COMMENTARY

The Belt and Road Initiative and Middle Eastern Politics: Challenges Ahead[1]

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ABSTRACT *Involving sixty countries, the Belt and Road Initiative sparked a global debate because of its potential economic and political implications. Sceptics argue this project cannot achieve its objectives as it requires close cooperation amongst many countries whose national interests are on a collision course. The optimists contend the initiative provides a win-win scenario for participating countries. This paper argues that success of the project in the Middle East depends on overcoming several challenges including: eliminating security threats and terrorist organizations; finding sustainable solutions to political tensions and armed conflicts; and consolidating good governance.*

Introduction

Announced by the Republic of China in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative generated considerable interest as the project is thought to have far reaching economic, political and cultural consequences. The Silk Road is an ancient trade route crossing three continents that reminds us globalization is not a totally new, modern phenomenon and that trade has connected peoples, regions and countries for hundreds of years. In fact, the activities and transactions in and around the Silk Road routes of past centuries represent an earlier version of globalization. Stretching from China and India all the way through Persia, Mesopotamia, the Middle East and Anatolia to Europe, the world enjoyed considerable economic and cultural exchanges for centuries.

The imperial wars for regional and global hegemony and emergence of nation states slowed down the forces of globalization as national borders became *sine qua non* for security especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, with the rise of communication technologies, popular culture, free trade and population movements, the process of globalization marked the second half of the previous century. Today we are witnessing a stronger wave of

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globalization on a wider and larger scale because of ever increasing trade volume, foreign investments, rising number of people traveling all around the globe –all enabled by much faster communication facilitated by new technologies and the media. There is no doubt that if the Belt and Road Initiative achieves its objectives, globalization will take a new shape and content bringing nations and cultures closer based on common interests.

As the events and changes in international relations unfold with the rise of populist leaders, two trends seem to compete with each other –and are reminiscent of the Cold War psyche. One trend is the inclusiveness and closer connectivity among regions and countries as barriers are lifted, creating economic interdependency based on cooperation on a broad range of issues rather than isolation and confrontation. The other trend recently gaining ground, especially in the West, is anti-globalization expressed in policies through economic protectionism, creating barriers against free trade and foreign investment, closing borders to immigration and new comers. Ironically, proponents and leaders of yesterday's globalization, especially in the Western world, seem to have had a U-turn today by celebrating populism that leads to isolationism. The Belt and Road Initiative calls for us to revisit these trends with potentially deep effects on global trade, commerce, intercultural, civilizational and technological exchanges as well as global security architecture and geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts. However, a number of serious challenges remain especially in regions marked by long running political instability and conflicts.

In this paper, I will focus on today's Middle East and try to highlight how the Belt and Road Initiative might impact the region and contribute to its economic development, political stabilization and common security arrangement. As it now stands, however, there are major challenges and potential obstacles to be resolved. Without a realistic assessment of these challenges and obstacles and the generation of viable solutions acceptable to the regional powers, the Belt and Road Initiative will likely take much longer to materialize. If the initiative is designed to be a common project of Middle Eastern countries, then we have no choice but to engage in a rational debate on



The two-day “Belt and Road Forum,” held in Beijing, China on May 15, 2017, was attended by 30 world leaders and governmental representatives from other countries.

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political tensions, military conflicts, security threats and problems of governance in the region.

The Potential of the Middle East

Now, let us look at the potential of the Middle East for the Belt and Road Initiative as a cradle of many civilizations and birthplace of global religions such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all of which can contribute to the modern revival of the Silk Road. Today, this region hosts different cultures, ethnic groups and sectarian communities with diasporic and kin links in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. It is rightly observed that “The Middle East is the last section of the so-called China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor that runs from China’s Xinjiang province and through Central Asia reaches mainly Iran and Turkey.”[2] The economic potential of the Middle East is widely acknowledged as increasing international trade and investment in the religion attests. Moreover, there is a young and vibrant population, increasing wealth and investment opportunities creating enormous amounts of economic exchanges and expectations and hopes for the people of region and beyond. The presence of huge energy resources such as vast oil and gas fields, renewable energy sources and rapid development of trade and industry with regional countries and global actors illustrate that the Middle East is one of the most important centers of world trade, commerce, politics and security today. In a globalizing world, economics, politics and security are interlinked as capital, goods, human beings, ideologies and cultures are in flux. This reality is yet another reminder to us that economic and political stability are of vital importance as chaos and instability will lead to insecurity that will not only influence the Middle East and but also will have a potentially destabilizing effect on a global scale.

