

# Bridging Civilizations From Asia to Europe: The Silk Road

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Throughout history, Silk Road played an important role with connecting more than 50 countries between its endpoints. Reviving this ancient trade route is a contemporary discussion among politicians. There are many projects realized and proposed for the resurgence of the modern Silk Road, including the railroad project connecting Baku, Tiflis and Kars of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey; the undersea rail tunnel under the Bosphorus strait, Marmaray; the Silk Road Economic Belt proposed by China; and the Maritime Silk Road, again proposed by China. Just like the original Silk Road, it was not only a route for caravans or trade, but it was a meeting point for cultural, religious, and philosophical exchanges that served humanity for centuries; today's modern Silk Road initiatives should be considered as bridges between Eastern and Western civilizations that will serve the same purpose of its ancient predecessor. The revived Silk Road will facilitate strengthening of relationships in between countries that experienced harmony in history. The railways, transportation facilities, transnational gates, energy corridors, and natural gas pipelines that constitute the Silk Road will transform the region with improving its economy and bringing peace and economic prosperity. With recent developments, it witnesses the importance of geopolitical and historical ties in establishing contemporary alliances. Although there are great expectations with the revival of the modern Silk Road, authors would like to emphasize that it should be an agreement to foster shared interests rather than the interest of bigger partners.

*Keywords:* modern Silk Road, Silk Road Economic Belt, economic development, trade agreements, geopolitics, Turkey

## Introduction

In ancient times, there were two major commercial trade routes connecting Far East to West. One of them was the Silk Road and the other was the Spice Route.<sup>1</sup> Spices were commonly used in India and all other eastern civilizations even thousands of years ago. Once Europe got to know about these spices and the fine silk of the East, a great demand was born to these products and the trade route, known to be the Silk Road, came into existence. Both of these trade routes start in China and end in Europe. At that time, the Spice route was

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<sup>1</sup> India in Indian is Bhārat Ganarājya. Bhārat means spice in Sanskrit. Arabs and Westerners have named India after the food (spices) that they have eaten in that country. Therefore, the name of India is Bharat in Sanskrit and this word is directly used to mean spice in Turkish. In Turkish, *baharat* is the name for the group of nice smelling substances like cinnamon, black pepper, and cloves.

making up only 5% of the total world trade and it was not going through Anatolia on its path.

Silk Road was a major trade route of its time that retained its importance for 2,000 years. This road also functioned as a bridge in between people and cultures for centuries. The road got its name from the product that is carried on it, the Chinese silk. In the past, the Silk Road reached the Pamir region after going through Iran and Afghanistan's northern territory. The road branched into two arms, where one arm was going to India and the other arm passed through the southern part of Turkistan. Starting from eastern China, the road followed various routes in Anatolia and uniting again in Istanbul and then, diving into the inner regions of Europe. On its path, the road not only functioned to facilitate trade, it also performed a role that progresses cultural and religious exchange where the outcomes of such a role are observed to this day (Waugh, 2010).<sup>2</sup> Anatolia was the bridge in between East and West and it was a major crossroad of the Silk Road.

In the middle ages, Silk Road started from the city of Xi'an, passing through Turkic regions across deserts, mountains and following multiple routes on its path to Anatolia. It ended in Europe going through Thrace. Silk Road branched into two arms in Iran, one to Latakia of Syria and the other to Anatolia. The Anatolian branch further ranced into three arms. The first of these branches started in Kars-Ani and went through Artvin, Trabzon, Gümüşhane, Erzurum, Sivas, Tokat, Amasya, Kastamonu, Adapazarı, İzmit, İstanbul, and ended in Edirne. The second of these branches started in Eastern Beyazıt and going through Ağrı, Erzurum, Erzincan, Sivas, and ranced again in Sivas into two sub branches. One was through Tokat, Amasya, Gerede, İstanbul, and the other through Kayseri, Ankara, Bilecik, Bursa, İznik, İzmit, and İstanbul. The last of the three branches was using maritime routes towards the cities of Ephesus and Miletus of the Aegean Sea, Trabzon and Sinop of the Black Sea, and Alanya and Antalya of the Mediterranean Sea, before reaching Europe (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2014). Modern and historical maps of Silk Road are in Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively.



