

CHALLENGES OF THE SILK ROAD – YESTERDAY AND TODAY

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ABSTRACT

Today more than ever, the Silk Road is the political and economic main focus, arousing hopes on the one hand, and distrust on the other, especially against the People's Republic of China, which officially revived the Silk Road and made it one of the leading topics and goals in recent years. Its leadership wins countries around the world interested in integration, from South and Southeast Asia over Central Asia to the western end of the Eurasian continent – Europe. The resuscitation, primarily taken up by Asian countries, is currently overshadowed by COVID-19, adding to further tension between "East" and "West", moreover now by the Ukraine conflict and general inflation. As part of the reconstruction – not least in relation to the renewal of the largest trade network as well as the recovery of the respective markets after the pandemic-related crisis that has already lasted almost two years – an intensification of the relations with states involved along the Silk Road is an option. Examples are given (Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Turkey) where conflicts have intensified in the course of the expansion of international relations, be it by the Silk Road or the European Union. Ultimately, however, the opportunities due to globalization will be highlighted as well.

Keywords: Silk Road, world economy, colonialism, Great Game, resources, economic corridor, conflict

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Silk and Culture versus Oil and Opium

The term "Silk Road(s)", used in 1877 by the German geologist and geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen, remains misleading because the paths were partially paved and by no means followed only one route. Most of them led over beaten paths, desert tracks, or mud fords. Factors such as wars, raids, or nature forced the caravans to find new routes again and again. In addition, not only was the eponymous silk transported along this route but everything that was possible and conceivable. This involved not only the transfer and exchange of commercial goods but also natural products and cultivated plants as well as discoveries and technologies. Thus, ideas and ideologies were disseminated. After all, the Silk Road stands for the openness of various religions that coexisted peacefully and is considered the most famous example of global interaction. Still, the world has always been more complex, and over the centuries, it has grown closer together, with all the opportunities and challenges. And though, for a while, the continental route of the Silk Road was out of sight and became forgotten. This had to do with Europe's rising "sea powers" and their connections to the rest of the world. The external global economic factors have been particularly strong in recent times when those powers were able to expand their politico-military-economic influence since the beginning of modern times, which led to the

transformation in the world economy. The maritime routes were increasingly used at the expense of the continental route.

The continuous influence of the Western powers can be seen in these centuries. The changing global demographic, global economic, and ecological circumstances suddenly made a number of interconnected investments appear economically rational and profitable, and strategies not least based on military actions (keyword colonialism) made between 1500 and 1800 Europe grow economically and politically. Soon after, the "Western" powers (mainly Russia and Great Britain, keyword "Great Game", see below) found stronger interest in Central Asia that once already had been the center of "global exchange", both but not the only ones responsible for certain destabilization in the region that was kept forgotten for a long time though. The focus was at the latest since 09/11 again set on the Central Asian region, and bringing us back to the continental Silk Road. Shortly before the Western political involvement intensified and recently found its inglorious end with the withdrawal from Afghanistan in summer 2021.

Though, UNESCO had already carried out international and interdisciplinary research into the transport network from 1988 to 1997 under the title "Silk Roads – Roads of Dialogue", with a large group of specialists. The aim was not only to reconstruct the past but also to research the current situation and, if necessary, to develop future prospects. To illustrate the continuity and diversity of traditions, traditional and modern art were incorporated, to confront the audience with it as well. Already at that time, there had been mainly mobile conferences to exchange ideas and collaborate with scientists from the host countries. New centers were founded, which among other things, should contribute to the coordination of Central Asian studies (in Samarkand, Uzbekistan), intensifying research on nomadism (in Ulan Bator, Mongolia), and the exploration of the maritime route network (as in Fuzhou, China). The Silk Road Festival with exhibitions, concerts, and theater performances achieved the largest attention. It was mainly about international understanding and, of course, economic perspectives. Thirty states signed agreements on the vision of a "new silk road". After all, it was also about the route from St. Petersburg to Singapore. Experience shows that the situation is not getting any easier in the region, which runs largely along with countries of the former Soviet Union, where politicians promote nationalism and, on the other hand, see the advantage of globalization.