Successful implementation of this project will be based on political stability and common security without which there will be hardly any investment in infrastructure

The Middle East and its surrounding regions including Central Asia, North Africa, the Gulf and the Mediterranean region have almost 60 percent of the proven oil resources and 60-65 percent of the world's proven gas reserves.[3] This reality requires close attention as the energy consumption and energy security are at heart of industrial and economic development. These regions not only have countries with huge energy resources but also large populations, growing economies and wealth generation. However, political stability, good governance, economic integration and establishment of common security are all important issues that need to be addressed.[4] Given such a complex background, the initiative offers new opportunities to realize the dreams of many countries although it also faces several challenges. First of all, by reviving the ancient Silk Road through investment in railways and sea routes, the project underlines the importance of an alternative globalization which includes both the North and the South countries as well stretching from East to West. As in the past, this road aims at connecting the world through a network of trade routes that requires political and economic engagements among the countries concerned.[5]

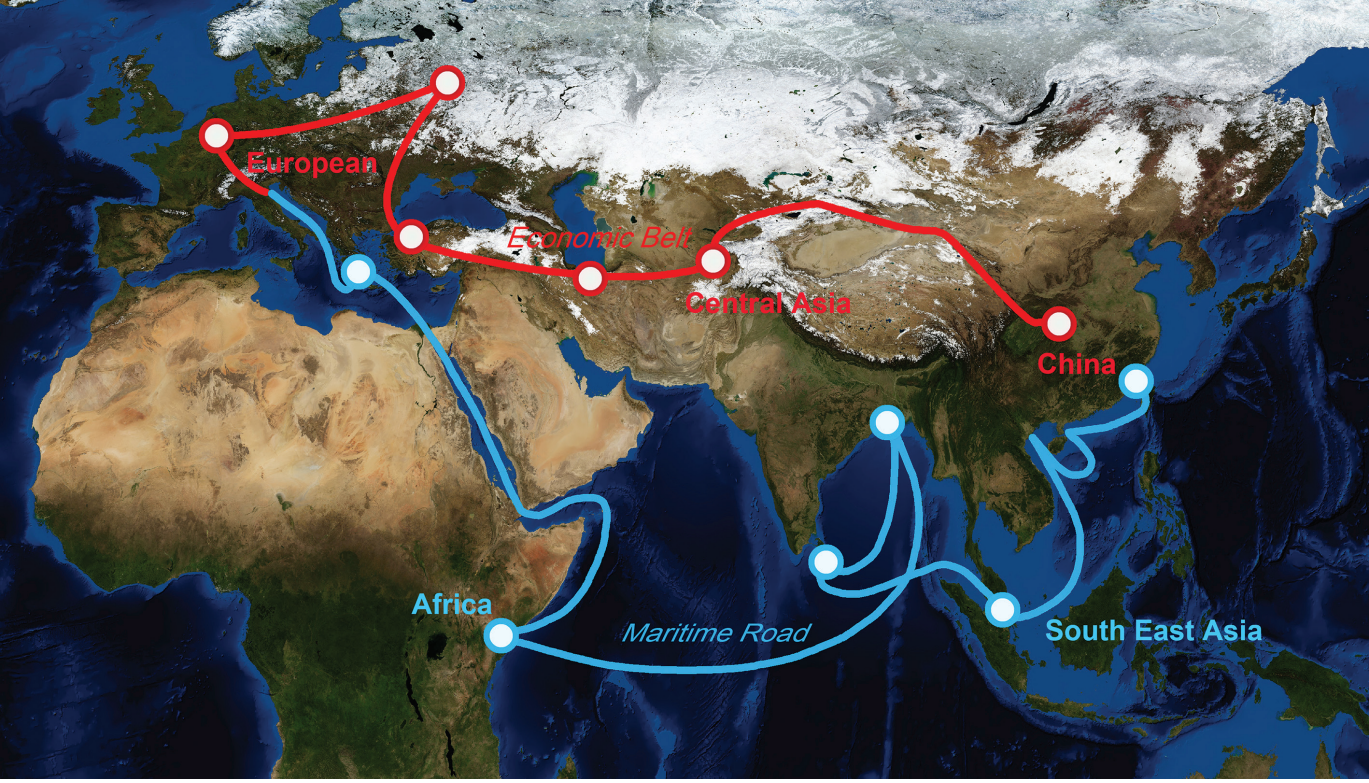
As far as the possible impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative for the Middle East and surrounding regions are concerned, one should note that the economic and financial investments generated by the project are expected to contribute to the development of partner countries. Given the amount of investment and jobs to be created, the Belt and Road Initiative promises to contribute to economic growth in the Middle East. As the economy grows, accumulation of wealth increases, life quality becomes better, opportunities for education, travel and work increase and interdependency among the partner countries and its citizens take root, the value of political stability and peace will be understood better by all participating countries. Under such circumstances states and peoples are expected to invest more in political stability, refrain from conflicts including supporting violence and terrorism. These are, of course, rational and optimistic expectations. However, successful implementation of this project will be based on political stability and common security without which there will be hardly any investment in infrastructure. Political destabilization and security threats remain the major obstacles to the investing agencies, companies and countries. An overall assessment of the region clearly illustrates that the Middle East has enormous potential and opportunities –as well as serious challenges in the context of regional disorder and geopo-

