

China's Re-Construction of Old Silk Road and Its Implications on Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper tries to trace how China revived the Ancient Silk Road and how it has redefined relations with other countries in the world, including Indonesia. Under President Xi Jinping, China revived the concept of the Silk Road through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) policy. BRI has two main parts, the land silk route known as the Silk Road Economic Belt and the sea route known as the Maritime Silk Road. The revival of the silk route has its charm so that many countries, including Indonesia, welcome BRI's presence. But before Indonesia gets involved further in the BRI, it is crucial for Indonesia to examine the extent to which the ideologies and values carried out in the reconstruction of the BRI concept whether threatens or benefits Indonesia's interests. Through a study of the discourse and views of Chinese leaders, this paper will explore how the traditional values of the silk road are modified to conform to the values of modern cooperation and trade to suit China ambition to be a great power.

Tulisan ini mencoba menelusuri bagaimana China menghidupkan kembali Jalur Sutra Kuno dan bagaimana China meredefinisi hubungan dengan negara-negara lain di dunia, termasuk Indonesia. Di bawah Presiden Xi Jinping, China menghidupkan kembali konsep Jalur Sutra melalui kebijakan Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). BRI memiliki dua bagian utama, yaitu jalur sutra darat yang dikenal dengan Silk Road Economic Belt dan jalur laut yang dikenal dengan Maritime Silk Road. Kebangkitan jalur sutra menjadi daya tarik tersendiri sehingga banyak negara, termasuk Indonesia, menyambut kehadiran BRI. Namun sebelum Indonesia terlibat lebih jauh dalam BRI, penting bagi Indonesia untuk mengkaji sejauh mana ideologi dan nilai yang dilakukan dalam rekonstruksi konsep BRI apakah mengancam atau menguntungkan kepentingan Indonesia. Melalui kajian wacana dan pandangan para pemimpin Tiongkok, tulisan ini akan mengeksplorasi bagaimana nilai-nilai tradisional jalan sutra dimodifikasi agar sesuai dengan nilai-nilai kerjasama dan perdagangan modern agar sesuai dengan ambisi Tiongkok menjadi kekuatan besar.

Keywords: China; BRI; Indonesia; Silk Road

Introduction

China, under President Xi Jinping, has a desire to revive the concept of the ancient silk lane through a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) policy. The idea was introduced by President Xi Jinping while visiting Central Asia in 2013.¹ In this concept, China attempts to realize the ancient silk route by using modern technology, namely through infrastructure development such as modern networks of fast train lines, land vehicle lines and oil pipelines in the Asian region.² BRI has two main parts, the land silk route known as the Silk Road Economic Belt and the sea route known as the Maritime Silk Road. The two BRI components can be divided into six economic corridors. The economic corridor consists of four land routes, the new Eurasian land bridge, the Sino-Mongolian-Russian economic corridor, the economic corridor of Central Asia-West Asia, the China-Pakistan economic corridor; and two other routes namely the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor and the China- Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor included in the Maritime Silk Road.³ BRI itself according to the Chinese government is an initiative that aims to promote the connectivity of the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa. In addition, BRI is also expected to be able to strengthen partnerships between the countries involved.⁴

In addition to receiving remarks from quite a several countries, the Chinese BRI program also faces challenges and concerns. For those who support, it is able to help the development and cooperation with China. But for those who refused, it was suspected as part of China's efforts to become a superpower and to control the economy in the countries that collaborated with China. Therefore, it is essential to see what the ideology, vision, and goals of BRI are. With this description, it is hoped that we can later figure out what the BRI implications are for Indonesia. We are of the view that BRI is China's effort to build economic activities by reviving the idea of the old silk road. By doing this way, China can give the impression and imagination of a collaboration that can provide benefits and glory such as economic cooperation and trade in the past that are mainly carried out in countries on track ancient silk. So far, it is still difficult to guess what the ideological impact of the silk road is because, in the discourse developed by Chinese leaders, it only deals with economic and trade benefits.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part will discuss BRI, as stated by President Xi Jinping, the values and ideology that it brought. The second part discusses the world's reaction to the idea of this new Silk Road. The third section discusses how Southeast Asia and Indonesia were put in the concept of BRI. The fourth part is the analysis and conclusions that try to see the acceptance and impact of the Chinese Silk Road in Indonesia.