Since then, ideas for the implementation of a transcontinental trade route have repeatedly been found, for example in the contract formulations of the TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia; Karamustafa – Kahraman, 2016) as a project of the European Union (1993) or in the wording of the Silk Road Strategy Act of the USA (1999) and the Russian-run Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union (Libman, 2016), coordinated with China since 2015. The Silk Road became to a lesser extent a synonym for roads than for pipelines and fiber optic cables, mainly since the Chinese project had been promoted economically and politically since 2013. Oil and natural gas may not be as productive as expected, but desires always remain and conflicts of interest are inevitable, not least the aforementioned Ukraine conflict proves the strong impact concerning the global market, one among many as the following lines should highlight:

1.2 Persistent conflicts as a legacy of the past

The interest in international trade and, on the other hand, conflicts have existed since the beginning of human interaction. When the world was not yet fully marketed, boundary points arose from topographical conditions, where it was easiest to exercise control. One example is the Jade Gate, the last waterhole before Loulan, from where the Silk Road turned north to the foot of Tianshan. The customs station of Irkeshtam on the Images between China and Kyrgyzstan was the lowest crossing of the passage from Kashgar to Balkh, the easiest way from the Tarim basin to Transoxania. First, there were temporary camps, then when empires were consolidated, way stations and controlled borders and outposts. This brought borders and politics into the game (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Border post between China and Kyrgyzstan

The nomadic Xiongnu had forced the Han to set up frontier markets at the western end of the Great Wall at the time of Emperor Wu Di (180–157 BC). These places were turned into tools for commercial penetration and political inclusion. Silk, other goods, and alcohol were brought to the western border as a tribute to please the Xiongnu nobility. Chinese scholars encouraged the posting in hopes of weakening nomadic lifestyles and acclimatization to Chinese exports. Specific countries see the Silk Road as a "Chinese Trojan Horse": Raw materials come to China, while other states are supplied with goods that are so cheap that it would be unprofitable to produce them in the respective countries (Gewirtz, 2017). Exchange and conflict coexisted over the centuries. With the fall of the Mongolian Yuan dynasty and the emerging maritime routes or a subsequent self-isolation during the Ming dynasty in China, the routes were interrupted. Though the continental routes were still active in certain areas. A fact that is often forgotten today – even in the recent modern era, kings of great empires ruled in Central Asia.

But from a western perspective, the areas were forgotten and only found greater interest again in the course of the intercontinental expansion of the predominantly European powers. They

sent researchers and surveyors, who often acted as spies, to these regions. Many of them are notorious for investigations (and at the same time for robbery of cultural goods for western museums). Sven Hedin, Aurel Stein and his contemporaries and rivals Grünwedel and LeCoq, Francis Younghusband, and Nikolai Przhevalsky – all were active players in the mainly British-Russian struggle for influence in Central Asia, the so-called "Great Game". Their explorations were supported by the British and Russian Empires as they filled in the remaining "blank spaces" on the maps, provided valuable information, and created "spheres of influence" for archaeological exploration, just as they did for actual political influence (Hansen, 2016).

Therefore, the almost forgotten Central Asia suddenly came into the focus of the world powers. Przhevalsky allegedly claimed that Imperial China was weak and insecure in its northern territories, particularly Xinjiang and Mongolia. Russia urged to get pieces of Chinese territory; today Russia is worried about territories (Clover – Zhang, 2018). Przhevalsky not only despised Chinese ethnic groups, but he also regarded the eight million non-Chinese peoples of Tibet, Turkestan, and Mongolia as uncivilized, evolutionarily backward people who had to be liberated from Chinese rule. Przewalski proposed to Russia to provoke rebellions of the Buddhist and Muslim peoples in these areas against the Chinese regime, to start a war with China, and to wrest "Turkestan". Turkestan – a large part of this artificially named area consists of Turkic-speaking inhabitants. This fact is also used by less-noticed sides: Turkey is striving for an alliance with those countries (Guldogan, 2018) in which a variant of Turkish is an official language. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in particular, are trying to integrate the Muslim population groups of Central Asia into a Sunni-influenced supraregional network. Countries involved in the new "Great Game" want to distinguish themselves as a hegemonic power. Thus, they react sensitively to the activities of pan-Turkish and pan-Islamic movements (Khan – Changgang – Afzaal, 2019).

Conflicts are inevitable. Such observations can also be made south and west of Turkey: Since Cyprus, as a member of the EU, has granted production concessions in the relatively oil-rich Aegean, tensions and certain clashes have become more frequent again, which ultimately impedes Turkey from joining the EU. Border conflicts and terror are becoming more frequent and stronger. A basic idea of the Silk Road is to reduce tensions between different population groups and to develop a better perspective of the political, economic, and social structure.