litical developments which may have an impact on the realization of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Challenges to Be Addressed

The major challenges and problems are not news –the Middle East has faced decades of turbulent political history. Political destabilization, ethnic and sectarian divisions, armed conflicts, terrorism, lack of effective governance and economic development, resistance to political reforms and a disregard for social demands as well as instrumentalization of religion and ideology remains barriers. These problems will hinder any meaningful move towards cooperation and the development of common policies in the Middle East.[6] The first and foremost challenge is that of security –not only for the countries in the region but also for the wider world. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 generated political instability and chaos and has deepened further as it continues today. Moreover, the 2010 Arab spring brought about significant transformations in several regional countries including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria.[7] While Tunisia found a relative calm based on political negotiations among leading actors, Egypt has established some kind of order following deadly social upheavals, and at the expense of political legitimacy, after a military takeover which the global powers and the Western world watched in silence as the alleged champions of the free world.[8] Libya, Yemen and Syria on the other hand have slipped into chaos and civil war. In the absence of political stability and without legitimate governments, a number of non-state actors and terrorist organizations found fertile ground to recruit killing machines and emerged as rivals to states and legitimate groups resisting the regimes in these countries. These non-state actors and terrorist organizations have gradually established their presence and extended their areas of influence.[9] Unfortunately, the international community, global powers, regional and international organizations failed to effectively intervene using political, diplomatic and military tools. This lack of interest in finding viable solutions to the unfolding crises has prepared a fertile ground for terrorist organizations to consolidate their presence by recruiting militants, engaging in economic activities and practising ethnic cleansing.

The effect of the civil war has been enormous on the people of the region and ongoing conflicts pose a challenge beyond the countries involved. As the Syrian crisis unfolds, a proxy war has been raging in the country and dispersing its people. The Syrian regime used all means at its disposal to prevent dissent, committed war crimes by killing its own people and lost control in the country where terrorist organizations such as ISIS and PYD/YPG have emerged and caused regional instability and hostility among different ethnic and sectarian communities. Since the conflict began six years ago, almost fifteen million Syrians were displaced and became refugees either inside or outside the country. Today Turkey hosts three



The illustration presents the routes of the Belt and Road Initiative, proposed by China, which aims to build a global infrastructure network stretching from East Asia to Europe.

