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## Pipelineistan and the New Silk Road(s)

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SINGAPORE - Ask Western elites - oh, those were the days, in the 17th century, when the rise of European sea powers led to the collapse of the caravan trade and the end of the Silk Road as Europe found a cheaper - and safer - way of trading between East and West.

Now, centuries after Tang armies establishing nodes all over Central Asia as far as Khorasan in northeast Iran, the 21st century Silk Road(s) are back. The camels now wear iPads, with the Persian Gulf as a high-tech caravanserai.

*Si chou zhi lu* ("Silk Road" in Mandarin). What's in a name? Trouble. A lot of trouble. At least if you ask the Pentagon, which places most of these roads - from the Persian Gulf to Central Asia and even the South China Sea - smack in the middle of its famous "arc of instability". In parallel, in rising Eastern latitudes, it's Dream Team time: and the name of the game is Eurasian integration.

Who's the real Iron Man in this picture? It has to be Beijing Man, expanding his economy at a dizzying pace, securing all the resources he needs - not only oil and gas but by being the world's largest consumer of aluminum, copper, lead, nickel, zinc, tin, iron ore - and breathlessly moving global power tectonic plates.

So no wonder Beijing is appalled by the carnage/civil war forced upon Syria by foreign actors;

that's bad for business. The PRC has historically viewed Syria as a *ning jiu li* - a cohesive force in the Arab world - in many aspects the epicenter of the Arab world, and much more progressive, socially, than the Persian Gulf. And while Beijing always praised Syria's stability, the Syrian establishment had been in thrall to China's economic miracle.

### **When the saints go marchin' in**

What we are experiencing now could be described as The Long March West (from the point of view of Beijing) versus The Short March East, as in Pivoting to Asia (from the point of view of Washington).

But it's not pivoting in the sense of the best the US has to offer - the university-based research system absorbing talent from all over; the drive to dare, to risk, to take a second chance; that vortex of invention - new companies, new industries, new products.

In this vast chessboard where the complex, intertwined geo-economic competition known as the New Great Game in Eurasia is being played, both kings are easy to identify: Pipelineistan, and the multiple intersections of the 21st century Silk Road. Call them the new iron and steel Silk Roads.

Across this immense Eurasian grid, speed trumps institutional politics. Nobody - from the European Union to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) - is on top of all that's going on; we would need a 4D version of the pipeline map room at Gazprom's headquarters in Moscow, a Star Wars version of the London Underground map.

What we can do is set out on a lightning quick road trip. Starting with Turkey, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Group of 20 member - keen to bill itself as the energy crossroads for Caspian oil, Iraqi oil, and now Kurdistan oil in northern Iraq.

Turkey has gone totally New Silk Road. Last month, it officially became a dialogue partner of the SCO. Why dream of entering a sinking EU? No. Better reinforce a political and trading partnership with Moscow and Beijing - not to mention the Central Asian "stans".

Now that's certainly a more sound application of Foreign Minister Davutoglu's "strategic depth" than that muddled "logistical support" for regime change in Syria.

Then there's the Southeast Anatolia Project, and the Ataturk Dam - not very far, by the way, from the Syrian border. The Euphrates river dam system - planned in the 1970s - is also propelling Turkey as a great power in the Arab Middle East. Inescapable, when you can divert as much as 90% of Iraq's and 40% of Syria's water power.

But only Iran can enable Turkey to fulfill its core strategic goal - as in the prime energy crossroads from East to West - because that would mean Turkey as the prime mover of oil and gas from Iran to Europe. If or when that happens, Turkey will be way more important than just a land bridge. Turkey and Iran may be competitors but more than ever they need to be allies.

Most of all what happens in Iran and to Iran will determine which way the wind will blow in Eurasia. Iran strategically straddles Mesopotamia, Anatolia, the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, Central and South Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Arabian Sea. Iran dominates the Persian Gulf - from the Shatt al Arab to the Strait of Hormuz. Location, population, energy wealth: the absolute key to Southwest Asia. Ask Dick Cheney; no wonder for Washington this has always been the Great Prize.

