

THE NEW SILK ROAD: A GEORGIAN PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Today, the discussion on building new relationships between the East and West has become increasingly intense. In the literature of political science, East and West have once more assumed geographical connotations, unlike the times of the Cold War, when, with the exception of school textbooks, they had political meaning and were identified with the two competing blocs in the world order. Such a semantic transformation occurred, thanks to the changes of historic importance that took place on the political world map. The demise of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the so-called Socialist Bloc were a demonstration of those changes. It can be argued with some reservations that the world today is more open, free from ideological and military confrontation and inclined towards integration. To this, we must also add the revolutionary changes in information and computer technology as well as in telecommunications that we are witnessing now. These changes serve as both the cause and the effect of the gradual globalisation of development processes.

Modern theories of competitiveness and development resent isolationism and autarky. This is particularly striking against the background of the growing globalisation of international processes. In fact, with the demise of the bipolar world order, it has become clear that the existing system of exchanging material, human, financial and spiritual resources, and information between countries and regions is ineffective, unproductive and, on the whole, unresponsive to the new challenges. This is particularly true regarding the immense Eurasian continent, which until quite recently was divided by the Iron Curtain.

Thus, it was no accident that the need to build a new bridge connecting East with West, in addition to the existing communications system, including through Russia, became a necessity. Subsequently, the new bridge acquired various more or less complete names, such as the Eurasian Transport and Communication Corridor. Since there had already been a precedent of trade between East and West, which was mainly represented by the transportation of the renowned Chinese silk to Asia Minor and on to Europe, this project is also widely known as the restoration of the Great Silk Road. In a certain sense, this is a new geopolitical and geo-economic necessity that will serve the needs of the international community as well as the countries and regions the new Eurasian bridge will cross.

DEFINING SOME TERMS

As the topic of restoration of the Great Silk Road is discussed increasingly in different forums and in the mass media, this subject has become somewhat fashionable and, accordingly, is interpreted in a number of ways. Very often one encounters terms such as the Great or Historic Silk Road, the Eurasian Thoroughfare, the Eurasian Transport Bridge, the Eurasian Transport Corridor, the TRACECA Road, the TRACECA Corridor or just TRACECA. As these terms often have a similar meaning and are even used synonymously, which we believe is incorrect, we deem it necessary to provide a brief explanation:

1. It is obvious that when the restoration of the Great Silk Road is discussed, it in no way means the point-by-point duplication of the old transport routes of Chinese silk, lacquer, paper or other craft products. Giving this name to the project undoubtedly invokes a certain symbolism, but it does not adequately reflect the nature of the ongoing processes of building new relations between East and West. A modern interpretation of the Silk Road covers an exchange of technological achievements, a dialogue among and the mutual enrichment of various cultures, an area of co-operation and co-existence among different civilisations, a common market and, perhaps, a system of collective security. In other words, the Silk Road is a multifaceted system of spatio-temporal relationship among nations, states and civilisations, which is the result of an evolutionary process of a co-operation on the enormous Eurasian landmass. Therefore, we believe it would be correct to talk of building a New Silk Road instead of the restoration of the Old, Historic or Great Silk Road. Furthermore, in the process of establishing the New Silk Road, we must put major emphasis on the establishment of one of its components: the Eurasian Transport Corridor. The Transport Corridor is the foundation from which the other components of the system will develop.

2. The Eurasian Transport and Communication Corridor is a general definition embracing concepts such as the Eurasian Bridge, the Eurasian Thoroughfare, etc. At the same time, its meaning is connected solely with transport and the transit of goods. In explaining the notion of the Eurasian Transport Corridor, one should note that it means a new, up-to-date, transcontinental and international transportation system connecting resource-rich Central Asia with the large European consumer market and encompassing a web of railroads, highways, airways, sea transportation lines and pipelines equipped with fibre-optic communications. A space satellite system will support all this by providing help with the movement and exchange of goods and information, and monitoring the area. In other words, the Eurasian Transport Corridor comprises four components:

a) Traditional transportation infrastructure, the rebuilding of which is under way predominantly within the TRACECA regional programme and projects financed by the World Bank and the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD),

b) The pipeline transportation system and its infrastructure, the construction of which is mainly conducted by private companies and consortia,

c) The trans-Eurasian fibre-optic cable system, various sections of which are being constructed within the Black Sea Economic Co-operation (BSEC), TRACECA programme and the Dokap project, and also within the Frankfurt-Shanghai communication system,

d) The space satellite system, for which the funds necessary are now being raised.

