

Washington and the New Silk Road: a new great game in Asia?

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Is Hillary Clinton's ambitious multilateral proposal workable, or does the rhetoric simply suggest just a new "Great Game" in Asia following the impending 2014 drawdown in Afghanistan?

Introduction

When Edvard Shevardnadze, the last foreign minister of the Soviet Union, visited Kabul in 1989, he knew that the Red Army's days in Afghanistan were over. Fast-forward to the present-day, and once again the timetable is set. Afghanistan is steeling itself for the withdrawal of U.S. and other international forces by 2014. But as the region braces itself for a host of transitional challenges, in late October 2011, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched a weeklong official tour that strategically arced through Central and South Asia, propagating her idea of a "New Silk Road". Rather than pulling-out, then, is it possible that the United States is actually drawing even firmer territorial lines in Asia?

An undeclared policy

"A balance in Asia is a vital American interest..."¹. In a November 2011 issue of *Time* magazine, Joe Klein wrote that "Iran's militarism and China's mercantilism"² were the two biggest foreign policy challenges for the Obama administration (once you cross out Al-Qaeda from the list). Thus, Clinton's visit to South and Central Asia last October conveyed a distinctly cold shoulder to Tehran and Beijing, and her suggested "New Silk Road" proposal, it has been argued, was deliberately designed to roll back the pre-eminent position of Russia and China in Central Asia, and to gain direct access to the vast mineral resources of the region through communication links that seek to bypass Russia and Iran.

Iran

In the same article,, Joe Klein wrote "There is a certain appeal to kicking Iran in the teeth as we go out the door, one regional expert told me

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[...]while Iran is less important than China, it is more dangerous. The Administration is particularly worried about Iranian mischief-making as U.S. troops leave Iraq over the coming weeks.”³

China

China’s aggressive economic policies in Asia directly draw attention to America’s more serious domestic problems: in other words China is managing to achieve abroad what America is failing to achieve at home – economic success. Already, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney is attacking Obama for not taking a harder stand against China’s growing economic and trading clout.

Thus, rather than withdrawing from the region after 2014, which is the promised deadline for complete drawdown of American and ISAF forces in Afghanistan, it seems as if the United States is very much interested in maintaining a continued presence in the region. Washington has announced that, on top of the hundreds of billions of aid and support it has already spent in Afghanistan, during the first half of 2012, it would receive an additional \$2.7 billion in arms shipments that have been referred to as an “iron mountain” by NATO security analysts. This represents the largest transfer of military equipment by the U.S. or NATO in the past ten years of conflict in Afghanistan⁴. This shipment consists of 22,000 vehicles, 44 aircraft and helicopters, 40,000 additional weapons, and tens of thousands of radios and other equipment. “In the next eight months, we are getting more equipment than we have gotten in the past eight years,” reported Ashraf Ghani⁵, a top adviser in the Hamid Karzai administration. Thus, despite international withdrawal, there is unlikely to be the same kind of financial and military abandonment of Afghanistan that took place following the withdrawal of the Soviet Union.

The international context

Viewed through a macro politico-economic lens, the global financial turmoil after 2008 has put an end to the uni-polar post-Cold War era. The looming new era is one where the United States is battling the emergence of a multi-polar power structure, plural politico-economic models, and multiple players on the international stage.

In 2011, trade between Russia and China reached \$55 billion, seven times more than it was in 2000. Timber and oil flow into resource-hungry China, while China’s roaring factories, ship machinery, textiles and other

manufactured goods flow back in return. The United States, on the other hand, has a weaker economic hold in Asia than China and Russia. And with the emergence of India as a new economic powerhouse, the U.S. is scrambling for even the slightest form of economic ascendancy over the new Asian regional stakeholders.

In a 2010 article in *The Economist* entitled “New Silk Roads”, it was noted: “In continental Asia, none of the new clubs, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) of China, Russia and Central Asian countries, includes America. American pressure on Iran over nuclear programme too has been undermined by the energy interests of China and Russia. Thus, with an overemphasis on maritime Asia, the West risks a kind of sea-blindness when it comes to the implications of the new continental trends.”⁶

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More recently, however, the United States seems to be engaged in rectifying this shortcoming. In light of the impending 2014 deadline for the drawdown of ISAF troops, the United States is touting its new-found awareness of the significance that Asian trade routes have for its own global position as a superpower. Despite arguments of declinism and the end of U.S. unipolarity, America is unremittingly pushing for greater control and influence abroad.

