Chapter – VI
CONCLUSION

At the outset of the third millennium, the Silk Route can still be considered to be a viable network of trade and commerce between East and West. When the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin passed through Xinjiang, the cradle of the Chinese section of the Silk Route, in 1933-1935, on his last expedition, he dreamt of reviving the old Silk Route as a great motorized highway linking China with Europe.

The beginnings of land-based trade between Orient and Occident can be treated to around 105 B.C., when the Chinese Emperor Wu-ti sent a group of Chinese emissaries to the court of Mithradates II, the Parthian rulers of Persia. At different times and throughout history, trading centers grew and prospered along the highways of the Silk Route. Great cities like the Abbasid capital of Baghdad, the Sogdian town of Samarkand and the Bactrian metropolis of Merv became dynamic entrepots where goods were traded in both directions. This trade was driven by three basic factors: firstly, the obvious desire of profit; secondly, a fascination with the exotic and thirdly, as means to enhance the political power.

Silk Route trade and commerce was truly global in nature because the commodities of trade have been unearthed in distant corners of the earth like, "an Indian ivory mirror handle from the first century A.D. found in the ruins of Pompeii, an Egyptian Pharaoh mask found in the thirteenth century grave of a Mongol Women at Genghis Khan’s capital of Karakorum in Mongolia and a seventh century bronze Buddha from Pakistan’s Swat Valley found in a Viking grave at Helgo in Sweden and Chinese Silk in Roman Empire".

2 Lotika Varadarajan, “Silk-The extra Silk Route Story” [paper presented in International Seminar on ‘Xuanzang and the Silk Route’ on January 17-19, 2003, at Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, Department of Culture, New Delhi, pp. 15-17.
Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism and Islam spread in Central Asia and China through the Silk Route. The Silk Route played the role of a connecting bridge between countries and civilizations. It served as a channel for trade, which became the catalyst for the development of arts and crafts. Travelers and explorers studied the countries and peoples of the lands along the Silk Route, thus making an enormous contribution to the development of knowledge. The world became acquainted with the ideas and work of the great philosophers, scholars and statesmen. Mutual enrichment of cultures took place, and there was an active exchange of knowledge and of spiritual and philosophical concepts and views through the ancient Silk Route.

The process of the Silk Route formation began during the Han empire, when Emperor Wu-ti sent missions against southern Siberia, known as Yuezhi. The Han emperors pushed China’s frontiers further westwards. In order to maintain the free flow of goods along the newly opened route, the Chinese policed it with garrisons and watch towers. Despite many hazards and interruptions, the Silk Route continued to flourish for a long time.

The height of the importance of the Silk Route was during the Tang dynasty, with relative internal stability in China. Individual states had mostly been assimilated, and the threat from marauding peoples was rather less. During this period, in the seventh century, the Chinese traveler Xuanzang crossed the region on his way to obtain Buddhist scriptures from India. His journey took him along the Northern Silk Road to Turfan and Kuqa, then across the Tianshan Mountains to Tashkent, Samarkand and Bactria; over the Hindu Kush to the Gandhara kingdom; in a vast circuit of India and finally back to China through the Pamirs and along the Southern Silk Route. He is still seen by the Chinese as an important influence in the development of Buddhism in China. Tang regime was the golden period of the art and the civilization of the Silk Road.

The heirs of the Tangs could not maintain internal stability of China, and neighboring states started to plunder the caravans. At that time the rise of Islam started to affect Asia and a curtain came down between the east and west. However, trade relations soon resumed with the Muslims playing the part of middlemen. The advancement of Islam along the Silk Road dealt death below to figurative art and the
portrayal of the human form. Many statues and wall paintings were damaged or destroyed by these iconoclasts. By the fifteenth century, Islam had become the religion of entire Takla Makan region. Under the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) the Silk Route was finally abandoned when China shut herself off from all contacts with the West. The decline of the Silk Route started with the crumbling of the Mongol empire due to the internecine feuds among various Mongol Khans. With the revival of Islam in the West and rise of Ming in China which emphasized Chinese nationalism and isolationism, the land route communication suffered a setback. With the development of easy and profitable sea route, the long and arduous land route was sidelined.

Interest in the revival of the Silk Route began at the end of the 19th century. Imperial Russia and Britain competed for trade opportunities in Kashgar and other cities of Central Asia. The discovery of ruins, ancient artifacts, buried cities and manuscripts attracted world wide attention. The Silk Route today is a series of paved roads and train tracks that connect east to west along the paths of old caravan routes. The new Silk Route of the 21st century covers all modes of transportation including road, rail as well as oil and gas pipelines and communication infrastructure.

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the revival of the historical Silk Route has become one of the key policy issues of the newly independent Central Asian Republics and other countries of the Silk Route region. Being landlocked and having rich natural resources, these Republics need economically viable, cheap and safe access to the world markets. In this aspect New Silk Route is seen as a strong option by these Republics and others.

