The New Challenges on the Silk Road

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In his book Out of Control, Brzezinski speaks about a vacuum in Eurasia, with important geopolitical consequences. Which are the new challenges and risks on the Silk Road in the time of globalization, radicalization, and freedom of movement? The paper will stress three challenges: the project “Economic zone on the Silk Road” (the leadership in economic performance is held by China and therefore the eastern political cultures have the necessary economic basis for asserting their independence), the influence of ETIM and IMU on the region and the role and place of Xinjiang, as a bridge between Central and South Asia; how they reflected on this way of old traditions and cultures and whether there is a “clash” between the Eastern religions on the “Silk Road” and Islam with its multi dimensions, between the thick black chador and the silk veil, called “tissue of wind”, between spiritual, transcendental cognition (Daoism) and pragmatic mundane faith of Islam. I will conclude that the new challenges on the Silk Road create new borders between people—religious, linguistic, ethnical, and new identities. The main question is as follows: Shall we keep the cultural plurality and authenticity of the region?

Keywords: Silk Road, challenges, radical Islam, identity

The New Challenges on the Silk Road

In the spirit of M. Castells, the Silk Road can be defined as the first net structure. This path winds its way along the heart of Asia leaving borderlines and nations behind—unlimited opportunities and choices; the path that is a labyrinth similar to that of old suburbs. This road is infinitely rich and infinitely vulnerable so that lasting peace can be provided. The concept was constructed by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in the 19th century to designate the intricacies of road arteries leading to the Mediterranean Sea. This is the road of the Yellow Emperor who ploughed a ritual groove throughout yellow soil of inferior China to mark the beginning of a year and turned yellow into the symbol of the “womb of the world” (Tabron, 2012, p. 13).

As a response to globalization, the world becomes more responsible for preservation of cultural variety, conservation of cultural identity. The World Bank experts suggest the stormy development of the Chinese, Indian, Islamic, and Buddhist civilizations.

China preserves the leadership in economic parameters as its portion of 2.7% in global economics in 1970 reaches 10.85% in 2001, with a growth trend till 14.2% in 2015, according to the World Bank prognoses (The World Bank—World Development Report 2002; a quotation from Vasilenko, 2010, p. 140). This result shows that eastern political cultures will have the economical basis required to defend their identities under the conditions of globalization.

What are the new challenges on the Silk Road?

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The Silk Road Economic Belt project; ETIM—Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement; Hizb ut-Tahrir & IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan).

According to the report of the American National Security Council for the world development, the USA hegemony will no longer exist after 20 years, the world will be multipolar, and China will surpass USA as the first economical power in 2013. China changes gradually the model of participation in international division of labor moving towards specialization in manufacture in the export of up-to-date high-technology products. In 2011 China accounts for 24% of the global export of high-technology articles; China also accounts for 40% of the import of high-technology goods in USA (2011) (Lebedeva, 2012, pp. 6-7). China and Russia are net creditors compared to the rest of the world. According to statistics of International Monetary Fund (IMF), at the end of 2013 Chinese assets abroad surpass by almost 2 trillion dollars the amount of the attracted to China foreign funds. China possesses autonomously monetary reserves amounting to 3.9 trillion dollars (31.5 of the overall global reserves) (Marinov, 2015, p. 43). The Chinese approach to performing market-based reforms has a general resonance; it is not a coincidence that the concept of Beijing Consensus (BC) is established in specialized literature as compared to the Washington Consensus (WC). China launches the new project called “Silk Road Economic Belt” that stands between the Russian Eurasian project for better positions in Central Asia and the American project called “New Silk Road”. The Chinese variant comprises Asian territories including three-milliard population; this belt extends from the Pacific to the Caucasus and from Siberia to the Indian Ocean. This causes new challenges to the economic, military, political cooperative actions (in the context of the problem about the nature of global economic management) and to redistribution of power judging from the behaviors of the Chinese president who made his own shuttle in the region of Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan) during the meeting of G-20 in Saint Petersburg and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Bishkek making pledges for financial support (30 milliard dollars for energetic and transport projects only in Kazakhstan). Cooperation in the sphere of energetics enables provision with energetic resources and effective uptake of innovative energy technologies to the fast developing countries. During the Beijing Summit of member states of APEC in November 2014 China and Russia made additional agreements for strategical cooperation in the sphere of energetics. During the Fortaleza Summit two important agreements were signed—for the establishment of the New Development Bank (based in Shanghai) and for the constitution of the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), which can be considered the first step to development of an autonomous monetary system of the BRICS group countries, which is independent of the guardianship by IMF and dominating position of the American dollar as a global currency. The change in global economic balance and the consolidation of new centers of economic and political power determine also the change in global geopolitical architecture.