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million, Lebanon hosts two million and Jordan hosts one million Syrian refugees with a heavy social, political and economic cost for the hosting countries.[10] The crisis represents the largest humanitarian crisis in the 21st century. Since the international community and international organizations failed to address the crisis in a comprehensive and effective way, its impact gradually spread from the regional to the global. Today, ISIS terrorism is not only operating in regional countries but also strikes European capitals and cities as well as other countries. Turkey, France, Belgium, UK, Russia and Iran have all been targeted by ISIS terrorists; and no country is safe until a lasting political solution is achieved in Syria and a policy of common security arrangement, at least on a regional scale, is agreed and put in place.

As pointed out earlier, the Middle East's turmoil and ills require treatment. The Belt and Road Initiative will cover Middle Eastern countries; through the Middle Corridor and through the Sea Route, the new Silk Road will pass through the Suez Canal involving many regional actors. Yet, there are several preconditions for full implementation of the initiative including: regional stability, peace, common security, partnership and good governance. Without such condition, a promising project might be doomed to failure and can hardly achieve its objectives at large. Meeting and ensuring the continuation of these preconditions (stability, common security, cooperation) on the basis of shared interests is the most serious challenge the initiative faces. The idea of reviving the ancient Silk Road has created mutual interest and an opportunity to establish a new regional geopolitical order in the Middle East. By facilitating economic development, contributing to common security arrangement, conflict resolution, political stability and effective governance, the new Silk Road offers

much to the region. Linking countries and peoples through economy, trade, financial investments, goods and cultural and technological exchanges is a source of excitement for the countries involved. However, we have complex challenges ahead that we should address with courage and sincerity. If we avoid tackling these challenges on the ground and focus only on theoretical issues and general expectations, I am afraid, we run the risk of undermining the significance of the Belt and Road Initiative to transform the region from a geoeconomic and geopolitical perspective on the global scale with a potential to challenge the established hegemony on world order. Moreover, we also run the risk of turning a blind eye to serious crisis in the Middle East and beyond that will have negative and even destructive effects on the realization of the Belt and Road Initiative. The political instability, armed conflicts, forced migration and vast number of refugees, security threats, terrorist organizations and networks, lack of good governance and legitimacy, radical ideologies of all sorts are among the challenges that the Belt and Road Initiative and partner countries need to address right at its beginning to lay a strong and secure ground.

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Today many countries in the Middle East face security threats that must be addressed urgently. The presence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq has far reaching consequences. Moreover, the PKK, which is recognized as a terrorist organization by the UN and the EU, has been a source of instability in Turkey, Iran, North Syria and Iraq. The PKK's presence in the four countries mentioned presents a security threat and is a destabilizing factor that must be seriously considered. It requires united action to eliminate so as to provide a safe and stable environment for investors in the Belt and Road Initiative. The PYD/YPG –offshoots of PKK terrorist organization– represent an additional threat to regional security and stability.[11] Setting one terrorist organization such as YPG against the other, in the form of ISIS, will not lead to any viable solution but risks putting more arms in the hand of terrorist organizations generating never ending conflicts in the region and creating more chaos and instability. Such a policy also sends wrong messages to the world and paves the way to legitimize terrorist organizations and networks.

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In addition to these terrorist organizations, we should also be aware a new form of terrorist organization which emerged in Turkey. Known as the Fetullah Gülenist Terrorist Network (FETÖ), it is active in many countries that involve the Belt and Road Initiative.[12] The Gülenist Terrorist Network initiated a coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016 to plunge the country into crisis and civil war in a region which has already been suffering instability and conflicts over the years. Members of the Gülenist Terrorist Network have infiltrated the armed forces, judiciary, police force and several other state institutions over the years. On July 15, 2016, armed cell of the Gülenist Terrorist Network in the military bombed the Turkish Parliament, the Presidential Complex, headquarters of intelligence and police forces. They also tried to capture and assassinate Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The coup attempt aimed to overthrow the elected government and suspend the operation of constitutional institutions. The attempt was averted by the strong opposition of Turkish people under the leadership of President Erdoğan. 249 Turkish citizens lost their lives and more than 2000 people were injured in defence of their constitutional institutions and elected government.[13] Had the coup attempt succeeded, Turkey would have been destabilized with serious political, economic and security implications for the Middle East. Unless these terrorist organizations are eliminated and security is established, the initiative will face insurmountable challenges and its implementation will be more difficult than imagined.

