

GEOPOLITICS OF OBOR AND (RE-) THINKING CONNECTIVITY DISCOURSE: APROPOS OF SOUTH ASIA

Muhammad Manzoor Elahi*

***Abstract:** The proposed research within its purview intends to (re)-think global connectivity matrix under the spectrum of Chinese discourse of connectivity i.e., One Belt One Road (OBOR) and analyses its extended corridors of connectivity with its southwestern peripheral region i.e. South Asia. In addition, the research also analyses the geopolitics of South Asia and its significance in OBOR strategy. OBOR initiative is a balancing-objective strategy in response to west oriented hegemonic-objective strategy to promote connectivity and cooperation in the world. The project was initiated in 2013 linking the world with network of rail, roads and ports. OBOR initiative is inclusive in a sense that it has no strict rules and regulations, every country can participate in it without any political and financial obligations. The research analyses the grand design strategy of president Xi Jinping as an alternate plan of western power discourses and discusses a shift from Columbian age (sea routes) to age of hybrid trade routes (sea+land) prompted by OBOR. The study applies the technique of discourse analysis and takes the case study of South Asia. In this broader perspective, this study highlights the geopolitical importance of South Asia in Sino-centric connectivity strategy and analyses that that how China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) endow with potential opportunities for sustainable development of the region?*

Keywords: OBOR, Eurasia, Columbian epoch, South Asia, geopolitics, hybrid connectivity

* Muhammad Manzoor Elahi is Lecturer at Department of Political Science, GC University Lahore, Pakistan (Email: mmelahi@gcu.edu.pk).

Introduction

“The Initiative (OBOR) is open for cooperation. It covers, but is not limited to, the area of the Ancient Silk Road. It is open to all countries and international and regional organizations for engagement”¹

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC.

China’s global reach policy is giving an insight to re-think the discourses of power, connectivity, and development at the global level. Xi Jinping’s proactive plan of Belt and Road Initiative has had far reaching impact on political and economic apparatus of the world. The plan was initially uncovered by him in September 2013 during his state visit to Kazakhstan where he announced *The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)*. Later, in October 2013, the grand maritime strategy of *21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI)* was revealed on his official visit to Indonesia.² This hybrid strategy of land and sea routes for trans-continental connectivity is commonly known as One-Belt, One-Road or *Yi-Dai, Yi-Lu*.³

The ‘One Belt’ denotes to land-based connectivity and reinvigorates old Silk Road between China and Europe passing through Central Asia, West Asia and South Asia by constructing a network of transit trade corridors. Whereas, ‘One Road’ is an extension of string of pearls’ strategy in Indian Ocean by making sea-based connectivity from South China Sea to Europe via straits of Malacca, Palk and Bab-ul-Mudabe. The distinguishing aspect of MSRI is to engage east African states in the web of connectivity. Indeed, Brain Eyler is of the opinion that “the focus of the Maritime Silk Road is to support and facilitate booming trade growth between

¹ “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, issued by the *National Development and Reform Commission*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, with State Council authorization. (March 2015). <http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html>

² Rumi Aoyama, “One Belt, One Road”: China’s New Global Strategy”, *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 5:2, (2016), 5. Also see, Joel Wuthnow, “Chinese Perspectives on the Belt Road Initiative: Strategic Rationales, Risks, and Implications”, *China Strategic Perspectives: No-12* (Washington D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2017), 4

³ “Connectivity Spearheads Development and Partnership Enables Cooperation,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China*, (November 8, 2014), <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/ytjhzzdrsr-cldrfzshyjsxghd/t1210466.shtml> also see, Nadège Rolland, (2017) China’s “Belt and Road Initiative”: Underwhelming or Game-Changer?, *The Washington Quarterly*, 40:1, 127. DOI: 10.1080/0163660X.2017.1302743.

Asia and Africa”⁴ In addition, a further sea based channel of Maritime Silk Route strengthens the political and economic linkages between the east-coastal China and the emerging economies of south-Pacific region. This strategy aims to spread out a network of ports and coastal infrastructures.

The ambitious plan of OBOR is unique in a sense that it has two-pronged developmental impact on its border regions as well as peripheral states. First, OBOR intends to ventilate the grievances of less developed border-regions of China by connecting them with rest of the world. This strategy has ushered a phase of infrastructural development, communication network, industrial advancement and social progress to deal with the east-west developmental syndrome in China. OBOR intends to engulf the gap between inland western impoverished region and sea-based enriched eastern region.⁵

Second, OBOR aims to strengthen very strong developmental ties with peripheral neighbors, particularly of Central and South Asian states. Xi urged for ‘Peripheral Diplomacy’ in the 18th party Congress in these words;

“Maintaining stability in China’s neighborhood is the key objective of peripheral diplomacy. We must encourage and participate in the process of regional economic integration, speed up the process of building up infrastructure and connectivity. We must build the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, creating a new regional economic order.”⁶

⁴ Under OBOR plan East African states comprises of Djibouti, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique and Tanzania, see for instance, Brian Eyler, ‘China’s Maritime Silk Road is All About Africa’, *East by Southeast*, November 17, 2014. <<http://www.eastbysoutheast.com/chinas-maritime-silk-road-africa/>>

⁵ For example, the coastal metropolitan city i.e. Shanghai, is five times wealthier than the inland province of Gansu, which was once the part of the Old Silk Road. See, “Regional Development: Rich Province, Poor Province”, *The Economist*, October 1, 2016, <<http://www.economist.com/news/china/21707964-governmentstruggling-spread-wealth-more-evenly-rich-province-poor-province>> The Western regions i.e. Tibet, Xinjiang, Qinghai and Gansu are ranked lowest by China Economic Research institute Free Market Index. See, China Economic Research institute, cited in, Peter Cai, *Understanding China’s belt and Road initiative* (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2017), 6.

