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The Sitan-countries: History as challenge along the Silk Road

Rainer Feldbacher

Associate Professor at the School of History, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

rainer.feldbacher@univie.ac.at

Abstract. The Eurasian trade route was more than 6,000 kilometers long and split into several sub-strands and has a long history. Now all of these routes have been revived. With a corresponding expansion of the infrastructure, certain circumstances are still challenging in the 21st century: nationalism, especially among the former Soviet states, security in times of global terror, and economic competition. The Central Asian region is a melting pot of different ethnic groups, in ancient, as well as more recent, history, sometimes with more harmonious coexistence, and sometimes with more conflicts that influence politics and social background. The author traveled through the individual states, examined the ecological-economic factors and conducted interviews to clarify socio-political views. This paper examines the implications regarding economy and politics, the cultural background, and to where it refers.

Keywords. Silk Road, OBOR, TRACECA, SCO, EEU, SREB

Introduction

The Silk Road was fruitful in connecting regions and cultures. Cultural contacts between individual sites and regions in their individual forms (languages, religious aspects, construction methods, art style, commercial products, etc.) enable the recognition of patterns of cross-regional cultural networking and make clear the crucial importance of these cultural contacts for the development of this area over the millennia. The Silk Road had long served as a catalyst for a wide variety of religions that are until nowadays recognizable by architecture, tradition and life style even in modern societies in those specific countries.

The splendor of the Silk Road is largely lost today, however, because its central area in Central Asia is now largely one of the developing and transition countries. In the former Soviet republics, people proudly refer to their past before socialism – in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan or Afghanistan. The present, however, confronts them with increasingly difficult political, economic and ecological conditions, which hardly seem to improve in some countries. In January 1992, only one month after founding of the new Central Asian countries, China signed a series of agreements to establish diplomatic relations with all of them (Pan 2007).

With the opening of the Eastern Bloc, new opportunities for economic integration between East and West opened up. Transcontinental transports from Western Europe to Eastern Asia became simply necessary, and thus, OBOR-related projects were quickly developed in Central Europe under the CEE 16+1 mechanism (Richet, Ruet, & Wang 2017, 99). Though,

most of the shipments are still carried out by ship through the Suez Canal, the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca. The fact that the land route has so far hardly been used is due to the natural obstacles such as mountains and deserts that traders had to overcome, but above all to the lack of infrastructure in most countries that have to be crossed. In addition, or not least because of this, the sea routes between Asia and the Middle East, and later also Europe, were increasingly discovered and expanded, mainly Central and Eastern European (CEE) (Matura 2018, 174).

Yet the continental route is gaining in importance again due to faster land transport and the resources that lie dormant in the interior of Eurasia. Thus, the Belt and Road Initiative is not the only or the first measure of greater cooperation across the area of the old Silk Road: For example, TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia) was created (Karamustafa & Kahraman 2016). All EU Member States are involved, the Caucasus countries Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia (Lianlei 2016), Ukraine, Moldova, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, as well as the Central Asian countries Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan (Chan 2018, 106-107). The EU does not run the program entirely unselfishly. In Central Asia there are huge deposits of crude oil and gas, some of which have so far hardly been developed. The expansion and reconstruction of oil and gas pipelines, funded by the EU, also belongs to the TRACECA-projects (Bizhanova 2018, 60). The EU wants to secure new sources of fossil fuels in order not to rely on Russia alone. In addition to the sanctions imposed in connection with the Ukraine crisis, this leads to further conflicts. The Eurasian corridor sought by the EU runs outside of Russian territory. Regardless of whether it is about oil and gas, the transport of industrial and commercial goods or the establishment of regional trade zones – Russia understandably sees with reservations that its previous republics are economically emancipating themselves from their former mother land.

Then there is the China factor: The People's Republic is a lot more active in terms of economic expansion.