Figure 1. Modern Silk Road. Source: Ben (2014).

<sup>2</sup> There were two routes in China: one from the north and the other from the south of the Taklamakan desert, later uniting in Luoyang region.

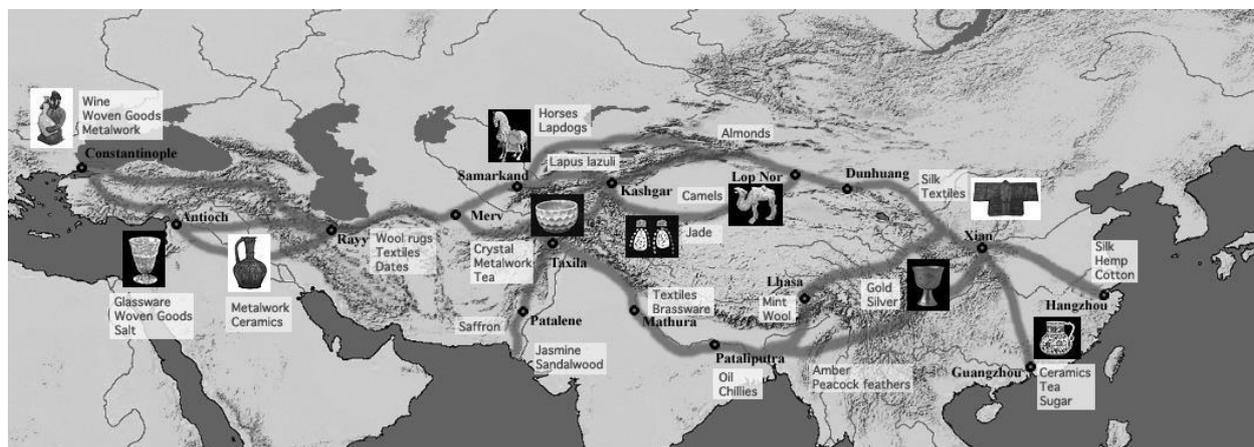


Figure 2. Historical Silk Road. Source: Retrieved from <http://silkroutes.net/>.

The Seljuks<sup>3</sup> governed Middle East and a part of Central Asia in between the 11th and the 14th centuries (Figure 3). To be able to sustain commercial activities in their territories, they secured trade routes through building caravansaries. At that period, cities on the Silk Road were major destinations to rest and reorganize caravans. Numerous caravansaries, which were the five-star hotels of the time, were built at these stopping points.

Caravansaries are resting areas for caravans on trading routes. The first caravansaries were built towards the end of the 10th century by Seljuk sultans in Central Asia for defensive purposes. Later on, as a need to accommodate commercial caravans arises, they are expanded to include hosting facilities for these caravans. In time, they became major elements of the Silk Road.



Figure 3. The Seljuks at their highest point.

The Seljuk caravansaries on major trade routes were built according to the distance of a typical caravan would travel in a nine-hour day: 40 kilometers apart (K. Erdmann & H. Erdmann, 1961). They were surrounded by high walls that were used for fortification during war time, while during peace time they were used as a bazaar site. Caravansaries were integral parts of the Silk Road. Countless caravansaries on the Silk Road, which

<sup>3</sup> Seljuks were a dynasty that ruled Middle East for 300 years and they were from the Kinik branch of the Turkic Oğuz tribe. The name comes from the first leader Seljuk Bey who established the state.

cover Anatolia like a web, were built to meet the needs of commercial caravans.

Besides facilities and services like hamams (Turkish bath), barns, medical services, pharmacies, carriage repair services, and barbers, caravansaries also had snake and scorpion hunters. There were armed forces to protect animals, people, and their properties as well. All these services were provided by the government free of charge. The expenses were paid by the taxes collected from these caravans' commercial activities.

The golden age of building caravansaries in Anatolia was during Seljuks' reign. It started to decline in the period after Seljuks and almost halted during the Ottoman period. The main cause of this decline was newly found maritime trading routes by Portuguese and Spanish sailors, which gradually obliterated the Silk Road. The cost of a medium-size vessel traveling over the southern tip of Africa was much lower than the cost of a caravan traveling on land. Besides, it took a ship three months to complete the journey where it was a year for a caravan.