The evolving trend in Asia of trade, migration and investment patterns was the subject of intense debate at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Hawaii in November 2011. Growing linkages, the altered role of the U.S. in the global economy, and the redrawing of political alliances are said to have sparked new geo-political rivalries. Stephen King, chief economist at HSBC, estimated that trade and capital flows between Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America could increase tenfold over the next 40 years. He called these new connections a 21st century version of the original Asian silk road that is set to revolutionize the global economy.

U.S.-sponsored proposal for ‘economic re-engagement’ in Asia

As early as July 2011, Hillary Clinton began outlining her vision of regional economic cooperation, trade liberalization and increased trade flows during her trip to Chennai – a so-called modern version of the fabled trade routes.⁷ “The idea of the NSR [New Silk Road] is to develop the connections between and among the states of South and Central Asia ... to take a region, which is in geostrategic terms, historic terms and cultural terms, a single coherent entity, but here historically levels of commerce and exchange have been very low.”⁸

But the actual proposal for a “New Silk Road” dates back to the 1990s, and indeed seems to have acquired the reputation of a toy-thing amongst the Washington foreign policy elite. Republican Senator Sam Brownback, who closely cooperated with Prof Frederick Starr in his legislative initiative “Silk Road Act”, echoed a strikingly similar initiative in October 1997.⁹ The plan’s original architect, Frederick Starr, chair of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (a DC think tank), advanced the proposal in conjunction with the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

Research on the proposal began in 2006, when scholars from 16 countries gathered in Kabul at the First Kabul Conference on Partnership, Trade and Development in Greater Central Asia. Also present were the Kazakhstan Institute, the Central Asia Caucasus Institute of John Hopkins University, foreign minister of Kazakhstan, and the then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Richard Boucher. In his introductory remarks to the conference, Boucher referred to the original trade route that curved through Asia: “And it all goes back to the fundamental fact that the Silk Road had a reason. The Silk Road had a geographic reason and it had an even larger logic to it, of Asia and Europe, of North and South, of Central and South Asia, the great civilizations of the world finding ways of things moving back and forward between Asia and the Middle East, or Asia and India.”¹⁰

At the Istanbul Conference on November 2, 2011, Western leadership introduced a controversial template for a new security architecture for Central and South Asia, complete with an institutional mechanism and a “contact group” for monitoring the implementation of a matrix of “confidence-building measures.”¹¹ Washington envisages that this regional mechanism will provide the security underpinnings for its “New Silk Road” project – quintessentially, a modern version of its “Greater Central Asia strategy” dating back to the George W Bush presidency. Thus, the State Department seems to have embraced the NSR vocabulary,

a thriving Europe-Asia trade corridor as the economic foundation of its post-2014 strategy for Afghanistan, with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton promoting the concept in her meetings last October with the presidents of three of Afghanistan's neighbours: Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Fundamentally, the NSR proposal is part of a wider move, "from aid to trade", according to Clinton's testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Clinton presented an attractive picture of what the "New Silk Road" would mean for the countries involved: "Turkmen gas fields could help meet both Pakistan's and India's growing energy needs and provide significant transit revenues for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tajik cotton could be turned into linens. Furniture and fruit from Afghanistan could find its way to the markets of Astana or Mumbai and beyond."¹²

The original Silk Road was more than 4,000 miles (6,400 kilometers) of networking trade routes crossing Asia and into southern Europe and northern Africa. Based on China's silk industry, the commerce it enabled also helped the growth of civilizations from Egypt to Rome. Hillary Clinton's recent proposal for a "New Silk Road" aims to integrate markets from "Mumbai to Karachi to Kabul, and on to Tashkent and Astana and beyond." In Chennai, Clinton marketed the proposal as heralding "A South Asian Economic Renaissance."¹³ However what warrants attention is that Clinton's definition and delineation of the NSR proposal seems to be ambiguously open-ended. There is no mention of China or Iran. Also, the timing of the idea is close to the 2014 deadline for withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan.