Deserts like the Taklamakan have to be crossed, which alone had once taken up to five months to transport the goods. In Kashgar the goods were re-sorted to be transported north to what is now Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to the Black Sea, or south over the Pamir mountains to Persia or even across the Karakoram Mountains in what is now Afghanistan to India. The Pamir was one of the major obstacles that had to be overcome on the way from Europe to Asia and back, in the corner of China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Tajikistan. All those nations (and provinces) have Muslim backgrounds with socialist characteristics. Nowadays China succeeds connecting the regions despite those obstacles (fig. 1)



Fig. 1: Chinese Road construction in the Pamir

Countries and their history along the Routes

The Silk Road did not run in the form of a single route from east to west, but consisted of a whole network of branches, like an ancient motorway, with “expressways” and local feeders. Some were used more frequently, while others less well known and with less intensity, but are often underestimated nowadays. Some examples are those on the steppes of Kazakhstan. Many maps trace the route from China through Central Asia south of the Caspian Sea. China is seen as the eastern center of the Silk Road. Slightly further to the west, “Tocharistan”¹ seemed to be the only area of Iran heavily colonized by Arabs, where Buddhism had flourished when they arrived, and it was the only area incorporated into the Arab empire where Sanskrit studies were pursued up to the conquest. No further translations of Sanskrit works into Arabic are known until that of Al-Biruni (Akasoy, Burnett, & Yoeli-Tlalim 2011, 46).

The political, economic and cultural situation is due to the complex history of the region: With the expansion of the Abbasid Caliphate into the Sasanian Empire, Islam adapted many Hellenistic and Persian concepts, imported by thinkers of Iranian or Turkic origin (Hunter 1998, 44). This era is sometimes called the “Islamic Golden Age”. Public hospitals established during this time (called Bimaristan hospitals), are considered “the first hospitals” in the modern sense of the word and issued the first medical diplomas to license doctors (Alatas 2006). As with any cultural, ethnic or religious entity, there are differences among the Islamic (by Arab-Persian-Turkic-Chinese influences) characteristics, most obvious in architectural patterns. However, this rule has been interpreted in different ways by different scholars and in different historical periods, and there are examples of paintings of both animals and humans in Mughal, Persian, and Turkish art. Figural representation is virtually unused in Islamic art because of Islam’s strong aversion toward idolatry. It was important for Muslim scholars and artists to find a style of art that represented the Islamic ideals of unity (tawhid) and order without figural representation. Geometric patterns perfectly suited this goal (Ayduz, Kalin, & Dagli 2014). Geometry became the primary graphic language of artistic forms: Mathematically accurate geometric structures expressed the ideas of the beauty of the Universe. The geometric harmony with its principles of symmetry, proportion and commensurateness became equated with the perfection of the world’s divine order (Arapov 2013, 183). Also, in the Sitan-countries, mainly the Persian influence can be observed. There are different reasons as will be highlighted in the following description of specific countries.

The Silk Road was mainly a fertile exchange between nations and regions, from time to time under cruel reign: Genghis Khan (1162-1227), who established his Mongol empire in Central Asia, or Tamerlane (1336-1405) and his rule of the Timurids still stand for the exoticism of the region (Arapov 2013, 204). However, both grand sovereigns had little to do with the Silk Road. Yet, residents of the individual Sitan-states even nowadays repeatedly refer to them, after they rediscovered their own past after their independence. Stereotypes, as a result of their own perception, come up. Ethnic identity is characterized by inherent allegiance to particular elements that are fixed and unchanging (Skop, & Li 2017). A rather similar pattern can be observed in recent times:

“It was only the end of the Cold War that has offered the possibility of the breakdown of century-old overland barriers that the intermodal and globalized trade system of the Silk Road era would have a chance to revive, but it had again had to wait for more than a decade through the initial pains of political and economic restoration among many countries affected

¹ What would be the central part of Bactria, where first contacts between China and the Greco-Bactrian kingdom took place, covering nowadays Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and parts of Northern Pakistan, the name deriving from the Indo-European Tocharians. Tremblay 2007, 77.

to see the ancient project to realize in the twenty-first Century” (Chan 2018, 106). The collapse of the Soviet Union gave the chance to a new start, but was also a challenge and crisis for most of the newly independent nations. The five former Soviet republics have drifted far from each other after the dissolution of the USSR. Currently, they have different or even contradictory foreign and internal policies, economic strategies, and even social structures (Horák 2014, 167). Though, the Central Asian republics used the chance and established relations with different major powers and with different regional and international organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Haas 2007), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Though interests are diverse and partly contradicting, coordination in bilateral as well as multilateral formats on security, economic, and transport projects became crucial for the region, not least after national conflicts as well as terrorism in many regions, including political stabilization and economic restoration of neighbors as Afghanistan (Rakhimov 2015, 14). And in recent years, the interconnection along continents became a hot topic:

The revival of a new silk road started when three competing global players implemented multilateral infrastructure development projects for advanced economic interconnectedness in Central Asia. Washington proposed a “New Silk Road Initiative” to connect Central Asian states amongst themselves and with Afghanistan. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU / EaEU), initiated by Kazakhstan with support of some CIS members in 1994, though not officially signed by the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia until May 29, 2014, on the other hand was launched to serve according to Vladimir Putin as the foundation of a new “epoch” for the post-Soviet states (Abazov 2017, 165). And China announced in 2013 its plans for the SREB (Silk Road Economic Belt), expanding railways and, most especially, energy pipeline networks in the region (Harutyunyan 2019, 319), where Central Asia plays a key role: Kazakhstan as well as China are investing to increase the number of freight routes to Europe. In 2016, the number of services between Kazakhstan and China increased by 21 percent, with 84 percent of the total being freight services. In February 2016, cargo trains began running from China to Iran via Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Transit alone, however, is not necessarily going to develop economies (Lain 2018, 2).

China and Russia share discontent with the continuous presence of third parties, as an American military base in Manas airport is located close to Bishkek. The two powers succeed so far in co-operational, rather than confrontational, approaches to the control of Central Asia seeing in the USA a contraceptive (Horák 2014, 166).

The cultural influences and transitions are another transnational characteristic along all those countries: This is, on the one hand, the result of military invasions, and on the other hand, through peaceful exchange that went hand in hand with trade. This can be determined by taking over inventions, but more tangibly through traditions and art such as jewelry and architecture. The Sitan-countries and their Muslim influence reflect different interpretations, a confluence of Arab-Persian, Nomadic and/or Chinese style. After the inclusion in the Caliphate, Central Asia became a part of a common field of the Islamic culture, which declared a new worldview. In architecture, the emerging Islamic principle included the conquered advanced architectural worlds of the Middle East, Mediterranean, and Iran. Thus, mainly the period from the 9th to the 15th century is regarded as the time of the greatest achievements and development of culture, witnessed nowadays mainly the architecture of Central Asia, the time marked by the rise of the urban culture. The open mind of the Islamic world and the inclusion of other cultures coming from all cardinal directions testify the Silk Road’s spirit - the evidence of the great past, which still amazes travelers.

Old and new infrastructure, and new challenges

The civilizations in Central Asia developed in a dry and inhospitable landscape. The motivation for such development was the trade and exchange along the Silk Road. However, other factors were crucial for survival: Cultural development in such dry zones goes hand in hand with the inventive ways and means of the locals to use water. In some countries, they can be traced, or are still partially used today: From Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan (Mukimov 2013, 113), northwest China (Tolmbok 2017, 403) or Iran (Eslamian, Davari, and Reyhani 2017, 123-150), it is known that the residents of such settlements used karez (called qanat in Iran) to use the little water that ran down from the adjacent mountain ranges into the deserts to collect and use. These karez consist of small artesian wells that collect groundwater and are lined up in hundreds of lines several kilometers long. In underground channels, the water runs down the slope and can supply several settlements with water. The ideal prerequisite for the karez are slightly inclined plains in semi-desert areas, such as those usually found north of the numerous elongated mountain ranges in Central Asia (Guliyev 2017, 323-332).

In Kazakhstan, where extensive nomadic and semi-nomadic cattle-breeding was common, written records or regional legends indicate that there must be underground channels. Although there are a number of remains of medieval settlements in South Kazakhstan that could hardly have been supplied by the few and sometimes only seasonal rivers, the necessary water supply could not be proven. A large center of irrigated agriculture in the 9-12th centuries for example was the Otrar oasis (Glaudinov & Glaudinova 2013, 12). Finally, an entire network of fountain galleries has been discovered by flying over the Turkestan and Otrar oases (Sala 2000), which were inhabited from around the year 200 to 1700 (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: The remains of Otrar

For example, more than 260 karez lines were identified in the area of ten by ten kilometers northeast of the former village of Sauran in the oasis of Turkestan. Together they are 110 kilometers long and consist of over 10,000 individual wells. The capacity of a single karez-line of a few kilometers in length can range from ten to 150 liters of water that come to the surface from the groundwater every second (Schlager 2008a). Successful water policies that had been completely lacking in the 20th century under Communist rule, as the Aral lake shows insistently and should force politicians and common people to reflect about the ridge walk between economy and ecology.