Conclusion

Although there are sceptics about the revival of the ancient Silk Road because of conflicts of interests and global completion amongst the established world powers and rising nation states, the Belt and Road Initiative has the potential for transformative effect on the geopolitical and geoeconomic balance of power in both a regional and global context. As argued in this article, there are two main competing trends: populism versus inclusiveness or isolationism versus globalization. The Belt and Road Initiative promotes globalization and cooperation as it involves 60 countries. However, having been initiated by China, it also raises questions, especially in the West, as to the intentions of China and its potential influence on a shifting balance of power in international trade and politics.

As far as the Middle East is concerned, the Belt and Road Initiative

promises positive outcomes but faces numerous challenges. First, the region and its countries need to find a culture of working together in partnership to find common ground. Within the Middle East, we must cultivate cooperation to resolve conflicts including proxy wars engulfing several countries. Essential to assist investment and development; we must find a solution to the humanitarian crisis and refugee issues. While ensuring good governance, a common policy should be agreed on to wipe out terrorist organizations and networks that cause political instability and pose significant security threats to the region. I believe that the Belt and Road Initiative will be a stimulus to address all of these issues and challenges while, in a rational way, drawing a road map for the future that will produce a win-win result for all the countries concerned. From a realistic perspective, the success of the Belt and Road Initiative ultimately depends on engagement of all countries concerned on all levels in a constructive dialogue. Needless to say such a dialogue is and will be just the beginning of a very long political and economic journey requiring patience, and confidence building.

Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this article is presented as a paper at the 3rd Silk Road Tianshan Forum, July 11-13, 2017, Urumqi, China.

2. Filippo Fasulo and Valeria Talbot, "The MENA Region: Where the Belt Joins the Road," in Alessia Amighini (ed.), *China's Belt and Road: A Game Changer?*, (Milano: ISPI, 2017); Tom Miller, *China's Asian Dream Empire Building along the New Silk Road*, (London: Zed Books, 2017), pp. 75-95.

3. For more details, see Muhammad Umar Abbasi, "The Future of Oil and Natural Gas Politics in Central Asia: A Statistical Analysis," *NDU Journal*, (2013), pp. 93-120.

4. For more, see "The Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality," *UNDP*.

5. Miller, *China's Asian Dream Empire Building along the New Silk Road*; Amighini (ed.), *China's Belt and Road: A Game Changer?* (Milano: ISPI, 2017).

6. M. Selin Bölme, "The Roots of Authoritarianism in the Middle East," in Julide Karakoç (ed.), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Before and After the Arab Uprisings*, (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2015), pp. 7-37.

7. For more, see Laribi Sadiki (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, (Abington: Routledge, 2015); Hamit Bozarslan, "The Arab World between 2011 and 2014: From Revolutionary Configurations to the State of Violence," in Julide Karakoç (ed.), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Before and After the Arab Uprisings*, (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2015), pp. 67-91.

8. Julide Karakoç, "A Comparative Analysis of the Post-Arab Uprisings Period in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya," in Julide Karakoc (ed.), *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Before and After the Arab Uprisings* (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2015), pp. 172-199.

9. Murat Yeşiltaş and Tuncay Kardaş, *Non-State Armed Actors in the Middle East: Geopolitics, Ideology, and Strategy*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

10. Please see Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal, http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php; Elizabeth G. Ferris and Kemal Kirişçi, *The Consequences of Chaos: Syria s Humanitarian Crisis and the Failure to Protect*, (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2016).

11. Bünyamin Keskin, "PKK's Syria Branch PYD: A Violent Non-State Actor and its Controversial Legitimacy," *The New Turkey*, (April 18, 2016).

12. Turkey's National Security Council (MGK) designated the FETO as a terrorist organization on May 26, 2016, as well as the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation listed it on October 13 and October 19, 2016, respectively.

13. Muhittin Ataman, *July 15 Coup Attempt in Turkey*, (Ankara: SETA Publications, 2017).