3. As for TRACECA, there are several reasons why it cannot be identified with the Eurasian Transport Corridor, and more so, with the New Silk Road:

a) TRACECA is a name of the project that is carried out under the aegis of an EU programme of technical assistance (TACIS), which encompasses exclusively the traditional means of transportation and does not include, inter alia, important components of the Eurasian Transport Corridor, such as a pipeline system. The Baku-Supsa early-oil pipeline and future projects connected with pipeline transportation falls outside TRACECA.

b) The TRACECA's geographic area is increasing and now includes the Ukraine, Moldova and Mongolia, besides the countries of the southern Caucasus and Central Asia. Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey could join soon. Therefore, since geographic location is not a limit to participation in TRACECA and any Eurasian country can join, its area of operation can expand in any direction. At the same time, the Eurasian Transport Corridor is limited to the southern Caucasus and Central Asia. This lack of 'geographic coincidence' could grow even further and so it would be a mistake to treat the two as being the same.c) Great non-European powers, such as the USA, Japan and China, have become increasingly interested in the Eurasian Transport Corridor. The Japanese government has devised a special programme to support and invest in the Transport Corridor under its New Eurasian Diplomacy doctrine and, in the US, the adoption of the so-called Silk Road Strategy Act is nearing an end. Both documents imply strong political support and encouragement for investments in building the New Silk Road. Most probably, these investments will be larger than the ones made under the aegis of TRACECA. This is a further reason to argue against the TRACECA programme's monopolistic patronage of the Eurasian Transport Corridor and, even more, against identifying it with the New Silk Road.

THE NEW SILK ROAD IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION

The development and utilisation of microelectronics, biotechnology, nuclear energy and other advanced technologies has enhanced production quality. Also, the distance between people is shorter because of high-speed, spacious and high capacity means of transportation (such as locomotives, cars, aeroplanes and ships) and the emergence of pipeline transportation and fibre-optic communications. The invention of container transportation, like glue, cemented the aforementioned means of transportation into a unified whole and, thus, enabled the formation of a new phenomenon-the transport and communication corridor. The emergence of transport corridors has significantly accelerated trends towards globalisation and brought about a new scientific discipline. Today the economics of transport corridors is often understood as a science that deals with the exchange and the distribution of new forms of co-operation, technology and goods among various regions. Transport arteries have a history going back thousands of years to the overland trading routes that linked the civilisations and population centres of China, India, the Middle and Near East, Europe and Africa. Indeed, the famous Silk Road of ancient times was only part of a Eurasian-wide trading network that extended north and included the so-called 'Fur Roads' in Siberia. From ancient times, the history of great trading routes was connected with the development of cities, promoting the spread of knowledge and culture over the entire vast area. The present population distribution in Eurasia reflects this combined effect of the natural corridors formed by major rivers and coastlines and the 'artificial' corridors formed by trade routes, man-made canals, roads and railroads. It is a remarkable fact that some 25 per cent of the entire population of Eurasia and 70 per cent of its urban population are concentrated within the transport corridor connecting Europe with China. The improvement of infrastructure of this transport thoroughfare has great importance to everyone, including those in the West, which, therefore, will gain easy access to China, a market of more than one billion people. There are three main transcontinental transport corridors in the world today:

a) The continental bridge of North America, from the East Coast to the West Coast, where just two big railroad companies-Burlington Northern Railroad Co. and Canadian Pacific Rail System-ship more than 500 thousand containers annually,b) The Trans-Siberia Euro-Asia continental bridge, which does not operate to full capacity for well-known reasons, but has a potential capacity of 300 thousand containers per annum,

c) The new Eurasian Transport and Communication Corridor, which is currently under construction.