Specific cooperation with China shows clearly that situation: Kazakhstan has expressed concern about China's diversion of water from the Ili River in arid northwestern China, which is contributing to the drying up of Kazakhstan's Lake Balkash, the second-largest body of water in Central Asia (Bohnenberger-Rich 2018). Moreover, there are also unresolved tensions with China over two trans-border rivers, the Ili and Irtysh (Laruelle 2018, xi). The more population, the more water is needed. Water management in Central Asia became a substantial source of enmity among the states of the region, particularly between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, on the one hand, and Uzbekistan, on the other. This is a complex situation, battered by intra- and inter-state tensions relating to the water distribution system (Duarte 2018, 16).

Another aspect was and is security: In the first centuries of Islam, fortresses had to be restored, and sardoba (reservoirs) and new caravanserais were built along old caravan roads. To

protect agricultural oases with large towns in the center (Bukhara oasis, Samarkand) the boundary walls were strengthened and the towns at the border with the steppe as Binket (present day Tashkent) and the Khorezm fortresses became particularly well-fortified (Arapov 2013, 180).

The Central Asian nations have no other choice than playing the big actors' new "Great Game" (referring to the 19th and 20th century power struggle between Russia and Great Britain for the position in Central Asia), in recent years mainly China: Despite the fact that Russia is the politically, culturally and militarily dominant power in Central Asia, China's economic influence - which can be translated into political or geopolitical influence – will force Russia to further surrender its position in the region. The growing nationalistic mood in Russia on the other hand, the potential for economic problems following the sanctions, and formal and informal pressure from Russian authorities, could induce some Central Asian migrants to return to their homelands. However, such processes could cause social unrest in the Sitan countries, with unpredictable results for both powers. Russia's economic problems may cause the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union to once again look toward diversifying their economies, thus moving away from Russia, and enable further Chinese involvement in key energy resources. In addition to the integration project as major objective of the EaEU, addition to the Customs Union is another background. Membership of the EaEU is (in contradiction to the European Union) flexible and member states are allowed to leave of their own accord (Roberts et. al. 2013, 10).

The new borders that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR have shaped Beijing's foreign policy toward Central Asia, especially as the region has strong ethnic and cultural linkages to China's westernmost province of Xinjiang. The closer western ties are necessary, as China faces a growing demand for energy at the same time as complications emerged regarding the supply of Middle Eastern energy exports, due to the Iraq "campaign" and sanctions against Iran. The geographically easily accessible resources in Central Asia, although underdeveloped, is able to substitute energy imports from the Persian Gulf. Thus, China became the main importer of Central Asian energy reserves, particularly Kazakhstan's oil and Turkmenistan's gas, and the China-oriented network of pipelines expands, as exports are shifting eastward (Horák 2014, 167) (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Oil fields in Aktau (Western Kazakhstan)

The ecological and economic circumstances are more problematic: One road among many is currently under construction to facilitate transportation within China and to Tajikistan. The inhabitants of Murghab, a desert plateau near the Chinese border in the east of the Pamir, are already expecting their region to become the “entry path” for the Chinese. The situation there is complicated for several reasons: The Soviet Union settled Murghab because it was an important border region with China and Afghanistan. “New settlers” were lured in with wages that were three times as high as in the rest of the country, coal, gas, diesel and food were supplied and sold at cheaper prices than elsewhere. Only through subsidies could Murghab be kept alive. When the Soviet Union collapsed and Tajikistan became independent, everything changed suddenly. Energy deliveries suddenly stopped. The people were suddenly on their own. The Tajik civil war from 1992 to 1997, during which many refugees came to Murghab, exacerbated the situation (Schlager 2008b).