Silk Road: From Ancient to New

The silk pathway is the term first used by German geographers van Richthofen.⁵ The Silk Road is a definition that explains the path that connects China with its trading partners in the Central Asian region, West Asia, India, and Europe during the Han dynasty.⁶ This line is called the silk route because silk is the primary commodity of Chinese trade through this route, followed by other products such as gold. Besides being used as a trade route that connects Asia and Europe, the ancient Chinese silk route in the past was also access to cultural and political activities in the 2nd century until the 18th century.⁷ The silk line was initially opened by Zang Qian who was a Chinese general during the Han dynasty and was sent to "the western region" which at that time was a supplier of essential needs and sources of political knowledge.⁸

As a form of China's seriousness towards the initiation of a new silk line, President Xi Jinping held a Belt and Road Initiative Forum in Beijing in May 2017. In his speech, Xi explained that the new silk line was a strategy for developing high-profile projects under the Belt and Road framework which included the Eurasian region, Central Asia and ASEAN.⁹ In addition, Xi Jinping also explained China's commitment to channel USD 1.4 trillion to realize the idea of a new silk path.¹⁰ On this occasion, he also explained the values and norms found in ancient silk lines which would later be implemented in BRI. President Xi Jinping told that there are at least four norms or values originating from old silk lines, namely peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit.¹¹

At the opening ceremony of The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing on May 14, 2017, President Xi Jinping explained how the values contained in the silk pathway were understood by the Chinese Government. Xi Jinping told that since long ago, the silk route had a spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit. Xi Jinping explained that the spirit of the silk path would be an excellent legacy for human civilization.¹² The first norm described by Xi Jinping in his speech at the forum was peace and cooperation. Xi Jinping links the history of the silk line with the four values mentioned earlier. The first value understood by Xi Jinping regarding the silk path is peace and cooperation. In his speech, Xi Jinping explained that:

"Peace and cooperation. In China's Han dynasty around 140 B.C., Zhang Qian, a royal emissary, left Chang'an capital of the Han Dynasty. He traveled westward on a mission of peace and opened an overland route linking the east and the west, a daring undertaking which came to be known as Zhang Qian's journey to the western region. Centuries later, in the years of Tang, Song and Yuan Dynasties, such silk routes, both overland and at sea, boomed. Great adventures, including Du Huan of China, Marcopolo of Italy and Ibn Batulah of Morocco, left their footprints along these

ancient routes. In the early 15 century, Zheng He, the famous Chinese navigator in the Ming Dynasty, made seven voyage to the western seas, a feat which still is remembered today. These pioneers won their place in history not as conquerors with warship, guns or swords. Rather, they are remembered as friendly emissaries leading camel caravans and sailing treasure-loaded ships. Generations after generation, the silk routes travellers have built a bridge for peace, and east-west cooperation".¹³

The message from Xi Jinping above suggests that the silk path contains the value of peace and cooperation. Meanwhile, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi said that cooperation was the only way that countries could use it to effectively deal with regional threats and global challenges. In addition, Wang Yi also added that:

"The type of partnership which China proposes does not target an imagined enemy or any third party, it advocates a win-win approach instead of a zero-sum game approach to state-to state relations and stresses the importance of seeking common interest. This is a positive proposal that will encourage dialogue and cooperation in the international community and prevent confrontation and conflict."¹⁴

Meanwhile, President Xi Jinping also explained that "The 'Belt and Road Initiative' is not set by ideology. We won't set a political agenda. It's not exclusive."¹⁵

Based on the above quote, the authors can explain that the norms regarding peace and cooperation were included to explain China's desire to cooperate under the BRI framework and not target any party. In his speech, President Xi Jinping also explained that BRI initiated by the Chinese Government was purely an initiation of cooperation in the economic field, and did not have any political agenda. Meanwhile, the Chinese Foreign Minister said that China, through BRI's collaboration, sought to establish a pattern of international relations that was not a zero-sum game but encouraged cooperation and avoiding conflict.