The new Central Asian Republics are rapidly picking up a flourishing trade in consumer items as well as heavy industry. And, trade with China is, therefore, starting to fulfill this demand. The developing trade requires new mode of communications among these countries. Within this process, old networks of roads and railways are being revived to facilitate trade. To export natural gas and oil, pipelines are being opened among the Asian and European countries. The network of transport corridors in Central Asia and adjoining countries will provide a foundation for the development of gigantic economic zones.

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The transport network connection of Asia with Europe passes through the territory of Eurasia. Russia has been having a monopoly over the transportation network with Central Asia that was built assiduously over the past hundred years or so. But after their independence, the Central Asian Republics are keen to develop other transport networks and routes, so that they are least dependent on Russia. Hence the proposal to revive the Silk Route connecting Asia with Europe by constructing the transport corridor through the Central Asian Republics and the Southern Caucasian states to meet Europe has been mooted.

Due to the geographical proximity of Central Asia to China, Russia, West Asia and South Asia this region has emerged as distinct geopolitical entity stimulating global attention and interest. Neighboring countries like Iran, Turkey, Russia, Pakistan, India and China are pursing competing strategic, economic and cultural interests in Central Asia. China considers herself to be an important player in the new geopolitics of the region not only because it shares nearly 3000 kms.\(^3\)

China views Central Asia as a huge energy resource and a market which would extend China’s reach through Iran to Persian Gulf. China has been evincing keen interest in the project for revival of Silk Route by extending the Urumchi-Almaty rail upto Iran and other various transport systems. Gradually, Xinjiang is rising as an important base and bridge tower of China, and an international transit base for commodities. Urmichi airport has become the hub of activity. It operates direct flights to Sarjah (UAE), Istambul, Almaty, Tashkent, Osh, Bishkek, Andijan and Islamabad.\(^4\) China’s ‘Open door policy’ for promoting foreign trade is designed to carve out a definite Chinese influence in Central Asian Republics.

Revival of the Silk Route is believed to be beneficial not only for the independent states of the Central Asia, but also for economically developed countries like Germany, France, Britain etc. These countries are interested in widening the

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\(^4\) Ibid. p.262.
scope of their economic activity and doing their business in new markets of Central Asia. The concept of the Eurasian infrastructure corridor as the Eurasian Land-Bridge has attracted the serious attention of various developed countries. A number of seminars have been held by these countries emphasize the importance of the revival of the Silk Route.

The new initiative of the Chinese government, called the policy of "the New Silk Road" in reference to the ancient trade routes between east and west or "the Eurasian Land-Bridge" has opened various dimensions for the restoration of the Silk Route. The Eurasian Land-Bridge has been constructed from Lian-Yan-Gang to Rotterdam. The revival of Trans-Siberian Railways, extension of Karakorum highway, opening of the North-South corridor from Finland to the Islamic Republic of Iran as Euro-Asian Transport, construction of Gwadar-port, opening of the Sakhalin Rail-Tunnel between the Japan and Russia, the development of the Tuman-Region and Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) project are the main constituents of the Eurasian Land-Bridge as the new Silk Route.

The level of transportation on the Eurasian Land-bridge has progressively increased. Many projects have already begun. China has also set up an institution to coordinate with other countries along the Eurasian land bridge. The institution’s objective is to develop cooperation on joint transportation. Institutions of China, Mongolia and Russia have already begun to coordinate with this institution.

To secure the required high-level coordination, it is important to set up a dedicated Working Group for the corridor consisting of senior professionals taken from within as well as from outside the railways. The tasks of the Working Groups will be to plan, organize and monitor activities as regards the technical, institutional and commercial aspects relating to the land-bridge development. However, it is important to lay down the framework under which implementation progress has to be

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reported and milestone decisions have to be approved. A Coordinating Council in charge of the corridors development might provide such a framework.

India, China and Russia are the major powers of Eurasian continents, which are mainly efforts in the sharing of oil and natural resources of Central Asia via various transportation routes. These three powerful states constitute the keystone of the future multipolar world. The opening of the new Eurasian Land-bridge can provide new opportunities and carriers for cooperation between India, China and Russia. The mega project of New Silk Route is the hub of the creation of India-China-Russia strategic triangle for cooperation and management of energy security.

Energy is an important source of revenue and particularly of hard currency earnings for the Central Asian Republics. Energy resources have now assumed political significance for the Central Asian Republics because of their peculiar geographical location and uneven distribution over the Caspian region. During the last 15 years differences have surfaced among the energy rich countries of this region on issues such as the legal status of Caspian, conflicting claims about ownership of oil fields located on border regions, building of pipeline network for exporting oil and gas to world markets, construction of railways and so on. Efforts have been made to resolve some of these issues and there seems to be some success on a few issues.