To heat their mud houses, the residents began to use teresque shrubs as fuel. Teresque is a desert shrub that has been growing slowly for decades - the only wood that grows in the area at all. On the one hand, this is not affordable for most residents, on the other hand, they destroy the little vegetation, which leads to karstification. For the few remaining nomads of this area and their cattle, the only pastures that need to be changed in such regions. Nazarbekov’s yaks eat these teresques alongside grass. Manure would be the alternative as a fuel. With little rainfall, mainly as snow, and extremely cold temperatures in winter and no more than 25 degrees in summer, Murghab has a desert climate. Agriculture is practically impossible here, only extensive pasture keeping of cattle. Water is only available from the well on the street, the nearby hydropower station only supplies electricity sporadically.

Many factors which make modern Central Asia an important region in the world. Among them are, firstly, the availability of rich energy resources in Central Asia and the Caspian region, secondly, the geopolitical location being surrounded by powers such as Russia, China, India, and Iran, and, thirdly, the issue of Afghanistan. As a result, regional and global actors increasingly compete with each other in contemporary Central Asia, encouraged by geopolitical interests and a competition for the significant reserves of mineral resources (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Mine Workers at Kucha in Xinjiang

In this regard, one of the main challenges for providing regional security and stability in Central Asia is the maintenance of a geopolitical balance, (Rahimov - Rakhimov 2014, 304-305). And despite the West's doubts and concerns: China's frames are its initiatives in cooperative non-exclusionary terms and to emphasize its openness to a wide range of stakeholders. It also clearly intends to further establish itself as a central actor in regional affairs. China's return to Central Asia as an economic force satisfies both premises, signaling that China has fully regained its old status as the world's premier economic power under its new leadership (Harutyunyan 2019, 320). China (as well as other rising powers)' reference is rather often a historical one: In the 9th -10th centuries, Maverannahr became part of a unified Islamic world, regained and strengthened its position in the center of the transcontinental trade between Europe, China and India (Arapov 2013, 179). This stimulated a rise in the economic life and gave a new impulse to the development of towns as centers of handicraft and goods exchange. By China's interest and repeating reference to the old Silk Road, nations and people should keep that imagination. China is staying (for all countries) the dominant exporter of goods.

Conclusion

The Silk Road with its transit and transfer of ideas – by peaceful and sometimes aggressive means – led to cultural exchange, mainly from east to west. Discussions can be brought up about the invention of printing, whether it independently developed in Europe, or if the idea was transferred from China via the Silk Road – not necessarily due to direct contact, as transfer (croisée) from one region to another can be observed in every epoch and area (as the Diamond sutra, found in the grottoes of Dunhuang, and being the earliest printed text (868 CE) will not have influenced Gutenberg's invention of the printing machine). “A confused and limiting notion of priority allows that only the original proponents of an idea can understand and use it. But the history of all cultures is the history of cultural borrowings. Cultures are not impermeable; just as Western science borrowed from the Arabs, they had borrowed from India and Greece. Culture is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures. This is a universal norm.” (Said 1993, 261, op.cit. FN 1).

Concerning economy, the same can be observed in China's “wild west”, still being more rural but due to resources an important province for the country. Despite the Chinese attempt to sinicize the Uyghur population, the cultural ties lie closer to the neighboring Sitan-countries, the more they lie to the west.² Along those continental paths are some of the most important oasis cities, between present day Xinjiang to Uzbekistan, either in the hands of Uyghurs (though an increasing number of Han-Chinese are settling down in the cities) or further west in those of other Turk peoples (Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Turkmens), all of them being Muslims. Islam, therefore, dominates as in the past also nowadays along the Silk Road. Along the Asian mainland, it is distributed from the Mediterranean to western China, but the expansion was also successful by sea. After all, Indonesia is the country with the highest Muslim population. There, however, it started late in the 15th century, which is one of the reasons why local traditions are used flexibly there. Thus, to this day, ancestors and spirits are still involved in the cult acts to keep calamity away from the community, and ceremonies are held that were originally used to

² The population of Kucha remained between the 5th century until the mid-7th chiefly Indo-Iranian in character, Gaochang adapted gradually more the Tang aesthetics. Grousset 1970, 98–99.

legitimize Buddhist or Hindu princes. However, today orthodox groups are becoming increasingly aggressive.³

The Silk Road is legendary and embraces at the same time today's world politics and globalized economy. In addition to the "nostalgic" routes for those interested in culture and adventure, the Xingjiang province plays a key role in the development of the New Silk Road. In recent years, its revival has become one of the most economically significant projects. The northwestern province plays a major role in this context with some of the better-known sites and cities. On the one hand, the routes around the Taklamakan (southern and northern routes) are being expanded again, and on the other hand, there are many major construction sites in the mountainous regions (Tianshan), to establish a more rapid connection to the West.