Competing agendas

Hilary Clinton's "New Silk Road"

While still essentially sketchy, Clinton's version of the NSR is a route that is vertical as opposed to horizontal; the suggested road originates in Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan (it is still not clear), passes through Afghanistan, then Pakistan and India. Although the concept is still in its embryonic stages, the complete exclusion of China and Iran from the suggested proposal is noteworthy. Pakistan has already expressed readiness to allow India to take its exports to Afghanistan through a land route, a pledge in line with the "connectivity" agreement signed by Pakistan as a member of SAARC.

China's "Special Economic Zone (SEZ)"

China's plans for Asian economic regionalization are multi-fold. "The New Eurasian Land Bridge" is the name given to China's rail link with Central Asia. This includes China's east-west railways. From Almaty in Kazakhstan the railway extends to Tashkent and Samarkand, Uzbekistan and then to Tejen, Turkmenistan. From Tejen, another line continues to Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan. The UNDP, meanwhile, has advocated greater regional integration along the Eurasian Land Bridge, including development of rail links between the countries of South and Southeast Asia and Central Asia.

Since 2004, active efforts have been made to dismantle trade barriers between developing Asian countries. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin recently raised the idea of forging a free-trade "Eurasian Union" among former Soviet states; and during an October visit by Putin to Beijing, Russia and China formed a joint \$4 billion fund to boost investment between them.

Beijing's plans now for a new special economic zone around Kashgar, relying heavily on Pakistan's cooperation, as its ports provide Kashgar goods with their closest access to international markets. This plan involves Pakistan becoming a primary transit corridor for Kashgar goods into the Persian Gulf. Kashgar's Special Economic Zone status, its strategic location linking China with central and south Asia, and its proximity to the regions' abundant resources, suggest China's far west has the potential to become an important Asian trading and logistical centre. In this context, the Karakoram Highway will serve as the central artery of regional trade connecting Kashgar to Pakistan and its Gwadar port.

Russian-sponsored "Eurasian Union"

Since the collapse of the bipolar world system, fierce mass media disputes have erupted around the Russian-proposed Eurasian way of development. Since 2004, active efforts have been made to dismantle trade barriers between developing Asian countries. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin recently raised the idea of forging a free-trade "Eurasian Union" among former Soviet states; and during an October visit by Putin to Beijing, Russia and China formed a joint \$4 billion fund to boost investment between them. Interestingly, the introductory line on Joshua Kucera's blog "The New Silk Road?" on *The Diplomat's* website is: "The

United States hopes that a combination of trade and infrastructure can help steer Afghanistan away from unrest – and Russia.”¹⁴

Mechanics of the Clinton proposal

1. Under this ambitious plan, the idea is to link the infrastructure (roads, railways and power lines) of Russia, the “-stans of post-Soviet Central Asia” southward through Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.” At the same time, the aim is to work with local governments to reduce legal and bureaucratic impediments to trade.
2. In his report entitled “Afghanistan beyond the fog of nation-building: giving economic strategy a chance”, Prof S. Frederick Starr provided an analysis of the factors that underpinned the layout of the NSR. He argued that the transport-logistical system of the Northern Distribution Network, so important for the U.S. strategy in Afghanistan, covers the territory of nine former republics of the USSR.* Thus, it involves a measure of rapprochement, and in particular a removal of military sanctions and activation of American businesses in Uzbekistan.¹⁵
3. According to a 2004 paper by Columbia University’s Michael Faye, John McArthur, Jeffrey Sachs and Michael Snowe; landlocked geography can benefit by investing in internal infrastructure to lower transportation costs, investing in regional integration strategies – somewhat as the NSR aims to do – and finally focus on administrative coordination (which international financial institutions and the United States can oversee).
4. So far, the plan has been light and sketchy on specifics, but State Department officials have said that it will partially entail new infrastructure like highways, railroads, electricity networks and pipelines, and partly reducing legal barriers to trade by getting countries surrounding Afghanistan to reduce customs duties and ease onerous border crossings.
5. On November 14, 2011, Pakistan and Turkmenistan signed a total of five agreements and MoUs in the first step towards the materialization of the \$7.6 billion proposed Turkmenistan-

* The countries that Dr Starr mentions are: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine and Latvia.

Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline – the multination pipeline is expected to be complete by 2016. Under the proposed project, the 1,680-km-long pipeline backed by the Asian Development Bank will bring 3.2 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day from Turkmenistan’s gas fields to Multan, and end at the northwestern Indian town of Fazilka. It is significant that President Zardari called for an “early realization” of the project so soon after Secretary Clinton’s visit to the region. It is expected that the pipeline will run alongside the Herat-Kandahar Highway in Afghanistan, and pass through Chaman-Zhob-DG Khan-Multan in Pakistan.¹⁶

Can the NSR achieve what it claims it is setting out to do?

No, it Cannot	Yes, it Can
<p><i>George Gavrilis</i>, an expert on Central Asia and borders, recently described the plan as specious: “Resuscitating region-wide approaches is a fool’s errand that will not save Afghanistan.” Rather, Gavrilis argues that the international community should singularly work with those neighbours of Kabul whose policies could be potentially moulded to Afghanistan’s benefit.</p>	<p><i>Stephen King</i>, the London-based chief economist of HSBC, has called the network of turbo-charged Southern trade as the “southern silk road” in a nod to the ancient trade route that connected China with Europe. <i>David J. Karl</i> (president of the Asia Strategy Initiative) has termed the NSR a “Marshall Plan for South Asia”, and written that by putting an emphasis on reconstruction projects that cross national frontiers, the NSR can serve as an important catalyst for historic reconciliation in Asia, similar to the reconciliation that took place between France and Germany and paved the way for the deep economic integration embodied in today’s EU.</p>
<p>According to <i>Chris Rickleton</i>, a Bishkek-based journalist who wrote an article on EurasiaNet about prospective Chinese rail construction in Kyrgyzstan, the obstacles to continental trade and transit are extremely high. “Is the game really worth the candle?”</p>	<p>At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s prime minister-level meeting in St Petersburg on November 9 last year, Vladimir Putin said that Moscow would contribute \$500 million to the CASA-1000 electricity project by which hydropower from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan would be transmitted to India and Pakistan.</p>

Joshua Foust, a fellow at the American Security Project, has dubbed the idea “The Brilliant, Unworkable New Silk Road”. Foust argues that the concept of tying Central Asia together with trade needs a heavy dose of realism because:

- (i) Afghanistan is not naturally suited as a commercial hub, and is far too unstable -- and will remain far too unstable -- to support massive and vulnerable infrastructure development projects such as the proposed TAPI pipeline; and
- (ii) Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan are both characterized by business-hostile climates.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry has, meanwhile, called the “New Silk Road” plan “suspicious”. Mohsen Pak-Aein, head of the Afghanistan office of Iranian Foreign Ministry, referred to the efforts to build the NSR for the purpose of the development of Afghanistan and said: “Economic development of the region does not need building the NSR by cross-regional countries.” He argued that the proposal is part of a move that sees the continuation of the hegemonic policies of the U.S. which have made Afghanistan and Pakistan so unstable in the first place.

According to **Evan A. Feigenbaum** (Council on Foreign Relations), landlocked economies can face a growth deficit as high as 1.5 percentage points because transaction and other costs are so high. Central Asia and Afghanistan in particular have suffered from “a poisonous combination of landlocked geography and very bad economic policies.” By reconnecting them to the world economy, and reducing their dependence on a single point of transit, there will be slow but sure tangible progress.

Ostensibly, the idea of using a regional framework such as the NSR to integrate war-ravaged Afghanistan into regional economics is a solid attempt at preventing Afghanistan from backsliding into extremist hands. There is a definite need to resuscitate Afghanistan which has become an economic dead-end. The relationship between poverty and extremism reinforces the idea that economic activity in the shape of the NSR along with military operations in Afghanistan will make an effective counterinsurgency campaign.

Economics or geopolitics?

