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ANCIENT SILK ROAD REVIVAL AND THE POSSIBILITY OF STABILITY

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On February 15, 2016, the first train connecting China and Iran arrived in Tehran, covering a distance of 9500 Km – passing through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in fourteen days and reducing the number of journey days by thirty compared to the sea voyage from Shanghai to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas – reviving the ancient Silk Road.¹ Furthermore, China is planning a rail link West from the far Western Xinjiang city of Kashgar, through the mountains into Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan – across to its western city Herat – to Iran and finally Westward. During President Xi Jinping's official visit to Iran from January 22 to 23, 2016, the two heads of State exchanged views on cooperation in all fields of bilateral relations as well as regional and international issues. What is of interest is that the two sides emphasized the importance of cooperation between developing countries on international affairs, with the end being realization of peace, stability and

development in the region and the world at large.²

West Asia has been high on China's agenda, as it is part of its "One Belt One Road" initiative to revive its ancient Silk Road, with President Xi making his first official overseas visits of 2016 to the three West Asian nations of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran. This visit marks China's increasing interest in the region, especially in view of the rising prominence of West Asia as a key regional partner of China's "Belt and Road" global development initiative. This initiative has seen China deepen its cooperation with these three countries with the signing of 52 agreements in a range of sectors including infrastructure construction and energy.³

Today, it is also found that China has deepened its engagement with Afghanistan by aggressively carrying out its policy of economic engagement. Chinese interest in Afghanistan seems to be more than just purely military since



there seems to be an increased emphasis placed on energy and economic security. It has to be realized that both Afghanistan and Pakistan are critical for China since they provide the essential transit route for its energy supply and its trade corridor. The push into Afghanistan is not a recent initiative by China; in 2007, China signed a contract with Kabul for the Aynak copper deposit, estimated to be worth US \$ 80 billion. The Chinese state-owned China Metallurgical group has a US \$ 3.5 billion copper mining venture in Logar Province. Reportedly, the Chinese bid includes building a 400 megawatt, coal-fired power plant and a freight railroad passing from western China through Tajikistan and Afghanistan to Pakistan. The plant is considered necessary to generate electricity for mining and extraction. The rail link will contribute to supplying the mineral resources to western China to be used for the region's development. In addition, the Chinese companies, ZTE Corporation and Huawei, are building up their presence in the telecommunication sector in Afghanistan. In Pakistan also, Chinese companies have been investing in mining, building dams, roads and telecommunication infrastructure.⁴

It could be argued that this push by China into West Asia, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, could also bring about some sort of stability in the region. Economic development, if realized, could also potentially help solve the problems of conflict and militancy in these

regions where the prevailing mass poverty acts as a major multiplier towards violence and instability. It should be realized that China's interest in the region is based on its geo-political – so as to counter other emerging Asian powers like India – and geo-strategic needs that include Beijing's great need for energy and other resources that are required for its continued economic growth.

For China this is a new kind of strategy with dual outcomes, wherein while on the one hand it seeks to increase its sphere of influence in the region, it continues to make economic gains on the other. A more far-fetched argument that could be put forward is that the Chinese engagement in the region, where it starts to invest in infrastructure and energy supplies, as stated above, could yield some dividend in the form of a more stable West Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The argument is that once China has invested in these regions it would want to protect its assets and this would ensure that these States in which China has some influence start to project a more predictable behaviour as demanded by China. It could, however, be argued whether revival of the old Silk Road would enable greater economic investment into these regions and bring about greater stability in these regions, as the desired goal.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹"First 'Silk Road' Train Arrives in Tehran from China", February 15, 2016, <http://news.yahoo.com/first-silk-road-train-arrives-tehran-china-134703954.html>, accessed on February 17, 2016.

²"China-Iran Joint Statement on the Establishment of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", *CRI English*, January 23, 2016, <http://english.cri.cn/12394/2016/01/23/3685s914310.htm>, accessed on February 16, 2016.

³ Alvin Cheng-Hin Lim, "West Asia and China's 'Belt And Road': Xi Jinping's 2016 State Visits to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran-Analysis", *Eurasia Review: A Journal of Analysis and News*, January 30, 2016, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/30012016-middle-east-and-china-belt-and-road-xi-jinpings-2016-state-visits-to-saudi-arabia-egypt-and-iran-analysis/>, accessed on February 16, 2016.

⁴Ayesha Siddiq, "Expansion by Stealth: China's Interest, Infrastructure and Investments in Pakistan and Afghanistan", *Barcelona Centre for International Affairs*, January 2012. For more see: <http://www.cidobafpakproject.com>.