Xinjiang is a part of the Silk Road and the biggest land road from China to Central Asia. This is an important route facilitating the exchange of ideas and technologies between China and other parts of Eurasia, a bridge between South and Central Asia. At the same time, this region is a challenge in terms of security given the increasing Uyghur Muslim population, which cannot be held restricted within the region. The projects for new corridors and “new boundaries” hide serious challenges to regional security in relation to the countries from the Eurasian zone, and the corridor Kashgar (China)—Gwada (Pakistan) will turn into a target for local separatist and jihadist groups associated with ETIM, IMU, Hizb ut-Tahrir. These geographical and political
challenges to security will complicate the long-discussed project Trans-Asia Railway (known as the Iron Silk Road) relating China and Europe through Near East as well as the South Gas Corridor (three gas pipe lines united in one main road—the South-Caucasian, Trans-Anadolian and Trans-Adriatic pipelines), which delivers blue fuel to Europe (Hafizova, 2003, p. 25).

In the past the Huns, the Turks and the Mongols descended to the South in the heart of China and crowded cities. So, the Arabian ancestors of Chinese Muslims came on the Silk Road. Due to mixed marriages (introduced during the Ming dynasty) the majority of them became indistinguishable for the surrounding people—they started to speak Chinese dialect and take Chinese names because of the isolationist policy of the government. The Muslims in China are 2% of the local population (CIA World Factbook), mainly Sunnis. According to the Directorate of Religions (SARA), 21 million Muslims live in China, while Islam in China dated to 1400 years ago, when the Third Righteous Caliph sent his ambassador guided by Sa’ad ibn Abi Waqqas, the maternal uncle of the Prophet.

The first sedentary community of Muslims in China includes the Persian and Arabian traders, who settled around the doors of towns—Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Hangzhou, as well as in the interior of the country—Chang’an, Kaifeng, Yangzhou.

Muslims live in the whole territory of China. Their highest concentration is in the north-west provinces of Xinjiang, Gansu, and Ningxia as well as the Yunnan province, south-west China, and the Henan province in central China. In China, 55 minorities are officially recognized as 10 of them are predominantly Muslim. The largest group among them are the Hui people (9.8 million, according to the official census in 2000 or 48% of all Muslims), followed by the Uyghur (8.4 million, 41%); Kazakh (1.25 million, 6.1%), Dongxiang (514,000, 2.5%), Kyrgyz (144,000), Uzbeks (125,000), Salar (105,000), Tajik (41,000), Bonan (17,000), Tatar (5,000) peoples (Gladney, 2002).

Separate representatives of Muslim ethnicity follow a different religion or are atheists. The Tibetan Muslims are officially referred to the Tibetan nation. The Muslims live mainly in the territories close to the borderline with Central Asia, Tibet and Mongolia forming the so-called Quran Belt.

Today, Islam is on the rise having multiple organizations, which coordinate activity within community. Government supports the Hui Muslims and satisfies their demands since they do not have separatist movements, unlike the Uyghurs.

Who Are ETIM?

Name: Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (an Islamic terrorist, separatist organization established by the militant Uyghurs in western China)

Zone of activity: China

Year of establishment: 1993, reorganized in 1997

Membership: the number is unknown

Type of organization: religious

Ideology: Sunni Islamism, Uyghur nationalism, pan-Islamism, Islamic fundamentalism

Sponsorship: al-Qaeda, the Talibans (financial support and training)

The Chinese government claims that ETIM includes eight fractions associated with terrorist organizations aimed to the establishment of a Turkish Islamic state (Eastern Turkestan Islamic State): Central Asian Uyghur Hezbollah (Kazakhstan); East Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO); Eastern Turkistan International
Committee; Eastern Islamic Movement (Afghanistan); Eastern Turkestan Islamic Resistance Movement (Turkey); Eastern Turkistan Youth League (Switzerland); Turkistan Party (Pakistan); United Committee of Uyghur’s Organizations (Central Asia). They are accused of the assaults in Xinjiang.