2.0 COLONIAL ATTITUDE ON BEHALF OF RESEARCH

Many of these problems stem from Western sins and mistakes: On April 4, 1904, the Geographical Pivot of History was published in the London Geographical Journal by Halford J. Mackinder, Director of the London School of Economics. He belonged to those people who tried to maintain the power of the British Empire in world politics. It was about interactions between geography, history, and "empire". His remarks showed that the landmass between Europe and Asia was first inhabited by nomads, who then usually became more sedentary and susceptible to the next onslaught. From the end of the Middle Ages, there was a geopolitical counterattack. Western European countries acquired territories, especially on the way across the sea. The acquisition of territories in Asia and Africa and the discovery of America, the growing rule over the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean, and Far Eastern waters showed that sea power prevailed against land power. Now Mackinder saw the pendulum swing back towards land power. One of the reasons for this he saw in the steam engine,

which was now conquering the world in the form of the railroad. The railroad was not only the engine of the middle phase of the industrial revolution in England but also led to a significant expansion in America. On the Eurasian continent, Tsar Peter's Great Russian Empire expanded eastward to develop land and mineral resources. The Russian railways in particular were a huge threat to the Western naval powers, especially to British India, the Caucasus, and the Far East. The author's worries were that the British would fall behind: "Whoever ruled Eastern Europe ruled the heartland. Who controls the heartland, controls the world islands [Eurasian landmass, note]. Whoever rules the island of the world rules the world." (Mackinder, 1904). He was right in many points. However, he could not expect that tsarist (and later communist) Russia would lose some of its influence and try to regain it, and instead would have the US stationed troops on a large scale in the Central Asian region. Leopold Amery (1905), politician and writer, had foreseen this: The power with the greatest technological and scientific lead would be the strongest.

In economic terms, China is the factor whose industrial growth is now above all other countries. That growth in the 1990s and 2000s depended on the old industrialized countries and their multinational corporations, which outsourced labor-intensive production to low-wage locations and kept research, development, and logistics in the "high ends" of the goods chains (which has also changed). All consequences are still felt to be a necessity. Today one would need a new impetus for this dynamic in the West, which cannot be expected in times of globalization (with the official start in the course of the world summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, under the influence of globalization, its importance as a control instrument for global political processes has increased since the 1990s). The historical roots of Asian strength, which prevailed in the past, were lifted again, not least by the West.

It must be added, however, that according to historians, economists, and social theorists (Karl Marx, Max Weber, Werner Sombart, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee) Europe – actually only the western peninsula of the Eurasian landmass – played a much larger role by ignoring another region. Despite all geographic reality, Europeans insist on making the appendage their own continent, while the much more numerous Indian population by definition only has one subcontinent (which is of course also part of Asia), and the Chinese, with a landmass far larger than Europe, only one own land. On the other hand, criticisms came up quite early, for example from Edward Said (1978) in his discussion of the idea of Orientalism, from Martin Bernal (1987), when he refers to the African origins of Western culture in his book *Black Athena*, or Amin Samir (1989), who raises the reproach of Eurocentrism. The other side of the coin is that especially today on the part of Chinese and Indian authors, the emphasis is shifting in their favor with the same intensity of giving more importance to their own identity. Nevertheless, new perspectives are built up, which can have a "refreshing" effect, so to speak. One among them is George Asinero from the Philippines, who would like to assign Asia a more global place, and K.N. Chaudhuri for India. Bin Wong examines the Industrial Revolution by comparing Europe and China. Braudel (1992, 134) wrote that "Europe invented historians and then used them everywhere" to advance its own interests in the country and around the world. Such ideological messages are used or abused by all cultures and states. What is certain is that there were historians, chronicle writers, and travelers everywhere who wrote partly objectively (and yet with the eyes of the observer of a culture different from the observed culture), but also often wrote on their own behalf (or that of their clients). From earlier

history and the Arab culture, Ibn Battuta (1304–1368/77), Ibn Khaldûn (1332–1406), and Rashid al-Din (1247–1318), who wrote Afro-Eurasian world history and were cosmopolitan, should be mentioned. Nowadays it seems that the closer we get to the age of enlightenment and modernity, the more religious tendencies and nationalisms are emerging again.

