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### **From *Seidenstraße* to One Belt One Road:**

#### **On the dynamics of trans-Asian travel, transport and trade**

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In 1877 the German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen (1833-1905) in his seminal work on China coined the term “*Seidenstraße*”, in English: Silk Road. Turkestan, the area between the Caspian Sea and China, by then was a vast tract of land, almost unknown to the outside world. Caravans had been replaced by steam ships and railways. Today, 140 years later, the area is well integrated into world travel, transport and trade. Trains from China regularly reach German towns like Hamburg and Duisburg, an increasing portion of bilateral trade (2015: €163bn) is moved over land. Accordingly, there is considerable interest in China’s One Road One Belt policy also outside of Asia.

The ancient Silk Road was a network rather than just one road linking China with the Mediterranean, and if we look at the many projects that come under the name of Silk Road today, we see that China is building railways, roads, pipelines and transmission lines in all directions. It also builds ports along the Maritime Silk Road. China has 14 neighbours and almost all of them have become parts of these plans. Other may follow.

The New Silk Road also is a network of transport ways, and as a belt it would be very wide, indeed. Not unlike the internet, the system is being built to guarantee that imports reach China and exports reach destinations, even if some of the areas become difficult or even impossible to pass. The existence of various corridors (e.g. through Myanmar) implies that they compete with each other for traffic, investment and business. Economic Corridor means more than just a transport beltway.

By territory, population and economy the dominant power in Asia, China has become the main driver of Asian economic integration, most evident by initiating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Of particular interest for China is the development of its eastern provinces/regions. With an area of 4.1 million square kilometres Western China, i.e. Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai and Gansu, is as big as the subcontinent, but has only 56 million inhabitants, as compared to Pakistan’s 200 million. Their GDP of (2013) 413 bn US\$ is twice as much as that of Pakistan. The most western parts of China are closer to Europe than to the Pacific; they are also closer to the Arabian Sea. The Chinese Pakistan Economic Corridor, thus, is as important for China’s own integration by reducing regional disparities within the country as it for Asia’s.

Pakistan with its unhappy history of regional neglect would greatly benefit from the Economic Corridor, as it not only would open up areas along the corridor in its hinterland. Therefore, the project not only would help to integrate Asia and China, but especially Pakistan. Regional development, however, is more difficult than building infrastructure, as we had to learn in Germany after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Reconstructing

East Germany with its 16 million people cost us around €2 trillion, out of it around €300bn were spent on infrastructure. Still, after 27 years, the new Länder (states) lag behind the old ones. Employment turned out to be the most difficult problem. The local workforce may not have the qualifications required and resent that 'better' jobs that they consider their own, go to outsiders.

Before concluding, however, a note of caution might be in place: Not only Pakistan is at crossroads again, world trade again is undergoing tremendous change, politically, economically and technically. Gains from trade, the great promise of globalization, may have benefited all countries, but not everybody in each country. Ideas of isolationism and protectionism are gaining ground rapidly. Social and ecological compliance force international corporations to insource and resource. Automation, 3-D-printing, the fear of copyright infringements and the need of minute quality control are more reasons to shift production back to industrial countries. Even without a global recession the volume of goods transported across the globe might not grow as much in future as during the last years. A major sea carrier (Hanjin) has already filed bankruptcy.

There is no doubt that China has the political will, the financial means and the technical capability to realized the grandest projects. The Economic Corridor would not just benefit Pakistan, but also its neighbours. That would help to further Asian integration even more. But Pakistan is not the only option and it might be worthwhile to study similar projects elsewhere.

The author's writing on related issues:

Economy and ecology as factors of bilateral and regional relations along the Silk Road: The case of Pakistan. Paper prepared for the International Conference "Silk Route as a Factor in Asian Integration", organized by the Centre for Central Asian Studies, University of Kashmir, and the Academy of International Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, in Srinagar, 10-11 March 2016 [in print].

China's Pakistan option: Economic and social implications of an 'all-weather relationship'. In: IIC Quarterly. New Delhi: Indian International Center. 42(autumn 2015)2, pp. 14-24. ISSN 0376-9771.

Economy and ecology as factors in South Asian cooperation. In: Muhammad Iqbal Chawla: Socio Economic Cooperation between India and Pakistan. Challenges and prospects. Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan. 2015. pp. 139-157. ISBN 978-9694251127.

The economics of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations: implications for the region. In: India Quarterly. New Delhi. 70(January-March 2014)1, pp. 1-14. ISSN 0974-9284.

Pakistan and its neighbourly relations: Economically, ecologically, socially and politically. Problems of assessment [to be published].

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