On October 17, 2011, Shahzad Chaudhry wrote an article in *The Express Tribune* entitled “What is America’s Great Game?” He noted a glaring lack of clarity vis-à-vis America’s objectives as the war in Afghanistan draws to a close. On the one hand, there is the possibility that America simply wants out of a badly conceived, badly conducted and poorly completed war “a la Vietnam, albeit with some grace to hide her

discomfiture.” However, the following are some of the key “great-game” objectives that he speculates as potentially existing in America’s long-term strategy with regard to Afghanistan and Asia:

- A continued presence in Asia will allow America to keep an eye on an energy-rich Central Asia, an irritating Iran, and a nuclear-Pakistan.
- Operational control of the Tibetan plateau, the Mongolian heights and Afghanistan all give a strategic advantage to the United States, particularly to contend with the growing Chinese clout in the region.
- The NSR, which will create a “Eurasian centre of gravity” can counter China’s attempt to re-enshrine the age-old Silk Road (which it has done by sponsoring projects such as Gwadar and the Karakoram Highway).
- Retain Afghanistan. Talks between Uzbek President Islam Karimov and Hilary Clinton took place in Tashkent on October 22, 2011, with Clinton discussing Uzbekistan’s further participation in the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan. In the spring of 2011, Uzbekistan commissioned the building of the Hairaton-Mazar-e-Sharif railway line creating a freight link from the Uzbek border at Hairaton into Afghanistan. Currently, Uzbekistan is the only country which has a direct working rail link with Afghanistan. This link has been the supply route for fuel and other resources to U.S. troops in Kabul. According to a senior U.S. official, 50 per cent of all “non-lethal supplies” take the northern route through Central Asia into Afghanistan. The U.S. has thus had to delicately balance its criticism of Tashkent’s human rights record with its reliance on the latter’s logistical support for the war in neighbouring Afghanistan.
- The US relationship with India, meanwhile, is one that continues to raise concerns in Pakistan. This is particularly the case with India’s policy towards Afghanistan and Central Asia, regarded by Pakistan as contrary to its interests, but supported by the U.S., which states that India and the U.S. plan to work together with regional partners to advance this vision of “an integrated South and Central Asia, and lay the foundations for a modern day Silk Road.”¹⁷

Thus, geopolitics seems to trump economics in Washington’s orchestrated scheme for the future of the Central and South Asian region.

1. **Anti-Moscow.** The origins of the plan, according to Joshua Kucera,¹⁸ lie in geopolitics and not economics. The United States has for a long time been attempting to unite South and Central Asia, the general aim having been to weaken the economic and political monopoly that Russia, by dint of the centralized Soviet infrastructure, had on these countries. In her new book *Mapping Central Asia* which in fact includes an entire chapter on the revived metaphor of the New Silk Road, Marlene Laruellehas has written: “The underlying geo-economic rationale of these roads is to exclude Moscow from new geopolitical configurations.”¹⁹ American attempts to break that monopoly have included:

- An effort to tie together the electrical grids of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan with those of Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- Moving the authority for the Central Asian countries under a new State Department bureau and connecting them with South Asia.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has in fact issued a statement criticizing America’s efforts to build the NSR: “The Istanbul forum has shown the regional states’ growing desire to shape the political landscape of the region on their own, without outside interference...”²⁰

2. **Anti-Tehran.** An examination of the map of South and Central Asia, according to Kucera, reveals that going by topography and the quality of the roads, the most sensible way to ship goods from India west is not the northern route over the massive mountain passes and crumbling roads of Central Asia, rather it’s the southern route through Iran and Turkey. But that is not likely to happen.any time soon.

3. **Anti-Beijing.** It is estimated in Washington circles that the American plan will inevitably come to overshadow the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as the primary regional security process in Central Asia and South Asia which in turn will erode the dominant influence of Russia and China in Central Asia. According to *The Washington Quarterly*, the “financial crisis” of the year has shifted the global perception of the economic balance of power from the United States towards China.²¹ Moreover it has been argued that the appearance of the *Vale Brasil* in Rio de Janeiro in May 2011 (the first of a new breed of Chinamax-class bulk carriers with the capacity to carry almost twice as much Brazilian iron ore to China as previous ships), has seriously threatened America’s global hegemony in terms of international trade.²² An American designed and sponsored new trade route through

Asia can effectively be interpreted as an effort to undermine China's regional position, especially if such a route ends in Mumbai and not in Shanghai. Similarly, an idea espoused by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's prime minister-level meeting in St. Petersburg in November 2011 endorsed the idea of a new China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, which is not an explicit part of the U.S. strategy, although it fits in perfectly into the NSR framework.