Ibn Khaldûn compared the "prosperity of the nations" and can be shifted to today's times: "This can be illustrated in eastern regions such as Egypt, Syria, India, China and all northern regions beyond the Mediterranean. As their civilization grew, so did their property and their dynasties. Their cities and settlements became numerous, and their trade and living conditions improved. We can now observe the conditions of the merchants from the Christian nations who come to the Muslims in the Maghreb whose wealth and abundance they described. The same is true of the merchants from the East and what we learn of their conditions, and even more so of the merchants from the Far East, from the non-Arab countries of Iraq, India and China. We hear remarkable stories of their fortunes and wealth told by travelers. These stories are usually received with skepticism." (Ibn Khaldûn 2015, 279)

Pere Du Halde, an eighteenth-century French publicist (who had never left Paris but used Jesuits and other travelers as sources) wrote: "The empire always flourishes strongly. The trade that is carried out within China is so great that the whole of Europe cannot be compared with it." (Quoted from Chaudhuri, 2015, 430; first published 1991). On the other hand, Adam Smith wrote in *Wealth of Nations* in 1776: "The discovery of the Americas and that of the passage to the East Indies around the Cape of Good Hope were the two greatest events in human history" (Smith, [1776] 1977, 557). Nevertheless, in the spirit of the philosopher David Hume, the last Western social theorist, he confessed that Europe was a straggler in the development of the prosperity of nations (ibid, 348).

Marx and Engels follow this observation in their *Communist Manifesto*: "The discovery and circumnavigation of America created a new terrain for the emerging bourgeoisie. The East Indian and Chinese markets, the colonization of the Americas, the exchange with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and commodities, in general, gave trade, shipping, and industry an unprecedented boom and thus the revolutionary element in the crumbling feudal society got a rapid development (Marx – Engels, 1848, 45). On the other hand, Marx followed Montesquieu and Rousseau in defining the East, be it the Ottoman Empire, Persia, or China, as despotic in their form of government and the productive forces traditional and backward until capitalism woke them from their slumber.

Ultimately, Europeans and Arabs sometimes had a more global view before the former was suppressed by Eurocentric historiography and social theory in the 19th century. A regression can sometimes be observed in the Islamic culture. Such exceptionalisms are more frightening when they are still used in our lifetime. The USA deserves special mention here, with Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History" (1992) and Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Cultures". In the latter's 1993 version, at least one question mark was placed, which overzealous editors apparently deleted in the 1996 edition. The world is and will remain far more complex. The cultures and regions have always been more closely interwoven than one would like to believe, and not just across the Silk Road.

Already Dudley North observed in 1691: "With regard to trade, the entire world is only a single nation or a single people, in which nations appear as individuals." (quotation from Cipolla 1974, 451). The world market and the associated flow of money enabled a division of labor within and between the sectors and regions and created a competition that spanned the entire globe and connected everyone. Less than 300 years later, something similar was described: "The reports show that there is competition between different products ... such as the East Indian and European textiles; also between the same products from different regions with the same climate, e.g. sugar from Java and from Bengal, sugar from Madeira and Sao Tome and Brazilian and West Indian sugar, or between products that were grown in different climatic regions, as is the case with tobacco. ... Chinese, Persian and Italian silk, Japanese, Hungarian, Swedish, and West Indian copper, the spices from Asia, Africa, and America, coffee from al-Mocha, from Java and the West Indies: all of these were in competition with each other. ... The best barometer, however, is the prices on the commodity exchange in Amsterdam." (Ibd., 274). However, the various division of labor and competing markets were not solely dependent on stock exchanges. Barendse gave other examples where the Dutch East India Company also had an influence:

"Production was centralized in places where labor costs were lowest. That, and not primarily low transportation costs, explains [that]... comparative cost advantages led Asian and American markets to work together, regardless of trade restrictions, nowadays all the more astonishing given the trade embargoes Trump had raised. On the other hand, Indian, Arabic, and Persian products such as indigo, silk, sugar, pearls, cotton, and later even coffee – the most profitable goods shipped across the Arabian Sea in the late 17th century – were replaced by goods that were elsewhere produced, generally in the American colonies. ... Thanks to this global process of product replacement, merchanting across the Arabian Sea disappeared or was in decline in 1680. For a while, this was absorbed by the rising coffee trade. It contributed to a persistent trade depression between the Gulf, Red Sea, and India's west coast. This decline in merchanting was moderated by trade between the Arabian Sea residents. The Middle East had to pay for imports from India by selling bulk products like grain and wool to the Mediterranean. An uncertain equilibrium ... exerted an inflationary influence on the Ottoman as well as the Safavid currency." (Barendse, 1998: Chapter 1). Especially since the cotton soon came from America's southern regions and led to a complete economic collapse in Egypt.