### **Introduction of Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road**

The concept of the Silk Road Economic Belt project is introduced by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in his speech in Astana, Kazakhstan, on September 7, 2013.<sup>4</sup> In his speech, president Xi asked China and Central Asian countries to bond together to revive the historical Silk Road which was a major trade route of the region for a long period. President Xi Jinping suggested opening the gates to future cooperation with restoring the historical name Silk Road in doing so.

President Xi was very clear with his proposal of inviting Central Asian countries to cooperate on economic strategies, to work together to solve problems on regional issues, and to create a strategic development plan. He also suggested establishing a transportation network that would connect the two ends of the Asian continent (Cohen, 2013).

The number of people living on the Silk Road is three billion and the potential for development is enormous. Developing facilities and introducing regulations to boost trade and remove trade barriers requires investment that needs to be undertaken by countries on the Silk Road. Although the cost of such investment is substantial, the outcomes of the proposed Silk Road will be massive in terms of development.

The Silk Road Economic Belt concept was restated in President Xi's speech in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. Before the summit, President Xi visited four of the Central Asian countries to China's west. He reminded people that he was from the eastern end point of the Silk Road, Xi'an, in his speech in Samarkand. He pointed the following five areas to improve his new proposal with the aim of reinforcing relations among China, Central Asia, and Europe:

- strengthening policy communication, which may help switch on a green light for joint economic cooperation;
- strengthening road connections, with the idea to establish a great transport corridor from the Pacific to the Baltic Sea, and from Central Asia to the Indian Ocean, then gradually build a network of transport connections among eastern, western, and southern Asia;
- strengthening trade facilitation, with a focus on eliminating trade barriers and taking steps to reduce trade and investment expenses;
- strengthening monetary cooperation, with special attention to currency settlements that could decrease

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<sup>4</sup> The speech took place at the Nazarbayev University.

transaction costs and lessen financial risk while increasing economic competitiveness;

- strengthening people-to-people relations.

The Silk Road Economic Belt project reminds a similar project, the New Silk Road, proposed by the former United States (U.S.) Secretary of State, Ms. Clinton (Zhiping, 2014). The New Silk Road centers around Afghanistan and it is a part of U.S.' strategic plan of redeveloping the region occupied during the wars in Afghanistan. Although the New Silk Road aims developing mainly Afghanistan, the Economic Belt goes further than that, in the east-west direction through northern Afghanistan, Central Asia, China, and it also spreads all the way into the Baltics region. Currently, there are no developments on the New Silk Road, where the Silk Road Economic Belt is progressing towards its promised outcomes (Zenn, 2013).

The Silk Road Economic Belt is proposed together with another traditional trade route, The Maritime Silk Road.<sup>5</sup> Whether in the Indonesian parliament or in Astana, China's intentions are similar. Infrastructure projects, economic cooperation, financial cooperation, and security cooperation are areas of interest for the Chinese government. Twenty-first century versions of the historical routes, Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road projects are twin projects to address environmental, technical, and scientific cooperation.

Clearly, China is willing to expand its economic and political influence in the region. It is ready to sign various agreements including free trade agreements to counter U.S.—initiated Trans-Pacific Partnership. China expands the scope of his proposed trade agreements as far as Eastern Europe and it is trying to connect China's economic centers with major economies on the route.

### **Implications of the Silk Road Economic Belt and Turkey**

The Silk Road Economic Belt project that is promoted by China is a regional development initiative and it is similar to European Free Trade Association of Europe which is a loose economic integration model (Karluk, 2013, 2014). Globalization caused big changes in world's economic structure. Advancements in computerization and communications lowered the cost of transportation and this allowed production to take place at different geographical locations, which subsequently required the economic integration of these locations. Establishment of logistical relationships gained importance in the process. Today, the location of the leading global manufacturers and suppliers, Asian countries and chiefly China, requires improvement in the transportation infrastructure that connects East and West (Kulalikaya, 2013).