The second norm in the conception of the silk line, according to Xi Jinping, is about openness and inclusiveness. Xi Jinping explained that the silk route in the past had passed through several regions which were the birth centers of world civilizations, such as Egypt, Babylon, India and China which were the centers of the birth of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam which were also the homes of diverse nationalities and races.¹⁶ Xi Jinping also explained that:

"These routes enabled people of various civilizations, religions, and races to interact with and embrace each other with an open mind. In the course of exchange, they fostered a spirit of mutual respect and were engaged in a common endeavor to pursue prosperity. Today, ancient cities of Jiuquan, Dunhuang, Tulufan, Kashi, Samarkand, Baghdad and Constantinople as well as

ancient ports of Ningbo, Quanzhou, Beihai, Colombo, Jeddah, and Alexandria stand as living monuments to these past interactions. This part of history shows that civilization thrives with openness and nations prosper through an exchange"¹⁷

Meanwhile, Wang Yi as China's foreign minister explained that the partnership proposed by China aims to harness the power of each country through exchange and mutual learning, while also seeking mutual progress despite differences and preventing isolation created by a small political group.¹⁸ Then President Xi Jinping explained that:

"To promote the Silk Road spirit, we need to respect each other's choice of development path. "People don't need to wear the same shoes; they should find what suits their feet". Governments don't have to adopt the same model of governance; they should find what benefits their people"¹⁹

In the excerpt from the speech, Xi Jinping emphasized the principle of inclusiveness, namely mutual respect for the differences in the system of government of a country and other countries. The openness norm can be seen from the acceptance of the Chinese Government for BRI cooperation not only limited to countries that are included in the silk route, but also to countries that are not included in the silk route. They are also included in infrastructure financing through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In addition, the norm regarding inclusiveness can also be explained from this perspective, where the Chinese Government does not question the differences in the system of government.

The third norm is mutual learning. In this case, Xi Jinping explained that the history of the silk line provides a lesson on the example of the success of knowledge exchange. Xi Jinping emphasized that:

"More importantly, the exchange of goods and know-how spurred new ideas. For example, Buddhism originated in India, blossomed in China, and was enriched in Southeast Asia. Confucianism, which was born in China, gained appreciation by European thinkers such as Leibniz and Voltaire. Herein lies the appeal of mutual learning."²⁰

In addition, Wang Yi as the Minister of Foreign Affairs of China explained that equality is not limited by the size and level of state development, more than that country under the cooperation of BRI can respect each other's sovereignty and treat each other as equal countries.²¹ From this, it can be explained that the inclusion of norms of mutual learning within BRI shows that China wants equality in BRI cooperation between the countries involved.

The last value that can be taken from Jinping's speech is mutual benefit. Xi Jinping explained that:

“The ancient prosperous cities of Alma-Ata, Samarkand and Chang’an and ports of Sur and Guangzhou thrived, so did the Roman empire as well as Parthia and Kushab Kingdoms, The Han and Tang Dynasties of China entered the golden age. The ancient silk routes brought prosperity to these regions and boosted their development”²²

In the speech, Xi Jinping explained that the cities that had entered and were involved in the ancient silk route had become a developing area. In addition, the existence of cooperation also brings shared prosperity to the regions involved. The concept of collaboration from Xi Jinping is similar to the concept of prosperity that Japan introduced long before China, during World War II Japan in Greater East Asia. But this concept has the characteristic of waging an anti- Western spirit in the Asian region. Unlike Japan, in its concept, China does not direct this concept in an anti-Western direction. This can be concluded by the authors because the collaboration initiated by China also did not close itself to countries in the West.

Furthermore, Xi Jinping in the same speech also emphasized the value of inclusiveness in China-ASEAN cooperation. Xi Jinping stated that:

“Fifth, stick to openness and inclusiveness. The sea is big because it admits all rivers. In the long course of human history, the people of China and ASEAN countries have created splendid and great civilizations renowned around the world. Ours is a diversified region. Various civilizations have assimilated and interacted with one another under the influence of different cultures, which affords an important cultural foundation for the people of China and ASEAN countries to learn from and complement one another”²³

The last two quotes above are two of the five points of cooperation values proposed by Xi Jinping for the China-ASEAN partnership. Three other points are the commitment to build trust as a good neighbor, maintain regional peace and stability, and increase friendship and mutual understanding.²⁴

President Xi Jinping not only expressed the importance of values of inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit during a visit to Indonesia in 2013. On March 23, 2014, when at the UNESCO headquarters, Xi Jinping on occasion said that mutual learning and inclusiveness are important principles in building civilization.