This is one among many examples where the complexity of global interaction becomes apparent: the Cotton trade from the USA came to a standstill during the Civil War (1861-1865). The Egyptians tried their luck again and, above all, Tsarist Russia increasingly used Central Asia for cultivation, hoping for resource independence and export opportunities (with the above-mentioned ecological consequences). This also brought stronger political ties to the headquarters in St. Petersburg and later under Soviet Moscow. Under their politics, an even more intense monoculture started. Waters like the Aral Sea are witnesses to this program and project. Politics is another challenge of this region and of this time: The young republics of Central Asia are structures from the time of the Soviets. Before the Bolshevik Revolution, there was no state to match them. Today's Central Asia was divided into three emirates: Kokand, Chiva, and Bukhara. From the 18th century, the region became colonized by Russia; first, the steppes were inhabited by nomads, then the emirates were wiped out. Bukhara was not annexed until 1920. All three cities were originally ruled by Uzbek tribes who

approached their tribal origins but ruled over a multiethnic population with predominantly generally Turkic and Persian-speaking people, while all groups were politically loyal to Islam.

Fearing the emergence of pan-Islamic sentiments based on Pan-Turkism, the Soviets began to dismantle these cultural fabrications – identities based on ethnicity defined by language. On the basis of ethnographic research from the time of the tsars, it was determined that a certain number of "peoples" had a right to inhabit an area and a state. The former Russian tsarist empire became divided into Soviet republics, dominated by the Republic of Russia. Boundaries were drawn without regard to ethnicity or language (as was the case in all colonies worldwide). The new republics were endowed with a national communist party and the appearance of a state. It was always the result of cartographic arbitrariness and overturned political orders, especially in the 20th century. In particular, the establishment of scientific academies led to the formation of a new generation of ethnographers, historians and writers, some of whom built up artificial history and culture.

Thus, one finds a strong nationalism in the Central Asian states today. On the other hand, after the collapse of the USSR, Beijing quickly recognized the potential of the former republics and began to develop the region. In this way, China took advantage of the gap that Russia had left and is now also leading the People's Republic on an economic level (Reeves, 2016). This not only has positive aspects or reactions: Kazakhstan, which ultimately forms a bridge to Eastern Europe and itself has cheap workers, cut back its own production. This led to a shift in the situation. The Kazakh economy is based on the extraction of oil, the sale of oil for dollars, and the purchase of cheap Chinese products with those dollars. Apart from the mining industry, there is barely any industry in the country and it is increasingly falling into the hands of multinational companies. The incessant flow of imported goods, the growing influence of China in the Kazakh agricultural and energy sector, and the million-dollar loans from Beijing are also causing fear in the Kazakh population (Gale – Hansen – Jewison, 2014). People believe that the neighbor's next step will be land grabbing, promoted by a corrupt leadership in Kazakhstan (Putz, 2016). The question arises, how far are there legitimate concerns, and how far are nationalist politics based on hysteria being pursued again?

3.0 PATTERNS OF GLOBALIZATION – SILK ROAD YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

Considerations from and experiences in the distance take on the most varied forms; they become more exotic the more remote the worlds are. In some cases, this has not changed even today. Certain exaggerations should ensure the self-defense of the individual. Given the self-perception and the Silk Road – where does Europe end, where does Asia begin? These two form a landmass, and only politicians keep setting new boundaries. Nonetheless, trade flourished even before measures like the European Schengen, which may be opening the borders too easily. That politics leads to rising migration – an idea the silk road project is not supporting, as borders are still more strictly protected. The general challenges of global trade were already revealed in ancient times. Yesterday as of now, it poses challenges to people, arouses desires and hopes, can lead to political tensions, but can also offer opportunities for the global community to grow together in a more reluctant way as the European Union started.

The continental silk road was almost forgotten by the two ends of Eurasia. It was only in the more recent modern times that personalities such as Sven Hedin and Aurel Stein explored the routes under the banner of research. However, their activities actually sprang from political and economic motives. Representatives from institutions and companies (such as Citroën and the Société de Géographie) also crossed parts of the route in the 1930s to test the performance of the vehicles. They were accompanied by researchers from various disciplines. More recently, ideas for revitalization have emerged, for example, the aforementioned "Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia" (TRACECA), which was proclaimed by the EU, brought relief goods from Stuttgart to Afghanistan and raised awareness of the Central Asian economic area (including the Silk Road). In recent times the importance of the overland route has increased again. In some cases, the connection between the states of Eurasia continues along the Silk Road – also as pipelines for crude oil and gas, which were discovered in the Caspian Sea and in the Taklamakan, among other places. In addition, the construction of roads has made it easier to access inhospitable areas, helped industrialize the area, and is now critical to tourism. For economic reasons in particular, the Asian road project is investing in renovation and expansion.