Analyzing the real gross domestic product (GDP) and the population of 186 countries whose data are available at World Bank's dataset, it can be computed that the total real GDP of the world was 75.6 trillion U.S. dollars in 2013 (Figure 4). The total population of the world was estimated to be 7.1 billion in 2013. Looking at the dispersion of this wealth, it can be seen that the top eight countries own 59% of world's real GDP and only 32% of the world population live in these countries (Table 1).

Consequently, the other countries own a smaller share of world's real GDP despite the fact that they have more of world's population. On top of that, when island countries and those countries whose economies mostly depend on gas and petroleum products are excluded, a severe inequality in the distribution of world's wealth is observed.

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<sup>5</sup> Chinese President Xi and Prime Minister Li Keqiang visited five Southeast Asian countries to mark strategic partnerships between China and ASEAN countries (Parameswaran, 2013). During his attendance at the 16th ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) + China summit, Prime Minister of China Li Keqiang publicized this proposal (16th China-ASEAN (10+1) leaders' Summit. Xinhua, 10 October, 2013). President Xi delivered a speech in the Indonesian parliament in the same month reiterating the proposal of the Maritime Silk Road.

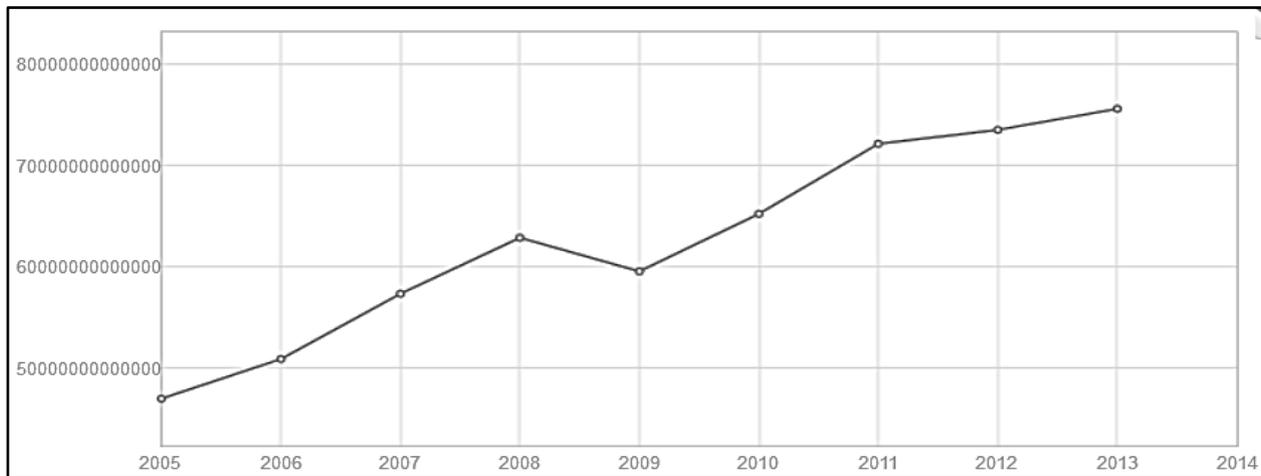


Figure 4. World GDP. Source: World Development Indicators and World Bank.

Table 1

Top Eight Countries by Annual GDP in 2013

		Population	GDP
1	United States	316,128,839	16,768,100,000,000.00
2	China	1,357,380,000	9,240,270,452,046.99
3	Japan	127,338,621	4,919,563,108,372.50
4	Germany	80,621,788	3,730,260,571,356.51
5	France	66,028,467	2,806,427,978,233.99
6	United Kingdom	64,097,085	2,678,454,886,796.67
7	Brazil	200,361,925	2,245,673,032,353.76
8	Italy	59,831,093	2,149,484,516,711.75
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2,271,787,818</b>	<b>44,538,234,545,872.20</b>

Source: World Development Indicators and World Bank.

The inequality in income and welfare among world countries has increased as the pace of globalization increased in the period after 1980 (Lindert & Williamson, 2003). The most equal, in terms of income, regions of the world are Europe, central Asia, and North America, where the most unequal regions of the world are Latin America, Caribbean countries, and sub-Saharan Africa. With the realization of the Silk Road Economic Belt project, it will be possible to reduce income inequality among these regions.

