



The futility of the New Silk Route

It is dream-like to imagine a new trade highway across central Asia when the region is rent by political rivalries

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As the US and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) begin their drawdown from Afghanistan, the coalition hopes to stave off disaster by pushing regional projects for 2014 and beyond. One is the “New Silk Road”, which envisages Afghanistan regaining its ancient status as a transcontinental trade and transit hub linking the Far East and the West. Glaring challenges, however, will impede this ambitious project.

Central Asia is an energy-rich, multi-ethnic region with impressive rates of growth. The US’s New Silk Road initiative hopes to improve the economic and political connectivity of countries across south Asia, central Asia, Eurasia, and the Middle East through the liberalization of trade barriers, the removal of bureaucratic customs procedures and the development of transit and energy infrastructure.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh put this idea poetically by saying, “I dream of a day...one can have breakfast in Amritsar, lunch in Lahore, and dinner in Kabul.”

Interest in turning Afghanistan into a regional trade hub arose in the summer of 2010, when Pentagon officials announced an estimated \$1 trillion of untapped mineral wealth, including gold, cobalt, iron, copper, silver and lithium. US officials, however, have been encouraging some iteration of this scheme for some time now, one example being the Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999.

Now, like then, US leaders have never consistently promoted the prospect of a better future for the region, for three reasons.

First, a New Silk Road is magical thinking, given that Afghanistan remains a hotbed of instability plagued by daunting challenges. Lack of security has already delayed Tapi, the natural gas pipeline linking Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

For the foreseeable future, Afghanistan will remain an international suzerainty with power split between an internationally backed Western regime and a Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and UAE-backed Taliban. It is unrealistic to assume that Afghanistan will yield an environment conducive to private sector-led growth, much less that its security will miraculously improve over the next 18 months.

Second, the relationship among countries in the region is shaky, as most are embroiled in ethnic, political and economic conflicts.

Tensions between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have impeded economic ties between them. Trade agreements among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have always remained fragile. Following last summer's violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, the border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has been closed for over a year. Uzbekistan has increased cargo transit fees by fivefold in the last two years and Tajikistan too has raised its tariffs twice over the same period. Such acrimony does not bode well for the free exchange of human and physical capital.

Closely related, China and Russia, both members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, are both uncomfortable with Washington taking the lead. Besides, while the New Silk Road can be dubbed the US's brainchild, China's version is quite different. It is based on three main corridors crisscrossing the Eurasian continent (the Eurasian Land Bridge) that serve as the main arteries from which rails, highways and pipelines will be built. The existing Trans-Siberian Railway runs from Vladivostok in eastern Russia to Moscow and connects to western Europe and Rotterdam. Another corridor runs from Lianyungang port in eastern China through Kazakhstan in central Asia and onto Rotterdam. A third runs from Pearl River Delta in south-east China through south Asia to Rotterdam.

Perhaps the biggest impediment to expanded regional connectivity is that what Washington perceives to be its interests is not synonymous with the pursuit of regional peace.

According to Andrew C. Kuchins, one of US's leading experts on central Asia, "Iran and Pakistan are sceptical of the New Silk Road strategy to the extent that they view it as a US plan." Indeed, the US constantly threatens to bomb Iran while currently being engaged in offensive operations in Pakistan.

With Tehran, Washington has few effective instruments to submerge the differences between them in the pursuit of common regional objectives. Both seem unwilling to engage in direct talks, much less make reciprocal concessions.

In Islamabad—despite the latter's crushing energy needs—last month, secretary of state Hillary Clinton warned that the US would impose sanctions if Pakistan went ahead with a proposed gas pipeline project with Iran. Such inconsistent policies—of calling for regional integration and subsequently sabotaging it—assumes that merely promoting a

vision of sustainable growth and good governance will lead ineluctably to measures that guide its implementation.

The pivotal reasoning behind the New Silk Road is that economic incentives will reinforce political integration and long-term stabilization. This, however, puts the cart before the horse. For centuries, central Asia has been a cockpit of regional competition. Consequently, anything approaching an adequate or even plausible strategy must accept the likelihood that the region's underlying historical rivalries might be immutable. Moreover, America's interests are not the same as that of various countries in the region, and to assume otherwise hinders the ability to shape a coherent regional economic strategy.

The US and Nato officials continue to call for pursuing greater regional diplomacy, however, they have yet to put forward precise ideas about the content of such a negotiation that will include all of Afghanistan's neighbours.

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