Today former Soviet states are independent, and yet the challenges have not diminished in a world that has grown closer together. The role of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), which was founded in 2001 to achieve better cooperation in the fight against terrorism, must be seen against this background (Haas, 2007). Respect for human rights, however, is not on the agenda of this group, and excuses are easy to find in their "fight against terror" (but it is not necessarily managed in a more exemplary manner by certain western states). Officially, however, one tries to reduce tensions between different population groups and develop perspectives on the political and social structure. Gender equality is also formulated as a goal in countries where life is dominated by men, in certain regions even by those who live from war and terror, such as the Taliban and other warlords (Afghanistan, or the Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia). In certain areas, the Silk Road is increasingly used for the transfer of drugs (Heroin Highway), which mainly leads from Afghanistan to Europe. Alternatives to the cultivation of opium by offering other products on the Silk Road must be created. So far, however, this has only been rhetoric on the part of international communities. Occasional burning of opium crops is not enough. The old routes of the Silk Road are also used today to transport weapons and for human trafficking. In some sections, the Silk Road is more like a smuggling trail – definitely not for the first time in history.

The ecological consequences for the means of the economy are obvious in their reversible negative developments. Areas of water are the refuge of huge resources that have yet to be extracted, such as the Caspian Sea, whose neighboring countries are all trying to get as much of this cake as possible. The dimensions of mining are no longer acceptable, such as "Mountaintop Removal Mining", where mountain peaks are just blasted off and removed. Here, too, ecosystems are being destroyed. In some cases, people have always had to fight against the adversities of nature, but very often they themselves had a share in the consequences. This problem shows itself with the loss of the former popular forests in the Tarim Basin east of the Pamir Mountains, which protect against siltation. The consumption was too high. Even when only branches were cut off, the poplars could not survive because they dried out (Fig. 2). The desert is now squeezing itself into these gaps. Interestingly enough, the ancient wooden structures (for example in the abandoned city of Niya, which is

now in the desert) were demolished much later. Often it is even more inconspicuous plants that kept the bit of fertile humus and played their part. But these are used, either as firewood, or roots are dug up for medical purposes. This is often done by Uighurs, but the final consumers are arguably the Han Chinese.



Fig. 2 Poplar Forest in the desert

Up to the 20th century, there were still river landscapes and more trees in the Taklamakan regions, with which shepherds and their animals got along. With the settlement of Han Chinese, the oases were artificially enlarged. More and more water was withdrawn from the rivers for state companies and industrial projects. As a consequence, many are now evaporating in the middle of the desert, in Xinjiang the Hotandarja and the Keriyadarja. Whole lakes have dried up, such as Lop Nor in Xinjiang, which was once considered a wonder of the desert. The fate of the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya on the other side of the Pamir, from which most of the rivers arise, is similar – and the Aral Sea will soon share Lop Nor's fate. Intensive agricultural use – mainly by the above-mentioned cotton – and inadequate soil management lead to deterioration in soil conditions. Excessive farming, which damages the soil structure, insufficient replenishment of nutrients, increasing population density, slash and burn, and expanding livestock farming lead to overexploitation. As a consequence, the soil's fertility is reduced.

The careless extraction of resources has always taken place, be it the mining of rock, metals, animal, or vegetable raw materials. Later it became coal, then crude oil – this led to more and more mobility combined with ever better and more effective mining methods, but to more and more dependence on fossil fuels or resources that do not grow again (Fig. 3). Oil and not silk became the main force for the economy, but also fiber optic cables and with them, above all, the information that every country wants to get about others, including its own citizens.



Fig. 3 Oil extraction in western Kazakhstan

European empires were created thanks to coal. Other states later began mining and using them (Fig. 4). Today it continues to be the world's most growing energy source and is mined in many areas, not only in Central Asia but also in countries like Germany, where the emphasis is (said to be) on green energy (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4 Coal workers in Xinjiang



Fig. 5 Lignite mining near Brandenburg, Germany

Nevertheless, a new substance was added: crude oil, whose modern history began in the middle of the 19th century. Though, it was already partially used (bitumen). A by-product of kerosene production was gasoline, too flammable and volatile to be used in lamps. Instead, it became a cheap stain remover for clothes until the discovery of the internal combustion engine. The proliferation of road vehicles led to other uses, such as tires made from petroleum instead of rubber. It must be added that previously in the Congo, western (Belgian) control over rubber production had cost the lives of millions of people. Now oil became the mainstay of the economy, leading to new conflicts. As fossil fuels went through their cycle of growth and decline, the world became aware of another energy resource – atomic energy through uranium, from ancient biological processes. Today it is even carved out of military explosive devices – so to speak, forming plowshares out of swords, as the Bible calls it (Psalms 46, 10). Of course, the above-mentioned question of security and economic consequences arises with the often-unbalanced import-export trade. In many countries, especially Kazakhstan (see above), the purchase of land is a hot topic. China itself propagates the benefits for everyone.