In this matter, Turkey welcomes the initiative of China to establish the Silk Road Economic Belt that will strengthen historical ties of countries on the historical Silk Road in political, transportation, commercial, financial, and civic society areas as a regional economic integration model, since such an initiative will bring prosperity to the people of these countries.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, in a meeting with the Turkish president of the time—Abdullah Gül, in his visit to Turkey on October 25, 2013, the Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Secretariat and the head of the CPC propaganda department, Liu Qibao mentioned that China is ready to improve historical relationships with all countries on the historic Silk Road in areas of politics, transportation, commerce, finance, and civic society. Liu said that they will work together to establish the Silk Road Economic Belt and consequently bring prosperity to the people of these countries. In that meeting, the president of the Turkish Republic Abdullah Gül said that the commercial, economic, and cultural relations between the two countries are improving. Liu mentioned that the friendship between Chinese and Turkish people has started with the 2000-year old Silk Road. In the time since diplomatic relationships have started in between the two countries, especially after the beginning of 21st century, the interactions between China and Turkey have steadily increased and improved (China Radio International, 2013).

Turkey and China are taking actions to be connected through railroads as well. In 2010, two countries signed an agreement that will connect Istanbul to Beijing (Ozdasli, 2014). Although there is not much progress after signing the agreement, Turkish government officials are still emphasizing the importance of Silk Road Economic Belt to Turkey. Turkish Minister of Economy highlights Turkey's interest in shaping the future of Eurasia together with the other participating countries (Turhan, 2014). The general perception of this project is positive, although there are cautious views of it as well (Demirtas, 2014).

### Recent Developments

After the 2008 global economic crisis, the direction of the world trade is changing and the center of wealth and trade is shifting to East. There is room for improvement in commercial, economic, political, and cultural relations between Asia and Europe at a time where growth rates between these two regions differ widely, 8.14% for the developing East Asian and Pacific countries and 0.89% for the European Union countries, and the change is very dynamic in the East (Table 2).

Table 2

*Average Growth Rate From 2010 to 2013 for Selected Countries*

China	8.77
East Asia & Pacific (developing only)	8.14
Middle East & North Africa (all income levels)	4.22
Latin America & Caribbean (developing only)	3.87
World	2.84
United States	2.17
European Union	0.89
Euro area	0.63

Source: World Development Indicators and World Bank.

There are more than 50 countries on the path of Silk Road. From Central Asia to Caucasia, Turkey, Middle East, Balkans, and to northern Europe, there are many countries on this route that will benefit from the wealth that this route will bring in the near future. Today, the indispensable means of commercial transportation is maritime routes, but Silk Road is expected to replace these maritime routes with land routes, since many of the countries on the Silk Road are landlocked. Besides this, the growth rates in these countries are twice as much as coastal countries. Looking at Table 3, it is possible to see the growth potential in trade for countries on the Silk Road. It is worth mentioning that Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are major petroleum products exporters.

Table 3

*Per Capita Trade Volume (Exports + Imports) for Selected Countries*

Netherlands	\$289,371.89
United States	\$46,771.99
Kazakhstan	\$27,968.41
Turkey	\$19,585.86
Turkmenistan	\$16,640.99
China	\$10,786.95
Georgia	\$3,681.49
Afghanistan	\$1,020.24

Source: World Trade Organization (WTO) for trade volumes and World Development Indices for population.

A train route—named *Yuxinou*, that would connect Eastern Asia to Western Europe, has already started (Russia Today, 2014). Although the freight has to be transferred to different wagons three times during the trip, due to the incompatibility of tracks, and it costs slightly more than sea transport, still there is hope that in the long-run this route will be an economically viable way for transporting goods between the two ends of two big continents. Besides this, *Yuxinou* would lower the transit time from the current 40 days on the maritime route and this would increase its strategic importance (Atli, 2014).

Multifaceted commercial, economic, and cultural relations between this region's countries will turn around the destiny of this land of the last 200 years. In this context, removal of restrictions on trade and commerce and free travel are essential for the development of the region which will eventually establish a peace and prosperity bridge between Asia and Europe.

