

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and Regional Integration in the Middle East

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Abstract

Chinese experts repeatedly emphasized on the importance of the development of connecting infrastructures in the Middle East and their role in integrating the Middle East countries. Many of them believed that developing these infrastructures can deepen integration in this region. What is missing in many analyses in different think tanks, even in the Belt and Road news research centers, is the existence of many obstacles for the regional integration. Therefore, the basic aim of the study is to examine the impact of these infrastructures on the development of integration in the Middle East while considering various obstacles. In this regard, this piece of research work seeks to address this important question as to what are the main obstacles for the realization of Belt Road Initiative in the development of integration in Middle East? The hypothesis to answer the question is that conflicting cultural, ethnic and political values, religious and ethnic divisions, competition of member states, dominance of security discourse and rivalries of trans-regional powers, security dependence of member countries on trans-

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regional powers and most importantly the lack of complementary economies are among the most important obstacles to the realization of this economic project.

Keywords: *Belt and Road Initiative, China, Integration Theory, Competitions of Trans-Regional Powers*

Introduction

The "Belt and Road Initiative"(BRI) project is one of the China's key foreign policy initiatives to expand its influence over strategic regions of the world. This plan, which accounts for about 65 percent of the world's population and 21 trillion\$ of GDP, was announced in 2013 by President Xi Jinping in a speech at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University in September 2013. It consists of two parts: the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road". It should be mentioned that Beijing's serious efforts to advance such huge projects, apart from having economic and political consequences for this vast country, is facing obstacles in terms of integration. This project aims to strengthen and develop interactions and to create an integrated network of mutually beneficial and multifaceted economic, social and political ties, and ultimately change the discourse, reduce mistrust and increase the sense of shared security among project members (Jiang, 2018: 196). According to Zhao, a Chinese expert, by launching this project, China seeks to open new markets and secure global demand chains to help protect China's economy and thus achieve social and economic stability in the country (Zhao, S, 2020: 319).

Generally, China has experienced significant economic growth in recent years, and given the accumulation of domestic capital and the need for multiple competition with the United States as a hegemon of the international system, it has tried to use this project as a lever. Beijing has thus tried to use the accumulated capital within the 65 countries participating in this project, which based on the old Silk Road, are going to shape the

future trends of the vast "Eurasia" region. In the playground of the region, China is struggling to be the best player. It is obvious that BRI is the most ambitious international megaproject in modern age. Accessing to the region's oil resources and exploiting the opportunity of the space of distrust against the United States in the Middle East has now become one of Beijing's most important ambitions. China has sent many human resources from China to the Middle East. The development of connecting infrastructures for regional integration is one of the most important priorities of the China Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East, however, there are certainly numerous obstacles in the region that prevent China from achieving its goals. Therefore, the basic aim of the study is to examine the impact of these infrastructures on the development of integration in the Middle East while considering various obstacles. In this regard, this piece of research work seeks to address this important question as to what are the main obstacles for the realization of Belt Road Initiative in the development of integration in Middle East? The hypothesis to answer the question is that conflicting cultural, ethnic and political values, religious and ethnic divisions, competition of member states, dominance of security discourse and rivalries of trans-regional powers, security dependence of member countries on trans-regional powers and most importantly the lack of complementary economies are among the most important obstacles to the realization of this economic project. This research is done through explanatory method to analyze the data by using primary and secondary resources including Chinese, Persian and English documents, reports, books, articles and internet sites.

The project, also called the "One Road and One Belt," is a part of China's overall efforts to boost its growing economic power (in its surroundings). The aim of this project is to strengthen and develop interactions and create an integrated network of mutually beneficial and multifaceted economic, social and political ties, and ultimately change the discourse, reduce mistrust and increase the sense of shared security among project

members (Jiang, 2018: 196). In this strategy, the "belt" refers to China's connection by sea to areas such as Africa, as well as the increase of China's naval power against the United States, and the "road" refers to the historical Silk Road that China intends to revive. This road in terms of land and sea, connects China to regions such as the subcontinent, Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Russia and the Middle East. This project provides geostrategic and geoeconomic benefits for China (Zhao, S., 2020: 319). In general, "Belt and Road Initiative" is a comprehensive project that seeks to open up new markets and secure global demand chains to help China to sustain its economy and achieve social stability domestically.

