important corridor for Afghanistan's illicit drug exports to Western Europe. After 9/11 events, the EU began to thought seriously its links with Central Asia. And, the countries of the region also showed their strong interest towards the EU. Of course, there might be various ideas about the implication of democratic ideals and human rights issues in the region; however, we argue that today all countries of the world need to cooperate in order to overcome different transnational threats and challenges of the era of globalization and integration.

The idea of the Modern Great Silk Road can be realized also by the fact that today's one of rapidly growing economies is China, where Central Asia located between them. We can see also the cross of interests of China, Russia, USA, the EU and etc. powers in the region. We hope that it would be no more cause for the "Great Game" but, as declared by the United Nations program "Silk Road – the way of communication", to strengthen cultural, economic relations among the

nations of the East and the West (Khodjaev, 2010). Of course, there might be various names to the policy that world powers are making toward Central Asia. 19th Century term “Great Game” now it’s called as “the Geopolitical Square”. According to scholars, the participants of this game are Russia, China, Islamic countries and the United States. The EU, by the way, is not regarded as a fair participant of this square. There is another so-called “Eurasian square” (Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) (www.narod.ru). However, it is regarded as rather potentially than really important union. Its capacity was proved by the decision to put in commission the line tube Turkmenistan – China through neighboring countries Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The line tube is supposed to deliver 30 billion cubic meters of Turkmen natural gas to China for 30 years. As famous theorists Adam Smith and David Ricardo emphasized, both sides may win if interactions meet the requirements of filling each other and we may add that there should not be politicized certain economic activities, that’s to work frankly, follow “open doors” policy share experiences and achievements thinking of the people.

Counting on all the factors, the relations began by the new merits and dimensions after the EU adopted “Strategy for a New Partnership” in 2007 with Central Asia. The policy areas included various fields such as good governance, trade, security, ecology, energy, transport, the rule of law, democracy, human rights and etc. its good that the EU aims to transfer its relations with Central Asian countries into systemic framework. Before this New Strategy, the EU had the concept of multilateral relations which was reflected in various agreements, for example, Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. We believe that the Strategy for a New Partnership is a respected concept of building

relations of cooperation between these two regions of the world, even if there thousands of kilometers between them and supports the task-oriented long term-programs on rapprochement with Central Asia under international politics.

The idea of the Modern Great Silk Road might be proved in the light of the EU – Central Asian links through both financial support and technical expertise. The EU is contributing to the restructuring of the Central Asian part of the old Silk Road (perhaps large scale of “the Great Central Asia”) by helping countries in the region optimize their energy resources and energy export potential; upgrade their energy, trade, and transportation infrastructure; raise educational standards; show technical assist in solving border problems and other security issues and communication between Europe and Central Asia. The EU’s one of projects that linked the East and the West is – TRACECA. The EU’s Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia program is designed to foster integration of the region’s transport networks and markets to conform to EU and international legal and regulatory standards. The ancient Silk Road represented one of the most modern transportation options of its time, and in today’s globalized era, the region is once again pursuing an improved transport infrastructure as key to fostering trade and regional development. TRACECA is an east-west transport corridor stretching from Central Asia to Europe via the Caspian and Black Seas, covering road, rail, and maritime connections. It’s 13 member countries, which include all Central Asian nations except Turkmenistan, work together to develop efficient and reliable Euro-Asian transport links, and promote the regional economy as a whole.

As a conclusion, it is needed to emphasize that the EU will need to integrate its policies, reach out to the people of Central Asia, too. We hope many new projects that have been set up in recent years that could help civil societies become involved and participate of the local ownership, where should be clear understanding of the Eastern models of democracy and oriental traditional societies. And according to the 7th and final priorities of the EU's Strategy, now it's necessary to focus on intercultural dialogue and people-to-people contacts, which will create great opportunities for countries of Europe and Central Asia.

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