- 4. Anti-Islamabad?** Although the so-called Northern Distribution Network currently in place feeding the American war against the Taliban goes via the admittedly extraneous Baltic states, Russia and Kazakhstan, the United States has claimed that it "may not always be able to count on the Pakistan route." According to a US official, "We've always said that we *prefer* to use the Pakistan route because it's cheaper, it's shorter, but still, it's (the northern route) a good thing to have, should Pakistan want to restrict our access or close it off."²³ Therefore, while the proposed NSR *does* include Pakistan as one of the economies that the U.S. hopes to link to Central Asia, it is also clear that America is wary of Pakistan's unpredictable support of American plans for the future of Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan's inclusion in Clinton's NSR proposal is, for Washington, an unfortunately necessary obligation, begrudgingly given. In a bleak assessment of bilateral relations on August 16, 2011, at a joint public forum with Clinton, CIA chief Leon Panetta said, "There is no choice but to maintain a relationship with Pakistan. Why? Because we are fighting a war there. We are fighting Al Qaeda there. Because they do happen to be a nuclear power that has nuclear weapons, and we have to be concerned about what happens with those nuclear weapons. So for all those reasons, we've got to maintain a relationship with Pakistan."²⁴
- 5. Pro-Delhi?** Meanwhile, the U.S. seems to be actively brokering a greater Indian role in Afghanistan. This explains the current phenomenon of India's becoming an increasingly major fulcrum of U.S. ambitions in South Asia. There have been offers to sell sophisticated weapons systems, not surprising since New Delhi plans on spending over \$100 billion in arms purchases in the next decade. And, in early November 2011, Deputy Secretary William Burns while describing Asia-Pacific as U.S. foreign policy's "strategic pivot" suggested that American and Indian strategies should "reinforce each other."²⁵ In the past year alone, Indian companies have built over 700 kilometers of roads in Afghanistan. Indian companies have also constructed 157 km of double-circuit transmission lines between Uzbekistan to Afghanistan, and installed 700 pre-fabricated high-

voltage transmission towers throughout the country.²⁶ According to Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of the South and Central Asia Affairs Bureau, Geoffrey Pyatt: “Our vision is a secure, stable and prosperous Afghanistan at the heart of a secure, stable and prosperous region. All of Afghanistan’s neighbours and near-neighbours, including India, stand to benefit from a political situation in Afghanistan.”²⁷ The fact that “near-neighbour” India has been specifically acknowledged as against the “actual-neighbour” Iran, is suggestive.

The rationality?

1. In October 2011, Joshua Kucera wrote an article in *The Atlantic* entitled “Clinton’s dubious plan to Save Afghanistan with a New Silk Road”. Kucera claims that the NSR proposal has been “bouncing around the post-Soviet think tank circuit in Washington since the mid-oughts.” Now that the 2014 deadline is approaching, this plan is a final desperate attempt to hold on to a locus of power in Asia.
2. The first Silk Road died out because sea transport became much cheaper, which is still true today. According to Marlene Laruelle, “plans to modify in depth the status quo of global trade, three-quarters of which is carried out by sea, by replacing it with continental trade on the pretext that once upon a time caravans used to travel along these routes, cannot be taken seriously.”²⁸
3. Geographically, the proposed route is not without its hurdles: these include the massive mountain passes of the north, as well as the compromised, crumbling road quality in Central Asia.
4. The proposal was meant to be modelled on a number of existing projects, such as the free-trade agreement signed last year between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which are yet to be implemented.
5. According to Ahmad Ahmadani of *The Nation*, imported Turkmen gas under the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI project) gas pipe would be “costlier than Iranian gas and other imported fuels as its price has been linked with the price of Brent crude oils.”²⁹ The project, crucially, depends on a credible security apparatus in war-torn Afghanistan, and since the TAPI pipeline mirrors the proposed NSR route, it is hoped that the development of one would facilitate the implementation of the other.

What of Pakistan?