China's "Silk Road Economic Belt" super project is a fundamental and long-term plan for China's entrance into West Asia and Russia. The plan has a north-south orientation (Central Asia-Afghanistan and South Asia) (Kramatinia, 2016: 2). According to an official document of the Chinese government entitled "Insights and Measures Related to the Joint Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Sea Silk Road", the Silk Road Economic Belt is aimed at integrating China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (Baltic Basin) and establishing China's relationship with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean (Kramatinia, 2016). The official documents of the Chinese government did not mention any name of Iran participating in this project. Given that the text of this document was prepared in 2015 before JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), Iran's participation in this project will be more likely in the future. It seems that China cannot achieve its goals without Iran's full participation. It should be mentioned that at least 65 countries are involved in this project but the names of the countries are not mentioned in the articles and documents (Kramatinia, 2016: 3).

China's practical approach and real focus in its official document is the path of Pakistan-China, which has been mentioned in the document "Insights and Measures Related to the

Joint Construction of the Silk Road and 21st Century Silk Road Economic Belt": the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor and Bangladesh-China Economic Corridor - India-Myanmar is closely related to the Road and Belt Initiative and therefore needs closer cooperation and more progress (Keramatnia, 2016: 6). Pakistan's Gwadar port is set to be connected to the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in northwest China by a 3,000-kilometer network of roads and railways. This economic corridor will pass through the two deprived states of Baluchistan and Lahore. Investors believe that road connections will boost the economic development of various parts of Pakistan and at the same time provide a vital gateway for China's exports to the Middle East and Europe. The three routes proposed by the Chinese authorities for this huge economic project are as follows: 1. Asia-Europe International Corridor in the East-West direction: This corridor transits and transports supplies between the countries of Asia, the Middle East, Europe and Africa. China's first alternative extends to the Commonwealth, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and through the Mediterranean to Greece and Europe. 2. Another route extends from China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Iran to Turkey and Europe. 3. The last one starts from China and leads to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Iran and from there to Turkey and Europe (Kramatinia, 2016: 6).

China's goals in this strategy are mostly economic. In this regard, it is said that China needs an export market and energy imports for the future of its economy. For its large market and the sale of its manufactured goods, China needs cheaper energy than its rivals such as the United States, because if energy imports have high prices, the selling price of goods will usually be increased. The easiest way is to supply oil through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in Central Asia and partly through Russia. From China's point of view, the Middle East and Iran are also good sources of energy.

I- Middle East and Belt and Road Initiative

The Middle East is very important for the Belt and Road Initiative from both of the land and sea dimensions. Since a large part of countries of the Middle East are included in the maritime dimension of this strategy, the Middle East has become a region that can play a prominent role in achieving political goals. Although there are many reasons for the pivotal position of the Middle East in China's maritime strategy, the most important one is to supply energy to the Chinese economy because China is heavily dependent on energy imports for its economic stability and continued production. In 2013, China became the world's largest importer of crude oil, acquiring almost half of its needs for energy from the Middle East, which makes energy security in this region the most important dimension of China's foreign policy. China's focus on increasing bilateral relations with countries of the region has led to increase its investment in energy, infrastructure development, ports and transportation lines, and etc. In addition, with the aim of deepening relations with GCC members, it has made investments to facilitate foreign exchange transactions.

Of course, it should be noted that in this regard countries with high national status and power such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Iran and Egypt have priority for China. Since achieving strategic goals through economic means is China's foreign policy discourse, constructive economic diplomacy, including economic cooperation and economic assistance to other members, is one of China's most important strategies for influencing and ultimately dominating the Middle East. From the year of 2013, the project has been hailed as China's main solution to improve economic and international cooperation to build a "common humanity" and the idea of a Green Silk Road and a Digital Silk Road. (He, 2020: 139). In the current context, with the spread of the Corona virus, China's focus on foreign trade, especially digital trade, has shifted in the long run because the virus epidemic has given China the opportunity to promote cross-border e-commerce and other

industries and to design new models for international trade under the influence of trade during the epidemic (hsu, 3.1.2020). This has doubled the importance of the Middle East in China's foreign economic policy, as the region could be China's most important target for promoting e-commerce.