Today, Silk Road countries make up 22% of the 30 trillion-dollar total world trade volume. In the short future, Silk Road territory will become one of the world's most important economic and cultural centers and intercontinental relations will not only take place in between East and West, but it will take place in between North and South.

Silk Road countries are on world's economic, social, cultural, and political agenda. Establishing an infrastructure that will lower all kinds of administrative and bureaucratic barriers on trade should be a priority for the countries of the Silk Road Economic Belt. Today, transportation is not only a mean of commerce, but it is a mean of cultural exchange as well.

Silk Road is also a medium for communication. Silk Road region is on the course of fiber optic communication routes from East Asia to Europe. Even though transportation routes are important, communication routes are more critical than ever before. Most of world's commerce is finalized on the internet. The pace of global relationships is faster with advanced communication networks. These developments will tie countries on the Silk Road to each other with stronger bonds.

Transportation and data transmission are two important technologies that enabled globalization to spread to the world (Baldwin, 2011). The opening of the undersea rail tunnel in Istanbul in October 2013 was another step in the advancement of the transportation network between Europe and Asia. It theoretically allowed people to travel from London to Beijing over Istanbul.

The European Union attaches importance to new transportation corridor projects which could be alternatives to Russian Federation's monopoly over the transportation networks going through Central Asia, South Caucasus, and Eastern Europe. The most important one among these transportation projects is the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA project)<sup>7</sup> (Retrieved from <http://www.traceca-org.org/en/countries/>) which aims creating a Eurasian Corridor to the south of Russia, which is also supported by USA.

The historical Silk Road is the shortest route connecting Central Asia to Europe. TRACECA, which is

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<sup>7</sup> TRACECA is an internationally recognized program aimed at strengthening of economic relations, trade, and transport communication in the regions of the Black Sea basin, South Caucasus, and Central Asia owing to active work based on political will and common aspirations of all member-states. In September 1998 at the historic Summit in Baku, 12 TRACECA countries signed the Basic Multilateral Agreement on International Transport for Development of the Europe-the Caucasus-Asia Corridor (MLA) with the aim of implementing in full of their geopolitical and economic potentials. In 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran joined to TRACECA. Today the TRACECA route comprises the transport system of the 13 member-states of the Basic Multilateral Agreement on International Transport for Development of the Europe-the Caucasus-Asia Corridor (MLATRACECA): Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Romania, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

going through the path of the historical Silk Road, was established by the contributions of Trade and Transportation Ministries of eight countries in a conference held in Brussels in May 1993. The TRECECA project has been developed to establish a transportation corridor starting from Europe, passing by the south of Black Sea, covering Caucasus and Caspian Sea and reaching Central Asia. The project is a viable alternative transportation system which is continuously improving and advancing (Karluk, 2009).

### Conclusions

Today, there are many trade agreements in operation and many others at the proposal stage. Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) is one of the ambitious projects that is getting attention lately (Seshadri, 2013). It will form an alliance that will give a hard time to those who are left out. Under these conditions, it is not difficult to understand why other countries, like China and Russia, are doing their best to form their own economic alliances. In the meantime, there are almost no countries advocating isolation as a way of economic development. The Silk Road Economic Belt is a promising project that will benefit many countries on its path.

It is not possible to have a viable future without a viable economy. Free markets economy has emerged as the only way to economic prosperity. It has been a long time since countries like Russia, formerly Soviet Union, and China bowed down to the promises of capitalism, in one way or another. Geographical proximities or historical ties are still important determinants of current economic and political activities. The Silk Road proposed by the Chinese government is a vivid example to this statement. People can relate to events that are closer to them or to events that they are culturally connected. An ancient trade route that is dead at least 600 years ago is making a comeback in a world much different than it used to be. Potential economic results are yet to be observed but at least politically, it already made a comeback.

The Silk Road Economic Belt project should have a multilateral approach, economically and politically, that will allow every participating country to be involved equally in taking decisions. It should be an agreement to foster shared interests rather than the interest of bigger partners. The world already experienced such political spheres of influence during the cold war era with the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Only this way, this project will take off without political concerns of the countries on the route. People's "faith" in the project comes before all other requirements in the project. Only then, the true outcomes of free trade and economic prosperity will be observed.

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