⁶ “Xi Jinping’s Important Speech at the Peripheral Diplomacy Work Conference”, *Xinhua News Agency*, (October 25, 2013) <http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/25/c_117878897.htm>.

However, China is building two major economic corridors in South Asia i.e. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). Apart from this, South Asian rims cover major part of OBOR's Maritime Silk Route Initiative (MSRI) and endows with strategic opportunities for China in Indian Ocean. Therefore, China is developing and upgrading ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Maldives. These ports will develop politico-economic links of South Asia with Africa and Europe. OBOR has transformed the nature of old silk route from mere transit-trade activity to conduit of mobility, cooperative security mechanism, passing of ideas as well as cultural and scientific exchanges. This grand strategy of engagement encompasses 4.4 billion people of around 65 countries which accounts 62 percent population, 35 percent trade and 31 percent GDP of the world. In addition, it installs \$5 trillion worth of mega developmental projects.⁷

Figure 1: China's Grand Connectivity Strategy



Source: Dr. Palitha Kohona, "Economic Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region and the One Belt One Road Initiative: A Threat or an Opportunity?" *Global Geopolitics*, (March 21, 2018).

⁷ Amy He, "Silk Road connects China to the world," *China Daily U.S.A*, March 31, 2015, <http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/us/2015-03/31/content_19965235.htm> cited in, "The Belt and Road Initiative", Institute for Security and Development Policy (2016). Also see, "The Belt and Road Initiative" <https://www.lehmanbrown.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative.pdf>. See for instance, Zheping Huang, Our Guide to Understanding OBOR, China's New Silk Road Plan, (May 15, 2017) <https://qz.com/983460/obor-an-extremely-simple-guide-to-understanding-chinas-one-belt-one-road-forum-for-its-new-silk-road/>

(Re-)thinking Connectivity Discourse

The idea of OBOR has its roots in ancient Silk Road which was a network of trade connectivity between east and west. For hundreds of years Silk Road carried the spirit of ‘peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit’ and made its contribution in the politico-economic, social and cultural development of connected areas. The route was transferor of goods, commodities, ideas, cultures, religions, medical science and knowledge. The term *Seidenstrassen*, ‘silk road’, was first coined by a German geographer, Baron F. Richthofen, in 1877. Jonathan Tucker considers it misnomer and opines that “it was not really a road at all; it was a vast network of land- based and maritime trade routes and the merchants who used it carried far, far more than just silk”.⁸

It is pertinent to discuss two main factors which hampered the functioning of 2000 year old Silk Road. First, the race of empire building between Tsarist Russia and Great Britain, in Asia. Second, opening up of sea-based intermediary links. The age of discoveries⁹ and explorations opened up new chapters of connectivity at the global level. The discoveries of sea routes prompted a shift from land-based trade routes to sea-based trade routes popularly known as Columbian epoch. A discernible aspect of this epoch was that on the pretext of connectivity principle, world witnessed the rise of imperialism and colonization. For instance, the European imperialism in Asia coincided with the discovery of sea route to India by Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese explorer, in 1498. His discovery was the dominant episode of connectivity in the European and Asian history. This opened avenues for European powers to rush over Indian subcontinent. Portuguese were the first one who got benefit of this discovery and captured Goa in 1510, a strategic point in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ Later, Great Britain gradually colonized South Asia and strengthens its influence over the strategic chock points in the Indian Ocean.¹¹

⁸ Jonathan Tucker, *The Silk Road: Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2015), 1

⁹ The discoveries of American and Australian continents as well as an Indian Sea route by European explorers.

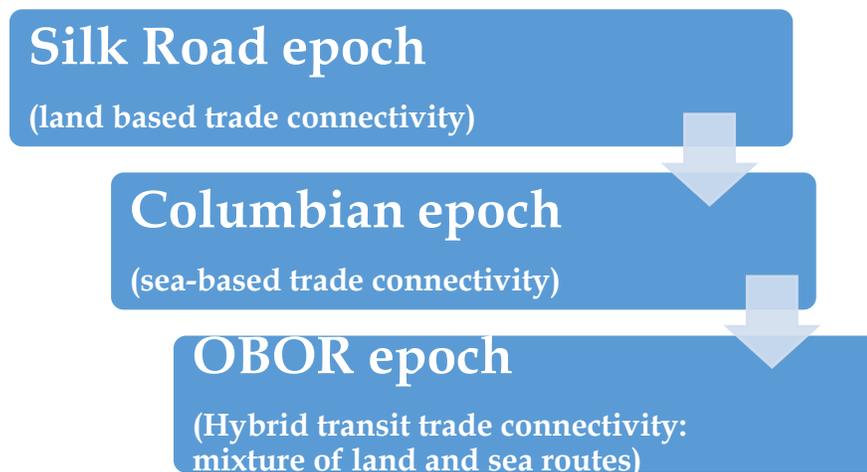
¹⁰ Malyn. D. Newitt, *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion: 1400-1668*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 77.

¹¹ In January 1613, East India Company established its trading port at Surat, India. In addition, the English merchants with the assistance of Persian army took Hormuz, a strategic point in the Persian Gulf, from the Portuguese. See for instance, W.H. Woodward, *An Outline History of British Empire: From 1500 to 1913*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 50-60

Likewise, on the flip side, Tsarist Russia, a northern great power, initiated north to south cut-off strategy and by the end of nineteenth century around 600,000 square miles territories of khanates of Central Asia were under its control.¹² Central Asia was a linchpin of Silk Road for mobility from east to west and vice-versa. Later, in twentieth century, sovietization of the region and falling of iron curtain over its territory further hampered the process of land-based connectivity of Eurasia.