II- Connecting Infrastructure Development

China has dedicated 40 billion\$ in infrastructure development to strengthen infrastructures in the Silk Road Economic Belt countries, including the revitalization of the old Silk Road between China and Europe through Afghanistan and Central Asia, and to link several corridors. The most important corridors are China-Pakistan, China-East Asia, China-Central Asia, China-Europe, China-Persian Gulf (Misiągiewicz, 2017: 39). Beijing seeks to offset the superiority of the US Navy through the high-speed rail line that connects China's eastern border with Eurasia. In fact, China seeks to reduce transportation costs and shipping time, and now all of the project's investments are based on the completion of the project, travel time and costs. One of the stated goals for the construction of the new Silk Road is to bring Asian, African and European countries closer together and to provide long-term Chinese government loans to countries that are willing to have mutual relations with Chinese construction companies.

Although few credible Chinese sources identify specific priorities among the initiative's goals, creating infrastructures is perhaps the most important operational goal because it provides the tools to achieve many other non-economic goals. In the meantime, the emphasis on building infrastructure between countries by Chinese companies acts as a tool of filling the gaps between the various marginalized regions of Asia. The lack of strong economic ties between these regions has led to their stagnation of economic development. In addition, the countries of Central Asia, Russia, South Asia and Southeast Asia have higher priorities in terms of geographical values, while the countries of East Africa and East Asia are at the crossroads of connecting

Asian and European countries. In the long run, Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and some African countries may be more involved. The Islamic Republic of Iran, in view of its geographical size, geostrategic position and constructive role in regional developments, always plays a pivotal role in any analysis of the future of Eurasia. Thus, any road, railway or pipeline in Eurasia must pass through Iran in order to reach the Middle East. This means that the future of the Silk Road project also depends on Iran's broad participation and cooperation.

III- Middle East Regional Integration

Regional integration should be explained precisely for it's a movement to increase cooperation between governments. The most advanced form of regional integration is the state in which governments act as federations on a large scale and pave the way for world governance. On the whole, three levels should be considered for the study of regional integration in international relations.

The first one is system-level regional integration, in which governments transfer part of their political, economic, and legal decision-making power to supranational institutions on a global scale. This situation may improve the quality of domestic and global governance and, while increasing decision-making efficiency, practically strengthen the basis of collective behavior. The second level of analysis is regional integration, in which a number of neighbor states come together to form a political and economic alliance similar to the European Union. The third level of analysis is directly related to the structural characteristics of governments, which certainly have a high degree of economic, technological, political, cultural and communication development of political units, and has a great impact on the process of regional integration. Regional integration can be studied both as a process and as a goal. It is a kinetic process aimed at increasing cooperation between governments and the gradual transfer of power to supranational institutions. It is also a move towards the

gradual assimilation of values and the eventual emergence of a global civil society and new forms of political society. The regional integration process must be voluntary and consensual, and therefore, creates a kind of collective decision-making configuration. In the process of regional integration, we are practically dealing with supranational relations (Moshirzadeh, 2013: 45-42).

Accordingly, regional integration or regionalism in international politics, which sometimes are synonymous with supernationalism or intergovernmental tendencies, refers to the considerable expansion of economic and political cooperation between governments and other actors in specific geographical areas. The region is basically defined as a combination of geographical proximity, high degree of interaction, institutional frameworks and shared cultural identities. Regional integration takes many forms, through systems of military alliances, economic unions, political and security, which are other components of regional integration that expose member states to potential and actual threats and react to the third countries actions (Ghavam, 1392: 54). In the regional integration of common political and social values, common interests and mutual benefits, a single image of a hypothetical threat or a single definition of security, interdependence and mutual need, and finally the breadth of communication between units are a set of aims that are necessary. (Ghasemi, 1372: 186).

