
Revival of Silk Route Through Kashmir The Chinese Response

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Introduction



The Eurasian region was famous for its legendary East-West overland highway dating back to around the 3rd/2nd century B.C. The region was described as the *Shahra-i Abrasham* or *Shahra-i Caravan* in medieval accounts. It was named as the Grand Silk Route by a German geographer, Ferdinand Von Richthofen in the 19th century. It developed in the wake of the trade of a fabulous Chinese product, the silk, followed by the exchange in other regional rarities from \European, South, Central and West Asian countries. Consequently, the Silk Route was differently named as *lapis lazuli, jade, silver, tea, golden, fur, ivory, horse route* etc.¹

The Silk Route had cluster of offshoots criss-crossing the hazardous deserts, volatile mountains and forests and

unaffordable rivers, etc.² Its trade structure was fairly wide, and so was the composition of the trading communities with distinct ethnic backgrounds. For its elongated character, the Silk Route was not simply a transcontinental trade link, but rather a dialogue route that facilitated the radiation and assimilation of cultures, ideologies and influences and human exchange and Diaspora across the porous borders characterizing free trade and human mobility.³

The Ladakh Route

One of the off springs of the highway was the Ladakh Route traversing the Karakoram Mountains to the North of Kashmir and connecting China with India through Kashmir. It originated from the Punjab, reached Srinagar- the Kashmir's capital, then moved

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ahead to Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir State, where it split into two branches; one, accessed the Tibetan part of China via Chishool, and another, via Nubra, crossed over Karakoram at Daulatbeg Ulde and reached the Chinese part of Central Asia or Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Republic (hereafter Xinjiang).

Since ancient times, the said route experienced unprecedented movement of men, material and ideas: thanks to the unflinching endeavours of those noble souls, clergy and merchants, who intermittently treaded it for fame, fortune and religious zeal. Such human and material connections are sufficiently vindicated by the archaeological remains and the abundant literary evidences besides instances of Kashmiri Diaspora in Khotan, Yarkand, Kashghar and Kucha in Xinjiang, China's largest Western province, and that of the Yarkandis, Kashgaris and Tibetan in Kashmir.

However, Ladakh Route froze with the Partition of Indian Sub-continent and the emergence of India and Pakistan on its debris. This was followed by the de-facto division of thitherto princely state of "Greater Kashmir" into what currently constitutes Indian State of Jammu &

Kashmir [J&K] and Pakistan administered Kashmir called Azad Jammu Kashmir [AJK]. Both new-born states locked horns on J&K under India and sequentially fought several wars on it from time to time, which eventually forged unending animosity between them over decades together. The said conflict has also contributed to Indo-Chinese tension on "Aksai Chin" bordering Xinjiang on the Chinese side and Ladakh on the Indian side of Karakoram. Consequently, the traditional Ladakh Route was blocked for free trade and human mobility and the union of the peoples of the otherwise common historical and civilizational background. In fact, its blockade rendered the settlements along the said route desolate, took away their source of living.

Revival of Silk Route

However, in the 20th century, due to fast transforming regional and global geo-politics and geo-economics, the revival of ancient Silk Route was thought necessary to ensure equitable resource sharing and equal opportunities of growth to the developed and under-developing countries through such measures as included softening of rigid borders, guaranteeing hassle free cross-border trade and human mobility,

encouraging foreign investment, liberalizing imports and increasing exports for efficient foreign earnings, privatizing state enterprise, reducing business taxes, wages and inflation, and permitting infrastructural development, roads, highways, railways, pipelines, telecommunication and electronic networks etc. In a way, the given phenomenon of neo-liberalism suggested a unified and flexible economic order that embodied integration of national, regional (pan European, pan-Asian, Pan-Arabic and pan-American) and world economies.⁴ Like Korea, Japan, India and other South and Central Asian countries, China optimized such a phenomenon of *laissez faire* and neo-liberalism to its benefit, which, within more than two decades only, changed her economic façade in the global economic order.⁵

Realizing the given economic order as a key to her grand success, China is softly gravitated to reopening her traditional Silk Route links with South Asian countries. As a matter of fact, she carried out massive construction projects in Xinjiang, her bordering province with Pakistan, Central Asia, Afghanistan and India towards Ladakh in J&K to achieve many objectives like creating regional influence, merging the dissident Uighurs into the mainstream,

establishing direct engagement with the energy-rich Central Asian States and exploring greater market for her industrial products in South Asian states including India as a big market.⁶

Locating an Access Route

Ladakh Route offers one such traditional link which China intends reopening as was gathered by this investigator during a couple of international conferences in Urumchi, the capital city of Xinjiang over the past few years. She perceives so to locate a direct over-land access to the South Asia and Arabian Sea for the marketing of her enormous industrial products besides developing, through this medium, a common strategy with India to fight the separatist and fundamentalist dissident groups of Uighurs in Xinjiang: India has the similar problem in Kashmir where a section of the native population harbors separatist sentiments. The restoration of the Ladakh Route is, therefore, perceived to have both, the economic and security implications for China, which she perceives to address through her strategic partnership with India.