In addition, the opening up of Suez Canal on November 17, 1869, revolutionized the concept of connectivity and accelerated mobility as well as trade between Asia and Europe. The new sea-based connection via Red and Mediterranean seas reduced 7000 km distance (4300 miles) between Calcutta and London¹³. Thus, the stark shades of Tsarist ascendancy in Central Asia and imperial preponderance of Great Britain in South Asia as well as Eurocentric oceanic connectivity relegated the significance of land-based Silk Road for three consecutive centuries e.g., seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth.

Figure 2: Global Connectivity Trends



In 21st century, China is the leading country in upholding the model of global connectivity. The growing influence of China in trans-continental politics and economy is raising

¹² Khanates of Khiva, Kokhand and Bukhara were conquered. See, George Padamore, *How Russia Transformed Her Colonial Empire*, (London: Dennis Dobson Lmt, 1946), 12. Also see, W.P and Zelda K. Coates, (eds.), *Soviets in Central Asia*, (Bombay: Peoples Publishing House, 1952), 31-34.

¹³ Joseph Everett Nourse, *The Maritime Canal of Suez*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1884), 98-100. See also, Pradeep Sharma, *Human Geography: The Land* (New Delhi, Discovery Publishing, 2007), 3-5.

some questions about Eurocentric liberal order of economy. The Chinese discourse of connectivity is also linked with global power structure and this ‘connectivity power’ is of a balancing objective strategy in response to hegemonic-objective strategy of USA. The more China is strengthening its web of connectivity the more potential opportunities China could exert on to others.

The idea of Beijing’s global reach policy opts bottom-up approach. The OBOR initiative starts from china’s focus upon its ‘peripheral diplomacy’ and gradually knits together the Eurasian landmass through web of hybrid trade routes. OBOR (re-)construct the regional order by introducing the Sino-centric apparatus of economy with new ideas of governance, cooperation and development. The grand strategy of China is one of the significant developmental plans of modern history and more than win-win cooperation for its beneficiaries. The grand strategy of connectivity encompasses following network of six hybrid corridors:

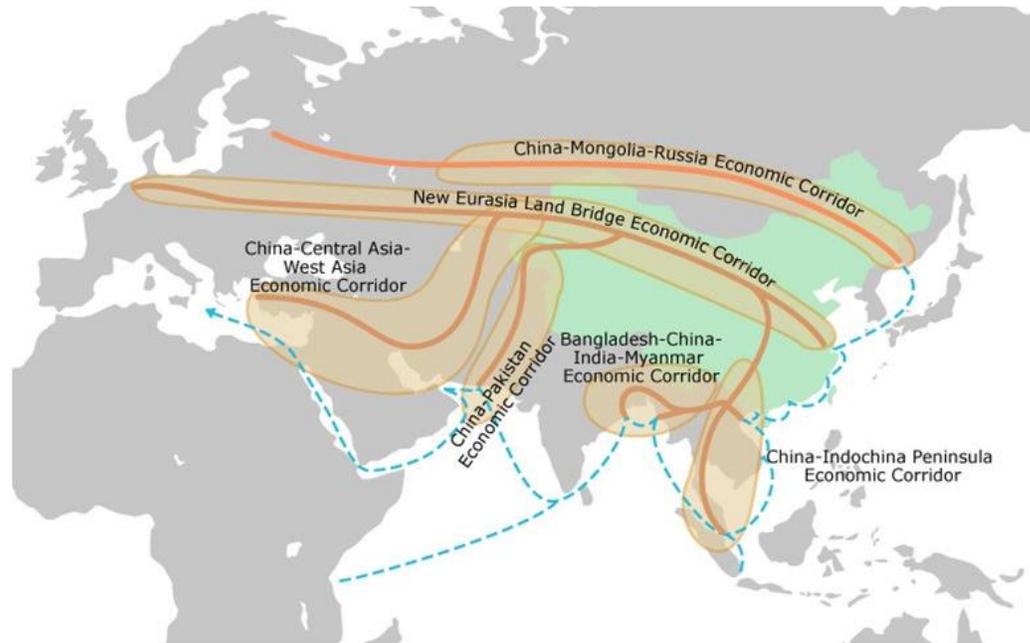
1. New Eurasia Land Bridge
2. China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor
3. China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor
4. China-Indochina Peninsular Economic Corridor
5. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
6. Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor

OBOR is not only about the construction of hard-infrastructure rather it accentuates on soft-infrastructure. President Xi urged in his speech at Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit (2014) that;

“linking Asian countries is ‘not merely about building roads and bridges or making linear connection of different places ... it should be a three-way combination of infrastructure, institutions and people-to-people exchanges and five-way progress in policy

communication, infrastructure connectivity, trade link[s], capital flow[s] and understanding among peoples.”¹⁴

Figure 3: Sino-centric Mega Network of Corridors under OBOR



Source: *The Belt and Road Initiative*, <<http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com>>

Table 1: Mega Corridors: Connectivity Matrix of OBOR¹⁵

¹⁴ ‘China Pledges \$40 Billion for New “Silk Road”’, *The Japan Times*, November 9, 2014, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/11/09/business/economy-business/china-pledges-40-billion-for-new-silk-road/#.VF_2KvSUdzM>.

¹⁵ Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice, and China’s Contribution* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2017), 10–17; Nadège Rolland, *China’s Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 74–85. Zhuang Beining, ‘Spotlight: China-Myanmar Oil, Gas Project Benefits Both,’ *Xinhua*, May 10, 2017, available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/10/c_136272395.htm>. ‘China Focus: China Mulls Upgrade of Lancang-Mekong Ship Route,’ *Xinhua*, March 25, 2016, available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/26/c_135224454.htm>. ‘Infographic: China-Europe Freight Train Service,’ *Xinhua*, April 21, 2017, available at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/21/c_136225717.htm>. For a comprehensive list of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects, see www.cpec.gov.pk/, cited in, Joel Wuthnow, *China Strategic Perspective*, 5, and modified by the researcher.