The most distinct characteristic of the new Eurasian bridge is that it links, from east to west, Pacific and Atlantic economic centres, which are a fundamental part of the developed region. Between these centres is a vast and somewhat narrow, less developed region that is rich in natural resources and lacks appropriate transport infrastructure. This region is also extremely diverse in terms of ethnicity, confession and religious beliefs and is highly susceptible to conflicts. However, with the achievements of modern science and technology and the dreadful lessons learned from the two world wars and the Cold War, society has acknowledged interdependence as a common discipline from which it shall not depart. Promotion of Euro-Asian economic co-operation and the expansion of Euro-Asian economic exchanges is not only a need of the least developed and underdeveloped countries and regions, but also a need of developed countries and regions. The poor countries need investment, credit resources and technical assistance, while the developed ones are interested in natural resources and new markets. The latter are also interested in the 'export' of democracy and the market economy to the developing regions, which in turn will strengthen stability and the spirit of partnership among them and will dwarf the possibility of aggression. Such a 'democratic area' will serve as a wedge to divide potentially aggressive and conflict-prone Russia from the Middle East and South Asia. The Eurasian Transport Corridor, which will create the basis for an arena of mutually beneficial co-operation, has the following advantages:

- There are many bridge-heads at the two ends of the transport corridor. At one end are the ports of Rizhao, Lianyungang and Shanghai in east China and the port of Guangzhou and Shenzhen in south China. The bridgeheads on the other end, are the ports along the east coast of the Atlantic Ocean, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean,
- A multitude of ports and the broad hinterland will attract plenty of containers in the future,
- The regions along the corridor are rich in natural resources, including raw materials of strategic value,
- The Eurasian Transport Corridor is 3000 km shorter than the Trans-Siberia thoroughfare,
- The east and west bridge-heads are all ice-free ports, so that cargo handling can operate all the year round.

The 'energy aspect' is another special feature of the Eurasian Transport Corridor that sets it apart from the other transport networks. In forthcoming decades, oil and natural gas will most likely continue to determine the world energy balance and will therefore remain strategic products. That is why the issues connected to mining and transporting large quantities of oil and natural gas will be at the top of the political agenda for some time to come, attracting world public opinion and triggering geopolitical games, big and small. This may complicate the political situation in the region, but it is also a factor of stability since the large external powers exploiting these products will have to assume responsibility for maintaining peace and security along the artery. It is not accidental that the US, the EU, Japan and China express increasing interest in the construction of the New Silk Road. As we have already noted, the US Congress is actively considering the Silk Road Strategy Act, the EU is vigorously engaged in building and modernising the transport infrastructure through the TRACECA and Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe (INOGATE) programmes, the Japanese government devised the New Eurasian Diplomacy doctrine and the Chinese government works intensively to link Xinjiang province to the Central Asian railroad systems. The World Bank, EBRD, other international financial organisations, multinational corporations, etc. are also active.

CONCLUSION

The unprecedented concentration of global political and economic superpower interests on the Eurasian Transport Corridor is a reality. This gives a rare chance to the South Caucasian and the Central Asian countries to make use of these unique circumstances and translate the competitive advantage of their favourable geographic location into economic and cultural

welfare. Full exploitation of this potential will be greatly in excess of the past and present economic, technical and humanitarian aid that the states in the region receive from international organisations and donor states. For all this to take place, it is necessary to stabilise the situation in the region and create tangible guarantees for peace and sustainable development. This is the very goal of the initiative for the 'Peaceful Caucasus' launched by the President of Georgia two years ago. The initiative offers a certain political formula that aims at transforming the existing confrontation, crises and poverty in the region into co-operation and general welfare. It is encouraging that the countries of the region, the leading powers and international organisations supported this initiative. In the recently published Great Silk Route, Eduard Shevardnadze illustrates a new vision of the Eurasian artery. In his opinion, there is a need to create a single political, economic, technical-scientific, humanitarian and cultural area acceptable to all concerned. The ambitious proposal to create a common market in the South Caucasus and Eurasia may still seem a very remote prospect, but as Shevardnadze remarks, "Political time can run faster than the calendar." As indeed, we believe, is truly the case this time too.