“Civilizations have become richer and more colorful with exchanges and mutual learning. Such exchanges and mutual learning form an important drive for human progress and global peace and development. To promote exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, we must adopt the right approach with some important principles. They, in my view, contain the following:

First, civilizations have come in different colors, and such diversity has made exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations relevant and valuable....

....Second, civilizations are equal, and such equality has made exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations possible.....

.....Third, civilizations are inclusive, and such inclusiveness has given exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations the needed drive to move forward"²⁵

President Xi Jinping's speech above emphasizes the exchange between civilizations through principles he understands, such as equality, mutual learning, and inclusiveness. Meanwhile, on the same occasion, President Xi Jinping also explained that China had upheld these principles from the past through the silk route. Xi Jinping emphasized that:

"Having gone through over 5,000 years of vicissitudes, the Chinese civilization has always kept to its original root. As the unique cultural identity of the Chinese nation, it contains our most profound cultural pursuits and provides us with abundant nourishment for existence and development. The Chinese civilization, though born on the soil of China, has come to its present form through constant exchanges and mutual learning with other civilizations. In the 2nd century B.C., China began working on the Silk Road leading to the Western Regions. In 138 B.C. and 119 B.C., Envoy Zhang Qian of the Han Dynasty made two trips to those regions, spreading the Chinese culture there and bringing into China grape, alfalfa, pomegranate, flax, sesame, and other products."²⁶

While visiting the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the Cooperation Forum of China and Arab Countries on June 5, 2014, President Xi Jinping on occasion reiterated that there were at least four principles contained in the silk pathway. "For hundreds of years the spirit embodied by the Silk Road, namely peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit, has passed down through the generations."²⁷ President Xi Jinping explained that Arab and Chinese countries must work together to promote the spirit of the silk path, which also cannot be separated from the long history of China and Arab countries. In addition, in the forum, Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of building the spirit of the silk path that China and Arab countries hope to do.²⁸ In his speech on the spirit of the silk path, Xi Jinping again emphasized the values of the silk path. President Xi Jinping explained that:

"To promote the Silk Road spirit, we need to boost mutual learning between civilizations. There is no such thing as a good or a bad civilization. Rather, different civilizations are enriched through an exchange" (The Governance of China 2014:346). "To promote the Silk Road spirit, we need to respect each other's choice of development path. "People don't need to wear the same shoes; they should find what suits their feet". Governments don't have to adopt the same model of governance; they should find what benefits their people"²⁹

World Reaction to BRI

In 2017, the Chinese Government held the Belt and Road Forum, which took place in Beijing on May 14, 2017. The forum was attended by at least 57 state representatives as well as representatives from international organizations, such as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, World Bank President Jim Yong Kim, and IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde.³⁰ The Chinese government has released the signing of the agreement of the countries joining BRI. On this occasion, China has signed 76 forms of agreements with other countries from various regions, which in practice, there are around 270 collaborative projects covering five sectors of cooperation. The five cooperation sectors are divided based on the action plan of the belt and road initiative, which includes five things, namely policy coordination, infrastructure, trade, finance and inter-community connectivity.³¹

On this occasion, Vladimir Putin as President of Russia, explained that Russia was ready to accept the idea of the silk route by the Chinese Government. President Putin also invited other countries to cooperate under BRI. President Putin explained that:

"We welcome China's One Belt, One Road initiative. By proposing this initiative, President Xi Jinping has demonstrated an example of a creative approach toward fostering integration in energy, infrastructure, transport, industry and humanitarian collaboration, about which I have just talked at length. I believe that by adding together the potential of all the integration formats like the EAEU, the BRI, the SCO, and the ASEAN, we can build the foundation for a larger Eurasian partnership. This is the approach that, we believe, should be applied to the agenda proposed today by the People's Republic of China."³²

He continues to state:

"On a final note, I would like to stress that Russia does not simply view the future of the Eurasian partnership as the mere establishment of new ties between states and economies. This partnership must shift the political and economic landscape of the continent and bring peace, stability, prosperity, and a new quality of life to Eurasia....