Sr. #	Connectivity Network/ Corridors	Partner States	Major Projects	Km/Proposed investment
1.	Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM)- Economic Corridor	Bangladesh India Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China-Myanmar crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) pipeline Padma Bridge (Bangladesh) Tunnel construction under Karnaphuli River (Bangladesh) 	2800 km
2.	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)	Pakistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gwadar free zone development Karakoram Highway, Phase II (Thakot-Havelian) Peshawar-Karachi Motorway 	3000 Km/ \$62 billion
3.	China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor	Iran Kazakhstan Kyrgyzstan Kuwait Qatar Saudi Arabia Tajikistan Turkey Turkmenistan Uzbekistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China-Kazakhstan passenger train rehabilitation of Nurek hydropower plant in Tajikistan Manas Airport modernization (Kyrgyzstan) Turkey east-west high-speed rail 	-----
4.	China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CIPEC)	Cambodia Laos Maynamar Malaysia Thailand Vietnam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three China-Indochina Peninsula High Speed Railway Routes Upgrade of Lancang-Mekong ship route Upholding ASEAN's 'Open Skies Policy' 	-----
5.	China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC)	Mongolia Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Altai LNG pipeline (linking Xinjiang and Siberia) Altanbulag-Ulaanbaatar-Zamiin-Uud Highway 	7000 km \$230 billion
6.	New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELB)	Belarus Bulgaria Czech Republic Greece Hungary Kazakhstan Poland, Russia Serbia, Slovakia and Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China-Europe freight trains (39 routes linking China with 9 European countries) Hungary-Serbia railway China-Belarus Industrial Park China-Kazakhstan-Khorgos International Border Cooperation Center Port of Piraeus (Greece) 	11800 km More than \$230 billion

It is pertinent to mention that China is not only the proponent of global connectivity discourse; in fact, several plans have already been unveiled. A plan of inter-regional connectivity was announced by European Union in May 1993, wherein several infrastructural development projects were announced under 'Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia initiative (TRACECA)'. This connectivity plan focused on to bring together European Union with 13 states of Eastern Europe, Caucasia and Central Asia to strengthen trade links.¹⁶ Another initiative of Eurasian connectivity was announced by India, Iran and Russia in 2002 at St. Petersburg.¹⁷

¹⁶ Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACECA). <<http://www.traceca-org.org>>

¹⁷ Dr Debidatta Aurobinda Mahapatra, "The North-South Corridor: Prospects of Multilateral Trade", *Eurasia, Russia and India Report*, (March 14, 2012) <http://indrus.in/articles/2012/03/14/the_north-south_corridor_prospects_of_multilateral_trade_in_eurasia_15134.html>

The North-South International Transit Trade Corridor (NSITRC), 7300 km long, bypasses Pakistan as well as Afghanistan and connects India with Russia via Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.¹⁸ Indian government accentuated on the importance of it in the establishment of bilateral relations with the Central Asian Republics and urged that, “we also need to engage them since there are no direct links with any of the Central Asian countries”.¹⁹ Russia also showed its concerns in the materialization of this corridor. The proposed corridor is a strategic alternative to Suez Canal. Its land-based connectivity web is 40% shorter and 30% cheaper. The Indian trade with Europe via this corridor could be covered up within 25-30 days in contrast to 45-60 days of traditional sea route of Suez Canal.²⁰

Furthermore, the US-centric Asian integration plan, the New Silk Road Initiative, was presented by Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, in 2011 to overpower the geographical constraints of landlocked Afghanistan through building economic and energy corridors between Central and South Asia. This plan was the extension of US diplomatic policy of ‘Asia-pivot’. In addition, Eurasian connectivity plans were also presented by East Asian states, Japan and South Korea under the titles of ‘revitalization strategy’ and ‘Eurasia Initiative’, respectively in 2013. The nucleus of these initiatives is revolving around Eurasian connectivity by building of road infrastructure for sustainable development. Asian Development Bank assessed that these plans need \$1.7 trillion per year from 2016 to 2030.²¹

In this perspective, the risk factor of OBOR is minimum as it is financed by multi-signatory institution i.e., Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which optimizes its

¹⁸ “The project envisages a multi-modal transportation network and connects ports on India's west coast to Bandar Abbas in Iran, then overland to Bandar Anzali port on the Caspian Sea; thence through Rasht and Astara on the Azerbaijan border onwards to Kazakhstan, and further onwards towards Russia, and through Mediterranean to reach Ukrainian ports of Odessa and Kiev, and then onwards to Russia and Central Asia.” See for instance, Indrani Bagchi, “India to Spread Tentacles into Central Asia via Iran”, *The Times of India*, (March 13, 2012) <http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-03-13/india/31159402_1_iranian-oil-oil-imports-rasht>

¹⁹ “India Initiates Rail Route Plan through Central Asia”, (March 1, 2012), <http://indrus.in/articles/2012/03/01/india_initiates_rail_route_plan_through_central_asia_15011.html>

²⁰ “North-South Corridor: Accelerating the Construction of the Missing Section”, *Railway PRO Magazine*, (May 17, 2011) <<http://www.railwaypro.com/wp/>>

²¹ Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 17-26. *Meeting Asia's Infrastructure Needs* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2017), xi. cited in, Joel Wuthnow, *China Strategic Perspective*, 5.

sustainability as a mega infrastructural developmental project across the continents.²² In addition, some regional financial institutes will make their financial contribution i.e. New Development Bank of BRICS, Silk Road Fund, China-ASEAN Interbank Association and SCO Development Bank.²³ It is pertinent to mention that the Chinese policy makers relegated west-centric financial giants i.e. World Bank and Asian Development bank to avoid any financial restriction. The principle of joint financing based upon private investment of signatory states is one of the positive aspects for the success of OBOR.