There is a conflict among the Central Asian and Caucasian countries about their share and control over the oil and gas fields. These countries are trying to maximize their own share and increasing economic benefits. Russia being self-sufficient in energy seems to be mainly interested in increasing its political influence over the region and has often used energy resources of the Central Asian and Caucasian states as a means to enhance and regain its big power status. Russia wants to stop the growing American influence in the region and has found common cause in this regard with China.

Within the Central Asian and Caspian countries, the interests of the advanced industrial democracies the United States, Japan and Western Europe are both complimentary and competitive. These countries share an interest in the political stability of the region because of its strategic importance and hydrocarbon wealth.
From the perspective of these industrialized countries, the Caspian and Central Asian states are perceived as energy exporters, as importers of western products and as targets of investment.

The USA has its own geo-political and economic objectives in the Central Asian region to fight against international terrorism and also to contain the Russian influence. 9/11 has made some impact on the Central Asian region as it led to the US presence in several Central Asian and Caucasian countries of this region. On the issue of the possible routes for the transportation of oil and gas, USA and other western European countries prefer pipelines that bypass the territory of Russia and Iran via Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. Consideration is given to supplying Turkmen gas by the same route or via Afghanistan.

American interest in Central Asia and Trans – Caucasus has been best expressed by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his book *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (1997). America’s major interest lies in not allowing the rise of any other power with aspirations and capabilities to compete with the U.S. In the opinion of the US strategists, there are not many effective contestants for power and influence in Eurasia. Britain, China, Japan, Turkey, Iran, South Korea, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India do have interest in carving out their sphere of influence in Central Asia through the revival of Silk Route but with the exception of China none are serious competitors of the United States.

The World Bank is joining an international effort to revive the old Silk Route connecting China and Central Asia with Europe. The East – West road link from Baku through Alyat to the Georgian border is one of the main access routes for goods to and from Azerbaijan, and this is supported by the European Union’s TRACECA as a main link in the proposed revival of the Silk Route. A strong institution responsible for road planning and management, and adequate budgetary resources for road maintenance are key requirements at this juncture for revival of the Silk Route project.

An agreement for the development of a highly efficient North – South transportation corridor was signed by the transportation ministers of Russia, Iran and
India on September 12, 2000 at St. Petersburg, seeking to raise economic cooperation between these three nations to a new level. The agreement establishes a combined land – sea corridor, by which freight from India to Russia will be transported from the western port of India by ship to the Iranian port of Bandar-e-Abbas, and thereafter via the railroad lines to Bandar-e-Anzali on the Caspian sea. From Bandar-e-Anzali, the ship route goes to the great Russian port of Astrakhan, and then by railroad or truck to destination points in Russia, or further on to Europe. This North – South transport corridor in itself is not new, but coincides with the traditional “Tea Route” from India. The implication of the North – South corridor is a big step in the old Silk Route revival in the century of globalization.

Construction of Gwadar deep seaport and Karakorum Highway are two important constituents of the revival of Silk Route in South Asia. The Gwadar port will provide a stable and proximate point of access to the Gulf ports. India and Iran have warily watched the construction of this port in their backyard. This port would endanger Indian naval security. At the same time it can be fruitful for the economic upliftment of Pakistan. Simultaneous extension of Karakorum Highway provides good communication linkage between Central and South Asia. It is, therefore, imperative that a proper environment of cooperation is established in South Asia.

Paradoxically, initiatives taken by Pakistan for promoting trade and commercial relations with China and the Central Asian states via Karakorum Highway are facing difficulties for two reasons. Firstly, there has been no proper follow up after the understanding reached or the agreement signed to develop communication linkage with these countries. For instance the trade and transit agreement between Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is yet to be implemented. Secondly, political instability in Pakistan acts as a stumbling block to give a practical shape to the idea of building communication linkage with these countries.

On the eve of the third millennium, the idea of the revival of the Silk Route has met with broad international support and an extremely warm response, largely as

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a result of the existence of two inter-dependent trends that characterize the development of the modern world.

The first of these involves the intensification of the process of interdependence and globalization, the phenomenally rapid development and introduction of the latest technologies, communication systems and computer network and the acceleration of information and capital flows that erode national boundaries. The second trend reflects the high level of integration at sub regional levels. The current steady and dynamic development of political, trade and economic relations would be unthinkable without the strengthening of fraternal trust and mutually advantageous relations of partnership between all states of the Silk Route region.

However, there are some obstacles on the way of the restoration of the Silk Route. Russia and Iran insist upon accepting the itinerary offered by them. Another problem is that some states – participants of TRACECA programme are in armed conflict with each other. Solution of these problems as well as the restoration of the Silk Route require the participant countries to carry out their obligations on the development of the Europe – the Caucasus – Asia transport corridor.

The restoration of the Silk Route is a means for strengthening the independence of Central Asian Republics. It is a key to the solution of their socio-economic, political and cultural problems. It would promote the development of regional cooperation within Central Asia and Europe as well.