However, almost none of these exist in the Middle East which to be included in the Silk Road project. The situation in the Middle East, shows that we are not allowed to generalize the process of regional integration and even limited institutional cooperation because despite the unifying efforts done in the region after World War II, there are also one-sidedness, competition and conflict. The dominant aspect has been the behavior of Middle East states (Ghasemi, 1372: 190). In the direction of regional integration in the Middle East, the Arab League, the Arab Common Market, the Regional Development Organization

(RCD), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab Cooperation Council have not succeeded in implementing their regional integration plans. Regional integration can be seen as the result of the decline of nationalism. In the Middle East, not only nationalism has not waned, but nationalist, radical, and fundamentalist tendencies have been growing (Peretz, 1963: 1396).

IV- Challenges and Obstacles

There is a deep regional integration among European countries due to the existence of the organization of the European Union and comprehensive trade agreements and common laws among the member states, which will advance the trade and economic goals of Europe. However, in the Middle East due to the cultural and ethnic conflicts, regional integration and reaching common decisions which accepted by all member states of this region will be very difficult and time consuming as well. Likewise, there are more than 65 countries along the New Silk Road, and each of them has its own racial, religious, cultural, economic challenges, therefore the regional integration and alignment of these countries in a huge economic project could also be very problematic. The realization of the regional integration is very difficult in these areas and may increase regional tensions. Here are some of the most important obstacles.

Lack of Complementary Economies: An economic study of the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Caucasus highlights the lack of a complementary economy. "An region is known by economically complementary in which the mass production and diversity of goods is in a situation that it's members can pay a significant portion of each other's needs rather than meet their needs outside the region and resolve the confrontation inside the region themselves." In fact, it is a complementary economy that leads to interdependence, because each country in the region could meet its own needs while selling surplus products. The countries of the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus,

however, are actually economical competitors because they are the main producers of natural oil and gas resources. This means that they will not be integrated easily.

Rental-based governments can earn high incomes without having to distribute a significant portion of this income as gains to the owners of capital and the owners of mines or labors. This allows them to make social classes dependent on states and change the course of social developments in state's favor (Katouzian, 2007: 20-300). Single product and export of one or two types of raw materials are characteristic of the economies of the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus. In these countries, their main export commodity is oil and gas and agricultural products that can meet the needs of industrialized countries but not countries in the region (Bioment et al., 1990: 330). The countries of the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus are mainly importers of industrial goods from industrialized countries in general Europe and the United States. The result of such a combination of production and consumption is that the trade orientation of the countries is focused on trans-regional actors rather than regional countries. Having a single product and relying on raw materials and the need for industrial goods, makes the states of this region dependent on the outside world.

The economies of the countries in the region are linked to the trans-regional countries, and such ties within the regions are weakened. Ultimately, regional integration between these states could not be achieved, because of the weak economic relations, weak bilateral and multilateral ties, the lack of complementary economies and interdependence in and between the states of the region. In Middle East and Central Asia, states compete with each other for the export and transfer of their rich natural resources to the West and Europe. States also compete and oppose with each other over the sale and determination of oil and gas prices to achieve maximum profit. The complementary economy is the most important field of regional integration, of which the

countries of the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus are lack. On the one hand, these countries' exports are mainly natural resources and raw materials without any export diversity. On the other hand, their weapons and high technology products rely on importing heavily. All of these made them cannot communicate and cooperate effectively in the regional integration process and therefore compete with each other instead.