Table 2: Eurocentric and Sinocentric Connectivity: Comparative Analysis

Themes	Eurocentric connectivity Discourse	Sinocentric Connectivity Discourse
Period	16th to 19th centuries	21st century
Ideological Paradigm	Realism	Functionalism
Policy Nature	Policy of dominance	Policy of inclusiveness
Power Nature	Hard power	Soft power
Process	Colonization	Investment and Commercialization
Gains	Self-aggrandizement	Win-win cooperation
Transit Linkage	Sea-based trade routes	Hybrid trade routes

²² Many countries have joined the AIIB. In 2014, twenty-one countries, including China, India, and Singapore, signed the agreement to establish the AIIB and later the UK, France, Germany, and Italy joined. In 2015, the original fifty-seven countries participated as the founding members; this list included twenty-one countries in Asia-Pacific, seven from the former Soviet group, nine from the Middle East, seventeen from Europe, one from America and two from Africa. See for instance, Julien Chaisse & Mitsuo, “China’s ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative: Mapping the World Trade Normative and Strategic Implications” *Journal of World Trade*, (Feb, 2018), 169-172.

²³ Wu Jianmin, “One Belt and One Road, Far-reaching Initiative,” *China-US Focus Digest*, March 26, 2015, <<http://www.chinausfocus.com/financeeconomy/one-belt-and-one-road-far-reaching-initiative/>>

The traditional discourse of global connectivity was mainly dominated by the western powers wherein the under-developed and developing countries were being exploited by the developed states that on the pretext of trade and commerce unleashed the forces of imperialism and sowed the seeds of colonization. For instance, in case of South Asia, during British *Raj*, Indian GDP share of world economy witnessed drastic downfall from 24.4% to 4.2% between 1700 to 1950.²⁴ Moreover, in compare to Mughal regime, the developmental trends like urbanization and industrialization were also at its lowest ebb during colonial rule.²⁵ The western global connectivity matrix was embedded with ‘realism’ wherein colonial states launched hegemonic politics and opted strategies for self-aggrandizement.

Unlike Eurocentric connectivity discourse, Chinese OBOR initiative is an attempt to reconstruct the global order of connectivity based upon the principles of functionalism i.e., mutual interest, sustainable development, peaceful co-existence and win-win cooperation. In contrast to politics of dominance, the Chinese politics of inclusiveness has far-reaching impact on South Asian economy.

Connectivity Discourse and Geopolitics of South Asia: ‘The Land of Desire’

South Asia is known for a budding place of Indus Valley civilization, one of the earliest civilizations of the world. George W. F. Hegel titled this region as ‘the Land of Desire’²⁶ which was a source of strategic strength for the European powers. Furthermore, Hegel accentuated on the significance of South Asia in the following words,

“From the most ancient times downwards, all nations have directed their wishes and longings to gaining access to the treasures of this land [South Asia] of marvels, the most costly which the Earth presents; treasures of Nature — pearls, diamonds, perfumes, rose-essences, elephants, lions, etc. — as also treasures of wisdom. The way by which these treasures have passed to the West, has at all

²⁴ Angus Maddison, “Statistical Appendix, Table A.6”, *Contours of the World Economy 1-2030 AD: Essays in Macro-Economic History* (New York, OUP, 2007). For further details please see, Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India*, (N.D. Penguin, 2018).

²⁵ Pls see, Shireen Moosvi, *The Economy of the Mughal Empire c. 1595: A Statistical Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 432–433. Also see, Abraham Eraly, *The Mughal World: Life in India's Last Golden Age* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 5.

²⁶ Georg W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, (New York: The Colonial Press, 1899), 142.

times been a matter of World-historical importance, bound up with the fate of nations”.²⁷

Historically, South Asia witnessed recurrent invasions from the northern men and the Europeans. ‘The Great Game’ was one of the leading episodes of imperialism in the region. In this game of power politics, Tsarist Russia wanted to knock out Britain from South Asia whereas the latter didn’t leave any stone unturned to keep the ‘crown of jewel’. Likewise, the region is still an epicenter of global powers’ politics. The region was also a connecting hub of Old Silk Road and hosted traders from Middle East and Central Asia.

Geographically, South Asia is southern part of the Asian continent, comprising eight sovereign states e.g. “Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka”. All states are democratic republic except Bhutan where constitutional monarchy is prevailing. Demographically, 1.80 billion people, covering an area of 5,134,618 sq km, are turning it the world’s most populated region which accounts 23 % of the world’s total population.²⁸ The region is hub of 60 percent poor people of the world²⁹ wherein more than 500 million people are earning less than \$1.25 a day.³⁰

The South Asian geopolitics is a strategic asset. A mountainous range of Himalayas, Hindukush and the Karakoram detaches the region from northern Asia and distinguishes it as Asian sub-continent.³¹ Its northern border are contiguous to China and Afghanistan where a narrow strip of Wakhan Corridor detaches it from Central Asia. The north-western and eastern

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ South Asia, *World Bank Data*, (2017) <<http://data.worldbank.org/region/SAS>>

²⁹ “South Asia and the Future of Pro-People Development: The Centrality of Social Justice and Equality”, *South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)*, September 21, 2017.<<http://www.saape.org/index.php/news-room/press-releases/94-poverty-report-2016-launched-in-lahore-pakistan>>

³⁰ A Report on, “South Asia Regional Strategy 2017”, *The World Bank*.