Since the official revival of the Silk Road by the People's Republic, the Tang dynasty has been mentioned in this context, in the case of the maritime the short phase of the Ming fleets under Admiral Zheng He. Since it is common in China's political life to link historical and current events, this phase is becoming even more important. This was shown, among other conditions, in the first visit to China by the Japanese Tenno Akihito and the Kogo Michiko in 1992 as an emphasis on the shared two-thousand-year history (Talmadge, 1992). Reference was made to the lasting influence of Chang'an / Xi'an on Nara in Japan. The question arises to what extent does cooperation along the Silk Road opens up a multilateral world or to what extent does it become unilateral?

In Central Asia, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the autonomy system proved that it often conjures up more conflicts than it resolves. All of the region's former republics suddenly gained their independence in December 1991. Pan-Turkish movements were expected, but instead, nationalism grew, although this type of identity arises from a product of the Soviet system from which they wanted to break free. Accordingly, history was reinvented in order to anchor the new nation-states in Central Asia. But enough of the pessimistic lists and questions raised for an epilogue ...

The emphasis should also be placed on the chances of this greatest project of all time: All those involved agree on one point: They emphasize their respective large and significant roles in the history of the Silk Road. What is certain is that the stations along the Silk Road and especially in Central Asia were a hub for countless people. The role of the Eurasian center has been underestimated in recent times: It is clear that all regions were consistently connected to one another. Thus, the history of the largely Islamic Central Asia between 1400 and 1800 was completely misunderstood in the Cambridge History of Islam.

"So Central Asia has been isolated since the early 16th century ... existed on the edge of world history. ... The discovery of the sea route to East Asia made the Silk Road increasingly superfluous ... From the dawn of modern times, Central Asia's history has become the history of a province. ... "(Holt – Lambton – Lewis, 1970, 471).

Consider how many of the great empires were founded by Central Asians – the Timurid dynasty named after Tamerlane, the Turkish Ottoman tribe, the Safavids of Iran, as well as the Mughals in India, all of whom considered themselves Central Asians. But the time of the nomadic empires, who ruled these regions through their cavalry, slowly came to an end with the colonial powers from Europe. Now more than ever, exploitation took place instead of trade and exchange, and borders were drawn where nature did not provide them. This, although sometimes not necessarily peaceful coexistence of nomadic tribal cultures with the great marginal civilizations, had formed the prerequisite for the creation of one of the greatest cultural exchange systems in the ancient world before the early modern development of the transatlantic and oceanic sea routes – the legendary great silk road between the Mediterranean coast and the East Asian shores of the Pacific. Perhaps it was forgotten for a certain era until it was brought to light again – both archaeologically and economically. We are discovering more pieces of the mosaic for our image of a diverse world that must not fall victim to standardization through globalization and profit.

Geographical observations and archaeological findings reveal what happens to a civilization when the climate changes or wars, environmental and social changes affect living conditions. With regard to the topic of the Silk Road, one can see how the cultural and political centers of gravity, regardless of geological conditions, are shifting to other regions, mainly to China, which now intends to connect the whole world (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 The advance to the west – Chinese road construction across the Pamir towards Kyrgyzstan