Pipelineistan - from a Western point of view - has always carried an obsessive theme; how to bypass both Russia and Iran. So inevitably Pipelineistan explains a great deal about why Syria is being destroyed. Take the agreement for the US\$10 billion Iran-Iraq-Syria gas pipeline that was signed in July 2012. This crucial Pipelineistan node will export gas from the South Pars field in Iran (the largest in the world, shared with Qatar), through Iraq, towards Syria, with a possible extension to Lebanon, with certified customers in Western Europe. It's what our friends in Beijing describe as a "win-win" situation.

But not for - guess who? - Turkey and Qatar. Qatar wants a rival pipeline from its North field (contiguous with Iran's South Pars field), through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and finally Turkey. Final destination: once again, Western Europe.

In terms of bypassing both Iran and Russia, the Qatari pipeline totally fits the bill, while with the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline, the export route may originate nowhere else than in Tartus, the Syrian port in the Eastern Mediterranean that hosts the Russian navy. And Gazprom would certainly be part of the whole picture, from investment to distribution.

### **Go West, young Han**

Non-stop movement in Pipelineistan, a railway frenzy, a network of underground fiber-optic cables. As far as Beijing is concerned, does it need to behave as a neo-colonial power, like Europe in the past? Of course not. And unlike the US, Beijing sports no ideology. No Western liberal democracy as Promised Land. No "moral progress" in geopolitics. No missionary drive. They just buy their way in.

Thus those Himalayas of new geopolitical "facts on the ground" all across Eurasia - from deep-water ports in Myanmar to special economic zones in North Korea.

We may already glimpse the contours of a new Eurasian land bridge - including, for instance, the integration of Central Asia with Xinjiang as well as a southern Silk Road branching through Indochina, linking China to Thailand. Thus the emergence of Kunming as a crack Chinese hub for an immense sub-region of Eurasia. We may interpret some of it as China Going West - a much more refined expansion of the original 1999 Go West campaign, which centered on Xinjiang. And we're not even talking about a Chinese trade-fueled economic renaissance of the Russian Far East.

China will be involved in the building of a high-speed railway line in Iran. And then there's China's Af-Pak vision: a maze of roads and pipelines connected to Indian Ocean ports linked with Central Asian roads connecting Xinjiang with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, India and Iran also plan to build a new Southern Silk Road, centered on Chabahar port in southeast Iran.

Eventually, Pakistan is bound to become a node of Greater China. The crucial game will be played in the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar. Beijing bets on Gwadar as a key transshipment hub linking it to Central Asia and the Gulf. Both ports - Chabahar and Gwadar - are key pawns in the New Great Game in Eurasia and also happen to be at the heart of Pipelineistan.

The Iran-Pakistan (IP) pipeline will go through Gwadar - with the distinct possibility of a Chinese-built extension all the way to Xinjiang. Gwadar might also become a terminal in case the ultimate Pipelineistan soap opera - the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline - is ever built. We all know it won't.

Then there's the Russia-China strategic partnership. Finally Beijing and Moscow agreed on the delivery of 38 billion cubic meters of Russian natural gas per year to China starting in 2015. That's Moscow helping Beijing to accomplish a key national security goal; the simultaneous escape from Hormuz and Malacca - not to mention a big help for China to develop its landlocked provinces.

Obviously China needs a powerful navy; 85% of Chinese imports arrive by the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Then there's all that oil and gas to be exploited across the South China Sea - which could become a sort of mini-Persian Gulf.

So the first step towards a Greater China would be to - peacefully - engage the whole of the South China Sea and Southeast Asia. Then to adequately protect the sea routes to the Middle East across the Indian Ocean, through which China receives oil from Angola, Sudan and Nigeria, iron ore from mines in Zambia and Gabon, copper and cobalt from mines in Democratic Republic of Congo. But more than anything China will privilege a steady network of energy supply from Myanmar, Russia, Central Asia and Iran.