³¹ According to geophysical study of the world, the Indian plate collided with the Eurasian plate, resultantly the former raised up the southern edge of the latter. The edge raised so high that it gave birth to three lofty mountain chains stretching west to east i.e. the Hindu Khush, the Karakoram and the Himaliyas. These mountains were strategic bulwark for South Asia and also stopped the Monsoon clouds which rise from the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal from drifting over to Central Asia and beyond. Resultantly the Central Asian plateau which was left high and dry at the time of the collision of the India and Eurasian plates remained poor nomadic and parched. For the northern region, South Asia was a fertile land and its riches were source of attraction for them. See for instance, Muhammad Yunus and Aradhana Parmar (eds.), *South Asia: A Historical Narrative*, (Karachi: OUP, 2003), 7-9. Also see, Peter Haggett, *The Encyclopedia of World Geography: The India Subcontinent*, (New York: Andromeda Oxford Ltd., 2002), 2598.

borders are shared with Iran and Myanmar respectively. Indian Ocean covers its southern zone. In addition, Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea covers eastern and western coastlines of Indian Peninsula respectively. “Pakistan’s geographical location in the region is an asset for northern landlocked states, Central Asia and western regions of China. Pakistan endows with cost-effective energy corridor of oil and natural gas from Middle East and Central Asia to other parts of South Asia particularly India. Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI)³² and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipelines are epitomes of such cost-effective pipeline corridors. In addition to this, Gwadar deep sea port on the shore of Baluchistan is also very significant. The port possesses a capacity to endow with warehouses, industrial facilities and technical assistance to more than twenty countries³³. Gwadar is a strategic asset for China to bypass Indian dominance in Indian Ocean”.

Mapping the Chinese Corridors in South Asia

South Asia is integral to Chinese 21st Century Maritime Silk Route Initiative (MSRI). Two corridors CPEC and BCIM are linking diverse culture with each other. The matter of fact is such a diminutive coastline world share is crucial in world trade activity as it endows with a sea passage from east to west or vice versa. Alferd T. Mahan, an American geostrategists and naval officer, shed light upon the vitality of Indian Ocean. He opined that mastery in the Indian Ocean is a key to ascendancy over world’s trade routes. Further he urged that;

"Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the twenty-first century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters".³⁴

³² India was initially the part of IPI gas pipeline but later left it.

³³ Hamid Hamza Qaisrani, “Gwadar Port Ready for Inauguration”, in, *Gwadar News*, (April, 2005), 2–3; cited in, Frederic Grare, *Pakistan: The Resurgence of Baloch Nationalism*, (Carnegie Papers: January 2006). <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/CP65.Grare.FINAL.pdf>>

³⁴ Bimal N. Patel, Aruna Kumar Malik & William Nunes (eds.), *Indian Ocean and Maritime Security: Competition, Cooperation and Threat* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 24-25. Also see, P. K. Gosh, “Maritime Security Challenges in South Asia and Indian Ocean: Response Strategies”, paper prepared for the Centre for Strategic and International Studies - American-Pacific Sea lanes Security Institute conference on, *Maritime Security in Asia*, (January 18-20, 2004) <<http://community.middlebury.edu/~scs/docs/ghosh,%20maritime%20security%20challenges%20in%20SAsia%20&%20Indian%20Ocean.pdf>>

Since the initiation of OBOR strategy China has increased its trade volume with South Asia from \$91.3 billion in 2013 to \$126.8 billion in 2017.³⁵ The data presented in table 3 and 4 is indicating that China’s trade relations with the corridor states have increased more rapidly in compare to non-corridor states. In addition, the trade volume from the year 2012 to 2017 is indicating that the quantum of trade growth increased after the announcement of OBOR in compare to pre OBOR trade quantum.

Table 3: China’s Trade with Corridor States of South Asia: Pre and Post OBOR Analysis

Sr. #	South Asian States	Pre-OBOR \$US 10,000 / bn			Post-OBOR \$US 10,000 / bn		
		2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
1.	Bangladesh	825921	844884	1030745	1254338	1471155	1517163
		8.2	8.4	10.3	12.5	14.7	15.1
2.	India	7390824	6647333	6540266	7057611	7159658	7017947
		73.9	66.4	65.4	70.5	71.5	70.1
3.	Myanmar	650140	697194	1019556	2496893	1510021	1228629
		6.5	6.9	10.1	24.9	15.1	12.2
4.	Pakistan	1055833	1241365	1421644	1599835	1891665	1914704
		10.5	12.4	14.2	15.9	18.9	19.1

Source: “Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation”, in China’s Statistical Year Books, 2011-2017, *National Bureau of Statistics of China*. <<http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/statisticaldata/annualdata/>>

³⁵“Trade with South Asia to expand”, *China Daily*, (June 15, 2018). <<http://www.ecns.cn/news/economy/2018-06-15/detail-ifyvfaqz8677400.shtml>>

Table 4: China's Trade with Non-Corridor States of South Asia: Pre and Post OBOR Analysis

Sr. #	South Asian States	Pre-OBOR \$US			Post-OBOR \$US		
		2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
1.	Afghanistan	23441	46924	33785	41093	37359	43583
2.	Bhutan	1746	1562	1741	1122	847	498
3.	Maldives	9726	7667	9783	10437	17283	32118
4.	Nepal	119509	199768	225414	233065	86471	88868
5.	Sri Lanka	314161	316305	361911	404107	456256	456177

Source: "Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation", in China's Statistical Year Books, 2011-2017, *National Bureau of Statistics of China*. <<http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/statisticaldata/annualdata/>>

China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor (CPEC): A Flagship Project

China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor (CPEC) is opening up new chapters of regional, cooperation, development and mutual-interest between Islamabad and Beijing. A network of rail and road from Kashgar, Xinjiang to Gwadar, Balochistan, connects landlocked border region of China with Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean which is a nucleus of its MSR strategy. This flagship project worth of \$62 billion (initially \$46 billion) was signed in April, 2015. Indeed, Sakin Sherani is of the view that "the size of the investment in the CPEC over the next 15 years, if materialized, will equal the cumulative gross foreign direct investment inflows into Pakistan since 1970."³⁶ The proactive plan encompasses four major sectors of development i.e. a) development of Gwadar deep sea port; b) production of energy through hydel, coal, solar and wind power projects³⁷; c) development of infrastructure and transportation; d) development of

³⁶ Sakib Sherani, "Evaluating the CPEC," *Dawn*, May 1, 2015, <<http://www.dawn.com/news/1179169>>.