4.0 DISCUSSION: SOLUTIONS FOR EAST-WEST TRADE?

Here we raise the question that has already been asked: Where does Europe end, where does Asia begin? In any case, it is a continent that is only continually set by politics. Does the question also arise to what extent are other states allowed to interfere in the affairs of others? The European Union, which is trying to expand in its own way, intervened in the December 2004 presidential election of Ukraine because it was considered a potential member. Historically, Ukraine is part of Russia, and Russia is part of Asia. The origins of modern Russia are an eastward projection of the first Slavic Union, established in the 9th century in Kyiv, Ukraine. The cultural and thus also the political boundaries between the two societies have always been blurred. The history of the western part of modern Ukraine is moreover closely related to the history of Poland and Lithuania. That is why the presidential election in Ukraine was seen as a test for the East-West relationship. The situation remains unsolved to this day. Different cultures overlap in the region and Ukrainian nationalism has never been strong, at least until today. The basic problem remains unsolved: Where does Ukraine belong within the new geopolitical structure of Europe? Modern Ukraine was seldom independent. The country gained independence towards the end of World War I, but the Red Army put an end to it in 1922. Ukraine became one of the founding republics of the new Soviet Union. Ukraine only became independent again when the USSR broke up in 1990/91. The influence continued in the form of the crisis in connection with the Nabucco pipeline project and culminated now in an open conflict that even threatens China's Silkroad initiative and the global market in general.

The same questions can also be raised with regard to Turkey in a different form. Although the Turks once ruled large parts of Southeast Europe, Turkey is not a European society, its

national territory is mainly in Asia. The Turkish language has no connection to the European states, religion is non-Christian, and the country's neighbors are the Caucasus and the Middle East. And here, too, the political divide is widening, not least by the question of refugees sent from there despite specific treaties. In this respect, one would have to find other forms of cooperation based on purely economic cooperation, as emphasized in the case of the Silk Road – non-interference in national affairs. The EU continues to fail in politics. The intention and urge of involving more countries in the Union and, despite all the diversity, also ultimately to unify all of them. This is alienating members as well as applicants – and though, it is a toothless approach that only leads to unbelief and further crises.

On an economic basis, however, it must be recognized that certain areas have to be adapted. A good example is the wheelsets of the wagons, the different gauges of which the Chinese and Russian rail must be adapted (initially in the course of changes for example at the city of Drushba; Contessi, 2018) so that a scrap of the former Soviet planned economy can get to the Yellow River and the Chinese economic miracle can continue. Other connections are roads, the asphalt strip which is freed from the sand of the increasingly frequent shifting dunes by road workers, or try to stop the desert with the help of mats –also a consequence of the climatic changes (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 Reed and plastic mats as an unsuccessful fight against silting up

The places where the caravans used to travel, or where the railways used to go, are now mainly connected with fiber optic cables and pipelines. Ultimately, one has to recognize that a merging of economy, science, and culture is necessary in view of the ever-closer cooperation, whereby tourism and environmental protection must also be integrated for the benefit of all. Though, how to build bridges between cultural heritage (science and culture) and investors (economy) without demanding too many compromises – keyword tourism? In the case of cultural sites and nature reserves, some of which are threatened with excessive

expansion for the Silk Road, it is important that people not only boast of this heritage that they have to preserve – they must be able to live in it, with it and yet also from it.

In the end the question arises: Does history repeat itself? Does it confirm the ups and downs of every civilization in a sine curve? As the Greek philosopher, Heraklit emphasized: *Pánta rhei*, everything flows; comparable to the dunes of the deserts along the Silk Road. For certain global problems continue, and challenges can only be mastered together.

Certain regions – once in the center of the Silk Road – were supposedly out of sight for a while before new resources such as oil, gas, and rare earth, as well as global power structures, made the now partly independent states of Central Asia into supposed "global players" again; and yet they are under the aegis of major powers such as China, Russia, and the United States. It is precisely the present-day republics of the former Soviet Union, whose societies have undergone more changes within a few decades than in centuries and millennia before, for better or worse, we will see. The current situation with Ukraine undoubtedly shows the dark side of interconnectedness.

An economic corridor like the Silk Road is the ideal opportunity to build a bridge between cultural idiosyncrasies or, better still, peculiarities of different regions and states. It is also important to use think tanks to determine how far we can set values as constants and to what extent adjustments are possible and necessary in all areas. The media, including social media, also serve as a bridge. However, it does not end with considerations about economic success but also about safety-related issues.

In the field of science, especially in light of the pandemic being another challenge for general globalization, the cooperation between scientists at the medical level is becoming more effective. In view of the challenges of a global belt or network as the Silk Road, it is necessary to programmatically and systematically overcome the boundaries between the various sciences in an interdisciplinary way to achieve synergy effects from the individual and ultimately combined results. In the field of culture, integration is crucial for the continued existence of cultural heritage if its social and economic activities are seen as part of the heritage. Accordingly, residents of a place directly affected must be more closely involved than up to now. So far, local, national and international actors from politics, business and society have different interests and values that are sometimes difficult to reconcile. The negotiation processes and their results testify to the distribution of power in the respective societies.

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