Pakistan will have to make a calculated cost-benefit analysis of its desired role as a regional player in Asia. Faced with the epochal transition of the drawdown of forces across the border in Afghanistan, it has been argued that if Pakistan acquiesces to the American NSR proposal, then America would have achieved its objective of “shackling” Pakistan within the four walls of a regional security mechanism dominated by the West so that Pakistan becomes “no more than just another protagonist among equals” and its claim to an eminent status in any Afghan peace process gets diluted.³⁰

It is argued that Pakistan is being presented as a victim of an either/or scenario: join the Northern Silk Road project and ditch China, or keep out of the project and prove its strategic loyalty to China which is presumed to be an outsider opposed to the project

On the other hand, it is argued that joining the framework can help reduce the huge trust deficit that has recently sprung up in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. According to *The Express Tribune*, “one can say with some certainty that the [Silk Road] project will benefit Pakistan through co-dependencies with its neighbours.”³¹ It is argued that Pakistan is being presented as a victim of an either/or scenario: join the Northern Silk Road project and ditch China, or keep out of the project and prove its strategic loyalty to China which is presumed to be an outsider opposed to the project. However this is arguable – China already has an economic presence in Afghanistan after buying copper deposits in Central Afghanistan and winning the contract to prospect for oil along the Amu Darya River in Northern Afghanistan.³²

“It can be said that Pakistan in tandem with China [vis-à-vis Gwadar] thought of the Central Asian connection in the early 1990s, and it is perhaps in answer to this move that America has been researching the Northern Silk Road project since 2004”.³³ With Afghanistan entering the so-called “endgame” phase, it is not only the U.S. which is exploring new avenues to protect and promote its interests in the region. The new shape of things is yet to evolve, but with Pakistan’s relations with the U.S. currently in their most strained phase, Islamabad should also not exclude the possibilities of reaching out to both Beijing and Moscow, “the former to consolidate its existing strategic relations and the latter to probe if

meaningful substance can be added to a relationship that has remained a prisoner of history's heavy baggage.”³⁴

If these efforts can expedite Pakistan's membership into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, for instance, then it is quite possible that even newer opportunities could emerge, adding to Pakistan's regional stability and prosperity. Until then, the signing of the TAPI agreement in mid-November last year indicates that Pakistan has already boarded Clinton's NSR bandwagon.

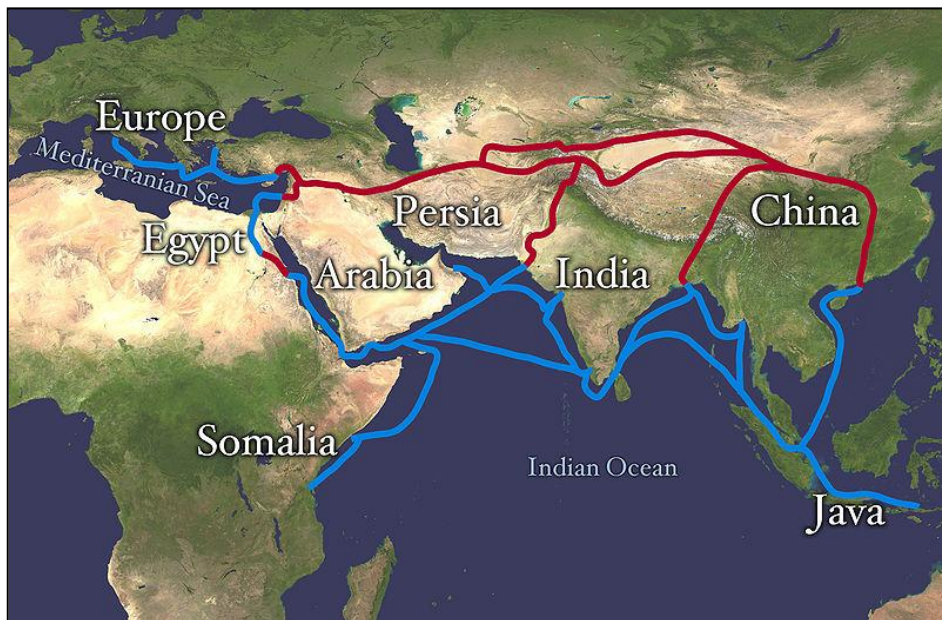
Map 1: An impression of Hillary Clinton's proposed NSR plan (note the strategic exclusion of Iran and China, and how the plan cuts through the Afghan heartland)



Map 2: The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan India (TAPI) pipeline's pathway



Map 3: The Old Silk Road, linking Europe, the Mediterranean and Africa to Asia, China and India (showing both the land and sea-routes)



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