³⁷ World's largest solar plant in Bahawalpur, a hydropower plant in Karot, a wind power plant in Jhimpir, two nuclear power stations near Karachi and a major coal-fired power plant is being planned in Qasim. See, "CPEC: Energy Priority Projects", Government of Pakistan. <<http://cpec.gov.pk/energy>>

Industrial zones in major cities of Pakistan. The Politico-economic and strategic benefits of CPEC can be summed up as:³⁸

- CPEC is a pragmatic answer to ‘Malacca conundrum’. Approximately, 80 percent of China’s economic life line, OIL, is coming from West Asia and Africa³⁹. That sea route is passing through Strait of Malacca and accounts for 12,900 km long distance. Gwadar could play a key role in ensuring China's energy security as it provides a much shorter route i.e 3,000 km.
- CPEC is more of a conduit of ‘energy corridor’. China has also shown interest in joining the \$7.4 billion Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline and replacing India in this project i.e. Iran-Pakistan-China (IPC) gas pipeline.
- Gwadar, deep sea port, will ultimately lessen the Chinese rely upon ports such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Sittwe in Myanmar and Chittagong in Bangladesh.
- CPEC could ventilate the grievances of separatist Uyghur's in Xinxiang. This will bring them into mainstream politics of China and lead towards its national integration. Xinjiang engulfs a bridge between mainland China and Central Asia. Socio-economic development and political stability in Xinjiang opens up vistas of energy cooperation with ‘energy Eldorado’ Central Asia. (Turkman-China Gas Pipeline and Kazakh-China Oil Pipeline are the testimony of this positivity).
- The cost-effective economic and energy cooperation between ‘sister regions’- South Asia and Central Asia- could be materialized through the channels of CPEC.
- Fifty One (51) Memorandums of Understandings (MoUs) were signed in diverse sectors of Pakistan.
- CPEC initiates sustainable supply of energy in Pakistan by means of hydel, thermal, nuclear, wind and solar power projects. These projects are expected to generate electricity around 16,400 Megawatts (MWs).

³⁸ Muhammad Manzoor Elahi, “Heartland and Rimland Theories in CPEC Perspective: Strategic Interplay in 21st Century” in *Proceedings of International Conference on CPEC*, (December 9-10, 2015), 38.

³⁹ US Energy Information and Administration (EIA).

- CPEC is dealing with menace of poverty by creating thousands of employment opportunities in Pakistan. Sun Weidong, China's ambassador, stated that 13,000 local jobs have been generated so far under this initiative. Economists are of the opinion that CPEC would create more than one million jobs by 2030.⁴⁰

Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC)

A quad-lateral economic corridor covers an area of 2800 km and connects Kolkata (India), Dhaka (Bangladesh), Mandalay (Myanmar) and Kunming (China). This corridor encompasses world's 40% population⁴¹ which turns it into the most populated network of connectivity among the six mega corridors of OBOR. Its roots go back to 'Kunming Initiative'; taken in the Conference on Regional Cooperation and Development on August 17, 1999. The initiative accentuated on the strong network of connectivity between southwestern region of China and northeastern states of India by reviving southern route of ancient Silk Road from Assam to Yunnan.⁴²

Later, the pronouncement of OBOR initiative by President Xi turned Kunming Initiative into BCIM economic corridor and in December 2013 delegates of member states mooted upon the potential areas of cooperation. BICM economic corridor starts a new era of regional development with the focus on development of network of roads, railways, airways and waterways for the sustainable growth of economic relations among the member states. In addition,

India is the only state of BCIM corridor who shares border with all member states, whereas China is contiguous to Myanmar and India and don't shares border with Bangladesh.⁴³ The connectivity apparatus possess strategic significance for its member states. The connectivity formula brings the isolated seven-sister states of northeastern India into mainstream politics.

⁴⁰ Abdul Rauf, "China's New Silk Road project: Focus on South Asia", *South Asia Journal* (June, 2017) <<http://southasiajournal.net/chinas-new-silk-road-project-focus-on-south-asia/>>

⁴¹ Nafees Intiaz, Moonir Hossan and Sabiha Matin, *Daffodil International University Journal of Business and Economics*, Vol. 9, No. 1,(June, 2015), 131.

⁴² P.V. Indiresan, "The Kunming Initiative", *Frontline*, (April, 2000) <https://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl1707/17070980.htm>

⁴³ India shares 1,463 km with Myanmar, 3,380 km with China, and 4,156 with Bangladesh. China shares 2,185 km boarder with Myanmar, 3,380 km with India.

The corridor is also an alternate to ‘Siliguri Corridor’, the only land-based connection between the northeastern states and mainland India. For China, it opens up doors of potential opportunities of its southwestern inland Yunnan province.

On the flipside, the corridor overpowers geographical constraints of Bangladesh and endows with an opportunity of transit-trade activity with the economic giant, China, which will ultimately boost up its trade relation.