### **Hillary's 3 am nightmare**

Faced with this Eurasian integration frenzy, the US does appear like an island on the other side of the world. The US counter-strategy to all the action in Eurasia has been to designate the Indian Ocean as the new, global strategic center of gravity; that's the essence of the Obama administration's "pivoting to Asia". For the White House/Pentagon, who controls this strategic center, in theory, controls Eurasia; but if you read the fine print, rather controls Chinese energy imports from the Persian Gulf and Africa - as well as the developing South-South economic axis between China and Africa, not to mention interferes in the free-trade area between China and ASEAN.

Here we find the Obama administration's Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) drive - that collection of shady free trade agreements shaped by 600 "secret" US corporate advisers currently being negotiated with the Pacific Rim, including Australia, New Zealand and ASEAN members Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam.

That may be a cool deal, for instance, to Big Pharma - smashing access to cheap generic medications in the developing world. It will be a wet dream for Wall Street finance capital gangsters - because it will allow a derivative fun-fest and an orgy of currency speculation. It will be a sort of financial Shock and Awe over Asia - once more with US big businesses telling governments it's our way or the highway. We may also call it the economic arm of the Obama administration's pivoting.

For a time, it seemed that Hillary Clinton had brushed up on Ancient Persia, Alexander the Great, the Mongols, Mughals, and Sikhs, and "saw the light" in Afghanistan; that's when she came up with a Washington vision of a New Silk Road (road, rail, pipelines) running through Afghanistan.

Maybe Hillary had a 3 am nightmare about the Iranian Eastern Corridor - built by India in 2008, from Chabahar to the Afghan border, roughly 200 km, and then connecting with the Zaranj-Delaram highway (also built by India) in Nimruz, in western Afghanistan, and further with the Afghan Ring Road. New Delhi, Tehran, and Kabul have planned a railway line along the entire route to facilitate trade - especially Afghan mineral wealth - to and from Central Asia.

So here we have India getting huge strategic leverage, not to mention exploring part of that \$3 trillion in Afghan mineral wealth alongside China; and Afghanistan finding an access to the sea, bypassing the Pakistani grip, and once again configuring Iran as the privileged Silk Road in and out of Central Asia.

Add to Pipelineistan the Economic Cooperation Organization freight railway Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad, already carrying \$20 billion in goods a year - and counting.

The lesson here? No matter Washington's obsession in isolating Iran, India - as well as Turkey - not to mention China and Russia, would always be betting on Asian integration.

Washington's obsession with isolating Iran led, for instance, to the Bill Clinton administration embracing the Taliban in the 1990s in the hope of building TAPI. Instead of that chimera - TAPI - or that other expensive soap opera, Nabucco - gas from the Caspian shipped through the Caucasus to Turkey - Iran is the real deal to carry Turkmenistan's gas to Europe.

Talk about the Asian energy security grid; all exports from gas republic Turkmenistan already go to Iran, China and Russia. And Iran and Kazakhstan are also linked by rail and pipeline - meaning Kazakhstan has a direct access to the Persian Gulf.

We all know by now how the "pivoting" follows what has been the US's strategic target in Central Asia since the first Clinton administration; to interfere in Pipelineistan not as much in terms of diversifying sources of energy for the West, but in preventing strategic victories for Russia, China and Iran.

Washington has had its own New Silk Road ideas, Hillary-style, linking Central to South Asia. None of them incorporate Iran. The only US Silk Road so far has been the Northern Distribution

Network (NDN) - that logistical/military marathon snaking across Central Asia with - what else - a narrow military purpose, so the US and NATO could resupply their spectacular failure in Afghanistan bypassing "unreliable" Pakistan.

So the Big Picture, long term, indicates relentless Chinese expansion westwards - based on trade - versus a US strategy that is essentially military. What is certain is that a great escape from the Atlanticist-dominated routes of trade, commerce and finance has been on for quite some time. And the New Silk Road(s) will be built by emerging Asia - and not by a fearful, declining West.