No doubt, the bilateral relations between India and China went through rough weather over the last

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few decades on territorial and other issues. The China's objection to the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh's visit to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh last year and her opposition to India's waiver in the meeting of the 45 nations Energy Suppliers Group at Vienna, indicate the same. Nevertheless, China realizes India's significance as a big military and economic power in South Asia. Accordingly, she inked a number of agreements with India in diverse fields as a follow up action to several official meetings and the visit of Indian diplomats to China and vice versa.

The Fresh Optimism

The two-way optimism is prospective of restituting Ladakh route notwithstanding four decade-long border dispute on Aksai Chin in the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir in particular and Himachal Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh in general. The China seems inclined to peaceful resolution of her border disputes with India⁷ as is evident from the official statements, empirical studies and the interviews conducted by the present investigator of different shades of Chinese people in Beijing and Urumchi, Xinjiang. Which is perhaps why there has been no war between them ever since 1962. Instead, tension over Sikkim has

been neutralized with the reopening of the traditional Nathula Pass across the Tibet-Uttar Pradesh border for bilateral trade. Similarly, China has created unprecedented infrastructure, well-built roads and telecommunication systems in Xinjiang bordering Ladakh across the Karakoram. Thus entire requisite infrastructure at the cross border points is in place for the resumption of China's traditional overland link with India through Ladakh and Kashmir. The people from both sides of the border are nostalgic of the said route and are longing for its reopening for free trade and traffic. To reiterate, the Indian including the Kashmiri and Chinese merchants in great numbers treaded the Ladakh route for trade in felts, carpets, shawls, silk, cocoons, tobacco, tea, saffron, hemp, grains, herbs, teapots, porcelain, dry fruits and shoes at Yarkand, Kashghar, Khotan, Khiva, Khokand, Bukhara, Samarqand, etc.⁸ Such commodities hold relevance even now, and hence, can be exchanged along with industrial products, hardware, electronics, automobiles, pharmaceuticals, textiles, etc. This is not unlikely as there exists already informal trade in cloth, dress material, electronic goods, medicines, crockery, porcelain, footwear, craft products, tea, saffron, jewellery, etc. on the Indo-Chinese cross-border points in Ladakh.

Such a re-opening would definitely shorten distances, reduce transport costs by around 30 per cent and boost Indo-Chinese bilateral trade in the foreseeable future. Beginning with routine consumer goods, the trade can be subsequently supplemented by energy products and all sorts of high-bulk and low-cost, and low-bulk and high-cost, industrial products of the two countries.

The Silk Route Strategy

Under its *Silk Route Strategy*, China has already opened herself to Eurasia across Xinjiang by railways, highways, pipelines⁹ and trade centres along the borders states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.¹⁰ She has equally reached out to the Arabian Sea through the Pakistan-bound Karakoram highway. She simply needs to establish the Ladakh Route with India to complete a round trade route in South Asia.

India can benefit from such an arrangement for her industrial exports to and energy imports from the Central Asian Republics (CAR's) across Xinjiang and the Ladakh Route.¹¹ The latter holds great importance in view of the centrality of energy in India's foreign policy agenda. To quote, then-Petroleum Minister, Mani Shankar Aiyer, in a

meeting with his Pakistani counterpart on June 5-7, 2005, "...any country could become part of any project in the process of contacts of South Asia with West, East and Central Asia in the hydrocarbon sector."¹² China may, at the moment, be disinclined to the pipeline idea for she would not appreciate India competing for oil and gas supplies as she too is a energy-deficient country. However, she would gradually appreciate the idea for strategic considerations besides earning transit fee, gaining regional influence, and boosting her trade volume with India from US\$11.4 billion in 2007 to US\$40 billion by 2010¹³ and US\$100 billion by 2015.

Conclusion

The renewal of the traditional Ladakh Route has indisputably several threats and challenges from across the Karakoram borders in Xinjiang and Kashmir. While such challenges antedate Indo-Chinese War of 1962, many others have surfaced especially after the growth of fundamentalism in the restive regions of Xinjiang and Kashmir, which regional and global powers strive to exploit for their vested interests. Nevertheless, China and India, both, have a common stand against the non-state forces, which perhaps would be the great stimulant

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to their ever- swelling multilateral relations particularly over the past two decades. Since China is slightly ahead of India in economic growth, population strength and military capability, she can not, therefore, befriend India especially keeping her potential of largest market for her industrial goods in mind, and also the growing possibility of her becoming a permanent member of the China-sponsored Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In this backdrop, the re-opening of traditional trade route through Kashmir would bring China closer to India, shorten distances, reduce costs of expenditure on imports and exports, re-join the old Silk Route

partners, restore the heydays of free trade and human mobility, cross-cultural and ideological fertilization and create a hope of re-living among the peoples nestling the Ladakh Route in Jammu and Kashmir state and onwards in Xinjiang, China. It would reduce their hardships and tribulations which they have been miserably experiencing since Partition of Indian sub-continent and de-facto division of Kashmir. By doing so, the trans-Kashmir overland transmission channel would serve as a *dialogue road*¹⁴ to reunify the peoples of Asian civilization, which of course mandates friendly ties between India and China in particular and other South Asian countries in general. ■

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