Impeding Factors for OBOR in South Asia

The internal security challenges and regional dynamics of South Asia are paving challenges to Chinese policy makers. Following grave concerns can be summed up as:

- South Asia has been passing through recurrent challenges to peace, security and stability. The region is volatile in terms of militant and terrorist activities. Stephen P. Cohen is of the view point that “no part of the world has more affected by terrorist attacks of September 11, 2011 than South Asia”.⁴⁴ In addition, the regional states are also tackling intra-state security vulnerabilities and have launched military operations against Naxalite-Maoist insurgency⁴⁵, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Tamil movement and Taliban resurrection in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan respectively⁴⁶.
- The region is also a nuclear flashpoint because of arch rivalry between its two nuclear weapon states - India and Pakistan. Kashmir is a bone of contention and has caused four full scale armed conflict between the densely populated states of the world. The day to day Indo-Pak border skirmishes could ignite a nuclear war.
- South Asia’s security is reflection of great powers’ hegemonic strategy. The race of conventional as well as strategic weapons between the great powers at global level is triggering security dilemma at regional level. China is strengthening its military power to counterpoise the US influence in South China Sea and the Indian regional paramountcy.

⁴⁴ Stephen P. Cohen, *India Emerging Power*, (Washington D. C.: The Brooking Institute Press, 2002), p. 13

⁴⁵ For detail see, Muhammad Manzoor Elahi, “Naxalite-Maoist Insurgency in India”, *India Desk*, (December: 2009), Pakistan Study Center, University of the Punjab.

⁴⁶ See, Selig S. Harrison, “Fanning Flames in South Asia”, in, Ejaz Aslam Qureshi, et al., (eds.), *Pakistan and South Asian Environment*, (Lahore: Sange-e-Meel, 1991), 18-21. Also see, Tazeen Javed, “The Politics of Insurgency and Counter Insurgency in South Asia”, in, Moonis Ahmar, *Internal and External Dynamics of South Asian Security*, (Karachi: Fazeleesons, PVT., LTD., 1998), 105-114.

Whereas, Indian government is also stretching its military wings and consolidating military ties with the US to deal with China's uprising.⁴⁷ Chinese grand plan of connectivity is building up grand naval bases in Indian Ocean and its strategic partnership with Pakistan is raising the eye brows of New Delhi.⁴⁸

- Lastly, Afghanistan- heart of Asia- has been suffering with menace of terrorism since 2001. Peace in South Asia is conditioned to stability and tranquility in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a linchpin in establishing network of economic and energy corridors between South and Central Asia. The political and security environment of Afghanistan is an open challenge to network of connectivity.

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Conclusion

The dawn of 21st century witnessed the terrorist incidents on September 9, 2001 which posed grave challenge to the free world and liberal democracies. Since then the world is passing through tough times because militancy and terrorism are posing existential threats. The US steered global war on terrorism is experiencing the reverse results and further exacerbating the peace order of the world. The rise of ISIS and the resurrection of Taliban in Afghanistan are presenting lessons that now the world must re-think the new strategies to deal with terrorism. "The best medicine to address the terrorism problem is through tackling the incubator of terrorism, namely poverty."

⁴⁷ In the light of comparative analysis of security and defense outflows, the US is on top of the list, spending \$609 billion annually on its defense. The US is followed by China, the second largest defense expenditure state, whose annual defense expenditures are \$228 billion. India is on the ninth number worldwide in its defense expenditures. Its total defense spending counts \$ 63.9 billion. In contrast to India, Pakistan spends \$ 10.7 billion annually on its defense. If we accumulate the defense budget of the top 15 defense expenditure states (excluding America) even than the total defense expenditures of the US are higher. The US is spending 3.1%, China 1.9%, India 2.5% and Pakistan 3.5% of their total GDP. Data is retrieved from the SIPRI database, *The SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2017*. <<https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>>.

⁴⁸ The smaller states of South Asia e.g. Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka are geopolitical pivots for the Chinese preponderance in the region. Beijing's arms sale to Sri Lanka to counter Tamil insurgents and signing of two developmental projects with it, worth of \$350 million in 2009, to have sway over the island's southern port of Hambantota. China's overwhelming investment in building of rail links from Kathmandu to Lahasa and in many other developmental projects of Nepal has raised eyebrows of the Indian security strategist. See for details, Chien-peng Chung, What are the strategic and economic implications for South Asia of China's Maritime Silk Road initiative?, *The Pacific Review*, 31:3, (2018), 315-332.

In this scenario, China is making its contribution by re-inventing the legacy of Silk Road i.e. mutual benefit, cooperation and development. The New Silk Road Spirit has initiated academic debates on neo-globalization wherein focus is on win-win plan. OBOR is not a hegemonic discourse rather revolves around principles of policy coordination, cultural exchange, financial integration, trade and investment and facility Connectivity.

A paradigm shift from Columbian epoch to OBOR epoch is a dominant theme of sino-centric world economic cooperation. In this epoch, South Asia endows with a unique position of a linchpin for east to west connectivity or vice versa. China's cordial relations with India, a regional power, are of utmost significance for the successful functioning of MSR strategy. India's growing ties with the US is also a source of tension for Chinese authorities. The OBOR is a grand plan for neutralizing Indo-US strategic partnership as Indian trade volume with China is greater than with USA.

India and Pakistan are now permanent members of SCO and also signatories of sino-steered AIIB. South Asian trade markets are highly linked with China. Muhammad Mehdi, foreign policy analyst is of the view that "China sees annual trade volume with Silk Road countries from US\$1 trillion to US\$2.5 trillion within a decade. It reflects 9.6 percent of annual growth. If South Asia taps this opportunity, it can change the fate of its poor people,"

CPEC is an epitome of policy of diversification based upon the dictum of "don't put your all eggs into a single basket". Despite the initiation of MSRI strategy in Indian ocean and building of ports in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Myanmar, China is not only relying on these. CPEC, a bilateral economic corridor, is a strategic alternative to MSR strategy as it endows with uninterrupted and sustainable supply of oil to world's largest oil consumer i.e., China.