This is not the only route. As the maritime Silk Road is also about to be established again, the route to the south also gets expanded. The People's Republic of China and Pakistan are now working to link Xinjiang and Gwadar in Pakistan by land route for energy needs. In spring 2015 both countries agreed on a 46-billion-dollar deal to build a highway of roads, railways and pipelines. This China-Pakistan Economic Corridor will give China direct access to the Indian Ocean. Since that area is volatile, security forces will protect the zone (Marshall 2016, 195).

As also diplomatic and economic journals write currently, there had been already in early times contacts between the Islamic World and the Chinese Empire. Envoys from the Seljuk Empire visited China during the Tang Dynasty. Admiral Zheng He (1371 – 1433 or 1435)⁴, China's Muslim navigator in the Ming Dynasty, traveled to Jeddah, Mecca, and Medina. Nowadays, descriptions are of course rather euphemistic about the mutual contact: "...China making the demonstration to invest in infrastructure investments projects in developing countries that have been ignored and marginalized for decades if not centuries...it would lead to an alliance of civilizations rather than clashes of civilizations" (Chan 2018, 121). "The interactions and mutual learning between the Chinese and Islamic civilizations are an important part in the history of inter-civilization exchanges."⁵ The emphasis on fertile cooperation with the Islamic world has also to do with the routes, most of them trespassing Muslim countries or at least communities: Those different economic corridors have been set up with countries along the Belt and Road trade route with funding from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund (SRF) and got specific references: 1. *China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC)*; 2. *New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB)*; 3. *China-Central and West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC)*; 4. *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)*; 5. *China-Indo-China Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC)*; or *China-Southeast Asia Corridors*; and 6. *Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC)* (Harutyunyan 2019, 288).

China proved in its efforts heaving poor regions into economically better life by the "five dimensions": marketization, industrialization, urbanization, internationalization and digitalization (Rui 2018, S14). It is difficult in this challenging time to find a balanced solution between compensating the lack channels of distributions and suffer from inaccessibility to some areas apart from major cities, without destroying social balanced strata (as far as they exist) and environment. Another fact is world economy is strongly relying on China, not least its tourists, too: The 21st generation is able to travel abroad, and the revival of the silk road makes the

³ Moreover, Muslim intellectuals who increasingly separate perennial Islamic beliefs from archaic cultural tradition. Nigosian 2004, 41.

⁴ About Zheng He's important voyages the author refers to: Liu et.al. 2014.

⁵ More on an economic exchange, China and Muslim countries are intensifying their relations again: <http://english.cri.cn/12394/2016/01/18/3441s913485.htm>

Central Asian region a number one destination. Thus, it should not be forgotten that tourism stimulates other economic activities: entertainment, trade, transport, accommodation, crafts, supporting services and amenities that presupposes the development of infrastructure as roads, airports, sanitation, and energy.

However, it is not only Chinese money that flows nowadays into the Silk Road project in the Central Asian region. Japan formulated the ‘*Silk Road diplomacy*’ concept for its relations with Central Asia already in 1997 and the *Central Asia plus Japan*’ dialogue was established in Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2004. South Korea on the other hand established in 2007 the annual multilateral forum ‘*Republic of Korea-Central Asia*’, “which aims at strengthening and extending the cooperation in economy, information and communication technologies, construction, transport, as well as in the spheres of science, culture, and tourism” (Rakhimov 2015, 11-13). The European Union is also making significant efforts to expand the transport network. Not that well known, the main instrument in its strategy towards the CIS region has been the ‘*Partnership and Cooperation Agreement*’ (PCA). The European Union signed PCAs with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in 1995/96 having become fully operational after ratification by all EU member states and the European Parliament in 1999; the ratification with Turkmenistan 2009 and Tajikistan in 2010 (Rakhimov 2015, 9). For the time being, all participants are optimistic and see only advantages in the revival of the old Silk Road. Its paths follow mainly the same tracks. Ultimately, the question arises as to what extent, in addition to the economically closer Eurasian contacts, the open mind will and can again blow along the Silk Road.

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