The Xinjiang-Uyghur autonomous region is inhabited by 20 million, 60% of which are Muslims. Similarly to the Bulgarian Muslims, they complain that government purposefully decreases their number and they are more than 25 million. The Chinese law on birth control is not in force in this region; therefore, any speculations regarding born Muslims are possible.

Local Muslims are insusceptible to assimilation and do not renounce Islam, have excellent relations with their non-Muslim neighbors; keep the memory of their otherness and diversity.

The Muslims in China have a dual identity—the Chinese (civic) identity and their proper cultural identity, which is based on their ethnic-confessional belonging. While urban population successfully blends into Chinese society, the rural population remains a guardian of the Islamic tradition.

Who Are IMU?

IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) have a direct influence and interests in the region. IMU (initially the group of Adolat, meaning justice in Uzbek) is a terrorist organization in the region of central Asia, established in 1998. The main aim is to topple the government of Uzbekistan and to establish Chaliphate in the region of Fergana Valley (Nazarov, 2011, pp. 317-321). Their ideology is religious. The IMU founders, visionaries and leaders are Juma Namangani (participant in the Soviet-Afghan War) and Tahir Yuldashev (Mullah) are killed in 2001. The movement attacks ISAF in various regions of Afghanistan and South Waziristan (Pakistan). The analysis of assaults and actions will reveal that this movement represents a danger for the region of Central Asia. While initially ETIM is a local organization without influence, its role in the region increases after it becomes a wing of IMU in 2000. The lack of more specific purposes and the performed liberation operation in the region (OES) makes IMU difficult to differentiate from the rest militant groups acting on the territory of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The group still represents a minimal danger to the regional stability.

Who Are Hizb ut-Tahrir?

Hizb ut-Tahrir (hizb—party in Arabic) is aimed to construction of Chaliphate and introduction of the Islamic law (Sharia). It is founded as a Sunni Muslim organization by Taquiddin al-Nabhani in Jerusalem, in 1953 and their ideology is pan-Islamism. In Central Asia (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), its members are predominantly ethnic Uzbek. Separatism in this area is associated with religious extremism, political Islam and instability in Afghanistan (Todorova, 2014, p. 198). In Kyrgyzstan, they had their own candidate for presidential election in 2005, and work for achievement of three goals in Kazakhstan: more converts and attraction of new members, building of a net of secret cells, infiltration of the party to government system and legitimation of its program and purposes.

Political limits require constructive defense by political actors and the working model appears as a moral model, which is capable of mobilizing spiritual potential, the spiritual resources of society, by resting on belief and moral. This is the intersection and force of both the Chinese and Muslim cultures. The issue at stake is not fundamentalist manifestations of belief, related to religious fanaticism, but the complementation of a moral-ethical policy based on the moral fundamentals of a national tradition.
Can the Purity of Culture Be Preserved?

The mosque in Xian is hybrid; it is a child of this road. It is the oldest, biggest, and well preserved Islamic mosque in China, localized in the north-west to the Drum Tower (Huajue Lane). Built in 742 during the Tang dynasty (618-907), it is a result of invasion of Islam in north-west China by traders from Persia and Afghanistan in the middle of the seventh century, when a part of them settle in China and marry women from the Han people. Their successors are Muslim even today. The Muslims play an important role for unification of China during the dynasties of Yuan and Ming. During it the Chinese and Islamic traditions mix with each other, inscriptions on the walls in Mandarin and Arabic alternate with each other and the minaret of Ma Laichi stands on the made of porcelain plates pagoda. Stone dragons and turtles are especially noteworthy unconcerned about Islamic prohibition on the images of living creatures. Chinese birds and flowers climb around scriptures from Quran.