Cultural and Security Challenges: In the Middle East and Central Asia, the existence of different ethnic groups, different languages, different religious sects and historical heritages left from different cultures, creates conflicts and gaps between these countries. Arabs live in a large part of the countries of the Middle East, and Turks and Persians live in some of its other regions, and since there are some ethnic and linguistic groups in the Middle East and Central Asia that are not specific to one country, a lack of national unity has been created. The countries of the Middle East and Central Asia are multi-ethnic and multi-identity, constantly facing conflicts and challenges from domestic groups, as exemplified by the situation in Iraq. Iraq, who has different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups, has always struggled to achieve national unity. Sunnis, Kurds and Shiites in Iraq have had intense internal conflicts over the past century. The existence of minorities, by leaving negative effects on the relations of neighboring countries, encourages competition and causes relations to be strained (Bioment et al., 1990: 319-318). Countries involved in the issue of minorities always accuse their neighbors of supporting opposition minorities. As an example in Lebanon, Syria is always accused of supporting Lebanese groups. The same situation can be seen more or less in other countries in the region and the host of the Belt and Road Initiative.

In addition, there are social unrests and successive coups in the Middle East and ethnic conflicts and civil wars in Central Asia, including the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, unrest in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, etc. Frequent coups cause unrest and instability in the Middle East and Central Asia which prevented

regional integration among countries in these regions. This had been a major obstacle to the construction of a new Silk Road. Another obstacle in the process of building a new silk road is the lack of democracy in these countries. A democratic government is a government in which the source of power is from the people, the ruler is elected by the people, and government affairs are managed directly and indirectly by the people themselves.

Since democracy is a government with the consent of the majority, it's opposed to authoritarian regimes in which the consent of the people is ignored and their demands are not fulfilled (Arblaster, 1379: 144-139). The existence of democracy is a precondition for regional integration among member states. Due to the lack of democracy, there is no regional integration between the countries of Central Asia and the Middle East. Obstacles related to democracy in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus include the traditional structure, weakness of civil and cultural society, economic and social underdevelopment (Sajedi, 1389: 112). Cultural poverty is another one of the main obstacles to democracy and consequently one of the obstacles to regional integration. Because people who are not aware of their rights to monitor and interfere in their political and social affairs, cannot use and defend their rights. As a result, the authoritarian person or class comes to power by force. However, regional integration will not be possible among countries with authoritarian governments. Therefore, the lack of democratic structure has put the countries of these regions in a crisis of legitimacy, and this is one of the obstacles to cooperation and regional integration among the countries of these regions. In order to create regional integration among the member states of a region, there must be a uniform cultural basis because cultural and religious conflicts between the countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East, prevents regional integration and also economic and political proximity. In fact, a country that cannot be institutionalized internally will certainly not be institutionalized in foreign policy and in relation with other states.

Another challenge is the lack or weakness of the security indicator. The concept of "security" is one of the concepts that evolved since the end of the Cold War after which a new chapter in security attitudes has emerged. During the Cold War, given the structural features of the international system and the attitudes of policymakers and foreign policy elites toward war and peace, as well as the prevailing Realism paradigm, governments were considered the most important actors in the international system whose primary motives were to support their sovereignty. From the Realism point of view, governments are worried about entering the war, so security is their main concern (Ghavam, 2005: 360).

Security challenges have been studied in new dimensions, including interaction between countries in the international structure, transnational organized crime, environmental issues, economic issues, poverty, diseases, immigration, and human rights. Regional security is provided by the member states of that region, and their governments, whose main security concern is intertwined. Same thing happens in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus, East and Southeast Asia. Border disputes and the atmosphere of mistrust between China and the newly independent states, and the existence of ethnic threats due to the similarities of some of the ethnic groups in these countries with each other, are among the security challenges and threats.

Central Asia and the Caucasus are in fact Russia's infiltration zone and its backyard, thus, the construction of a new Silk Road and its passage poses a serious security threat to Russia. China and Russia, which have had border disputes for a long time, and the complete non-resolution of these disputes, makes it difficult for cooperation and interaction between the two countries and causes a lack of strategic closeness as well. Among the security problems is the increase of the production and export of narcotics from Afghanistan to the Middle East, Central Asia, the Caucasus and Europe. Ninety percent of the heroin consumed in continental Europe and 70 percent of the narcotics needs worldwide are

produced in Afghanistan and transited to Asian, European and American markets by the international drug mafia. Although part of Afghanistan's narcotics shipments are smuggled out of these countries via Kabul airport, the main routes of smuggling of these drugs are the overt and covert routes of Afghanistan's neighboring countries, through which many large quantities of drugs are smuggled. Drugs are distributed within these countries. Due to the fact that Afghanistan has no sea routes and is geographically landlocked, narcotics are naturally trafficked from neighboring countries, namely Iran, Pakistan and Central Asian countries (www.dchq.ir).