The decoration of the mausoleum of Oljeitu (the government of the Ilchans, when the silk shows in all its glory) reflects the mysterious insecurity and complex intricacies of styles along the Silk Road. The ruler himself, who was a Christian, Buddhist, Sunni, then Shia, is placed in a thumb, which is a combination of Sunni coating and Shia majolica.

The Hybrid Mosque (a pagoda and mosque all in one) is a warning that nothing will be homogeneous and stable again, the purity of culture, particularly the Chinese culture, becomes illusory. It is also a product of the Silk Road, and if we must follow this road, then we must follow it as a variety. The key element here is national temperament and its influence on the historical development, especially from the point of view of territorial policy of the country and adopted living space. This space is a human product; therefore it is existential but not simply a geographical territory. Man identifies with a territory, national idea, he is a motor of a certain spiritual project, which he externalizes in the space (this is the difference between the West, with dominating economic geography, and the East based on a humanistic, existential geography). Along the Silk Road, there are raised newly built mosques with gracefully overlooking minarets, which are symbols of the vertical relation of Man and God, but there are also old mosques such as the oldest mosque in Damghan, which is the symbol of the grounded past of the Sassanides. The slightly sharpened arcs from a concave warship hall, which makes one to freeze in a prayerful meditation. In the past times, Chingis Khan was entranced by his wives dressed in monochrome silk clothes, according to the corresponding religious holiday. We cross the consecutive invisible border—from the highlands of the Turk Azers to the planes of the ethnic Persians. Beautiful faces are packaged in veils, and young bodies wear the weight of dense black chadors, so that women appear similarly. However, under chador each woman is different—jeans, sneakers, branded clothes. Chadors and Persian silk, woven by Chinese yarn, captivated the West. In one of the castles along Loire, the silk chasuble, in which the body of Saint Maxime is wrapped, with depicted guepards tied in chains to the Zoroastrian Fire Altar, is kept.

The idea of human lightness, “the essential weightlessness of a Daoist hiding in itself the seed of utopia and revolt” (Eliade, 1999, p. 63), does not oppose to the Islamic idea of Man. The three religions substantiate religious life in China and compete for the hearts of believers, but political relations among Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism are not peaceful. In the spirit of syncretic religion of Chao-en, maybe the union of the three religions and Islam shall be announced, as a synthesis based of their best components.

A fundamental term in Chinese ethics is “zhen”—philanthropy, humanism, kindness, justice. These are also the main categories in Islamic ethics: justice (Quran 4:134), tolerance (Quran 2:257), and
generosity—(Quran 75:5, 7-9).

“Zhen” is a special sociopolitical norm regulating human relations, and philanthropy requires the refusal of using violence. In Islam, there is an unbreakable connection between Man and God—the mutual love between the beloved and the loving; the connection, in which a difference submerges and is dissolved in the absolute unity. According to Rumi, Man is the real substance, and all worlds are his accidents. Respect to the divine in a human personality is the main moral principle in Islamic ethics. We spoke of man’s dignity in Islam. Dignity is to recover Man’s noble aspect as well as his generous self. Man is essentially honored and God demands that he conducts himself in an honorific way: “God likes noble things and hates wickedness” (Hadith).

**Conclusion**

In today’s world of anxiety and crises, insecure future and broken illusions, new borderlines, nations, and identities, urbanization is a part of China. High housing buildings replace gradually old suburbs, bulldozers destroy the collected in hutongs memory and generations. Irrespective of the contact with western influence, things turn subtly in something Chinese.

The future will show if the Chinese will turn into the Islamic, if the Great Wall will continue to separate the light from darkness. However, it is important that places with history and villages with memory exist; it is important that the silk tents and clothes preserving their dragons and threes of life exist; it is important that along with the steps of the Eighth Imam in the Black Rock of Kadam Gah also the steps of the Yellow Emperor—the mythic founder of China, of wisdom, of silk, do not fade. The silk—being always wrapped in secrets and magic (western people believed that it is woven by fairies); it is aerial and transparent, however, waterproof and fireproof, and the road—of fragmented nations and identities, of imaginary political borders, of intertwined ethnicities and religions, of different cultures and ancient history, the road that is marked by profound changes and conflicts, officially non-existing, however, leaving “restless traces” behind.

**References**