Islamic Fundamentalism: Another threat to security in these areas is the existence of Islamic fundamentalism. Islamic fundamentalist groups, led by al-Qaeda and ISIS, support extremist groups in other countries in addition to planning and carrying out terrorist operations in various countries. The operations of al-Qaeda and Islamic fundamentalists have been formed in several countries (Abolhassan Shirazi and Karimi, 2009: 38-37). In general, factors such as separatism, ethnicity, border security, terrorism, Islamic extremism, and drug trafficking have turned these areas into danger zones, which is one of the most important obstacles to the continuation of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Opposition from the Great Powers: Another challenge is the opposition from Russia and the United States. Russia, China's neighbor, located from east to west, is sensitive to the potential benefits and harms of the project. Russia seeks to play a key role in securing the Central Asian region and to prevent the presence of extra-regional actors in these regions in order to strengthen its strategic position. One of the reasons for Russia's opposition to the Silk Road is its fear of separatist and ethnic tendencies. With the construction of the new Silk Road and the growth of the autonomous regions, Russia is likely to face security threats posed by ethnic divisions and separatist tendencies, which will move beyond the control of the Russian government, and this

is a matter of great concern to Russia. One of the Russian experts, Dmitry Papov, considers China's unsuccessful attempt to create an economic union in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as one of the options for presenting this plan, and considers the right policy to be opposition to that (Kramatinia, 2016).

The United States does consider Road and Belt Initiative as a real harm to its interests in Middle East and Central Asia. After the end of the Cold War, the United States had been seeking to increase its influence on Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus to counter Russia, as well as pursue its national interests to maximize energy resources in the region. The US and its allies' influences on these regions and their efforts to reduce Russia's influence as well as to prevent China from increasing its power and starting macroeconomic competition with it, have led to US's opposition to the new Silk Road project. Other reasons for US's opposition to the BRI include having access to oil and gas resources and controlling its exploitation and export in Central Asia and the Caucasus, controlling the regional markets and expanding trade, and finally maintaining the status quo. Institutions have been built in the region with the long-term goals and political competition with China and Russia (Mottaqi Dastani, 1393: 72-71). The United States wants to extend its long-term influence in Middle East. Also, the existence of such a huge economic project involving the countries of the Middle East and Central Asia is a great confrontation with US hegemony. Thus, the United States, by opposing this economic project, will maintain its hegemonic stability as well as confront and compete with China.

Conclusion

In general, China's policy in the Middle East is based on several priorities, including:

mutual respect between China and each country in the region, which means respect for each other's territorial integrity and non-interference in each other's internal affairs and maintaining a

peaceful and stable environment for progress on the path of Chinese modernization, increasing the level of development, maintaining good relations with the countries of the region and preventing any interference of the great regional and global powers. In order to achieve this goal, the development of multi-model transportation, which includes highways, railways and air routes, is on the agenda of China, and according to this strategy, the Xinjiang province is the main area of the Silk Road Economic Belt and Fujian province is the main area of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Although these infrastructures have contributed significantly in deepening economic ties and exchanges between member countries and have been able to act as a strong stimulus to increase foreign trade in the Middle East and China, in practice, they have not been able to play a significant role in deepening regional integration. The Middle East, as mentioned, is a region of challenges and changes, and conflicts of interest between member states cause them to consider China and the United States as two alternatives in foreign policy, so these infrastructures can hardly be used as a platform for regional integration, at least in the short term. If China is trying to achieve the success of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East, it must help to resolve or reduce the crises in this region so that the foundations of the plan could be strengthened.

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