....I believe that by maintaining the spirit of cooperation, we can achieve that future. I want to thank President Xi Jinping for this well-timed initiative, promising such splendid prospects for cooperation"³³

President Putin's speech above explained that Russia was ready to accept BRI initiated by President Xi Jinping. Aside from being the head of state of Russia, President Putin also invited all formats of regional integration to join BRI.

On the same occasion, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras supported BRI initiated by China. Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras explained that in the 21st-century cooperation between countries is needed to face increasing global and regional challenges. Therefore, he supports initiatives from China to initiate multilateral cooperation under BRI.

Meanwhile, Victor Orban, as the Hungarian prime minister, explained that his country was the first European country to approve BRI's ideas proposed by the Chinese Government. Likewise, the Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni in his interview with Chinese journalists based in Rome before attending the Belt and Road Forum explained that Italy is interested in infrastructure development cooperation initiated by the Chinese Government. On the Belt and Road Forum, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also supports BRI, which was initiated by the Chinese Government. President Erdogan, in his speech, explained that "the New Silk Road, will be the future with its aim to link. Asia, Europe, Africa, and even South America will contribute to developing the land, sea and air routes on a continental level."³⁴ In the speech, President Erdogan believed that the new silk route would be able to connect regions throughout the world. In addition, in his speech, President Erdogan also argued that BRI could reduce the level of terrorism in the world.

The acceptance of BRI's ideas was also expressed by Michelle Bachelet as President of Chile. Bachelet explained that Chile is ready to accept BRI and bridge Asia with Latin America through BRI. President Bachelet also explained that in the new silk route, Chile would like to play a role in the sea lane or the 21st-century maritime silk road. The two statements above show that Chile, through President Bachelet accepted and supported the service of the Chinese Government in the new silk path initiative. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev also expressed his agreement regarding the idea of BRI initiated by the Chinese Government. This was revealed by President Nazarbayev when he was interviewed by the channel China 's CCTV - 13. On this occasion, President Nazarbayev explained that Kazakhstan was very open to receiving BRI.

Southeast Asia and Indonesia in BRI

On October 3, 2013, Xi Jinping visited Indonesia and had the opportunity to deliver a speech about BRI in front of members of the People's Representative Council of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR RI). On this occasion, Xi Jinping explained that, "China will strengthen maritime cooperation with the ASEAN countries, and the China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund should be used to develop maritime partnership partnerships to build the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century."³⁵ The statement shows that Southeast Asia is an

area that is one of the main focuses of the BRI. On that occasion, President Xi Jinping expressed China's commitment to funding China- ASEAN maritime cooperation through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

Jinping also wanted to erase Indonesia's worries about this collaboration by mentioning BRI values such as inclusiveness and mutual benefits. He stated that the cooperation of the Southeast Asia-China region would have a positive impact on both parties. This cooperation is a win-win cooperation. As a well known Chinese saying goes, "The interests to be the interests of all," China is ready to open itself wider to ASEAN countries based on equality and mutual benefit to enable ASEAN countries to benefit from more than China's development."³⁶

In response to the idea of BRI, Indonesian President Joko Widodo hoped that Indonesia and countries in the Southeast Asia region could play an essential role in supplying material needs and natural needs which could be further processed. President Joko Widodo explained: "Indonesia and Southeast Asia must have an important role in supplying raw materials and natural resources that can be processed into finished goods and services". President Joko Widodo is optimistic that BRI will trigger industrializations on a massive scale.³⁷

Meanwhile, when meeting with representatives of the AIIB who visited Indonesia in March 2018. President Joko Widodo explained that Indonesia was "one of the first countries in the world to fully endorse the idea of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank". His first action after being elected President in 2014 was to support and join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.³⁸ Meanwhile, Christopher Legg, as the head of the AIIB delegation, stated that AIIB plans to increase loans for Indonesia. So far, AIIB has issued 20 loans and three for Indonesia.³⁹

Conclusion: The Impact to Indonesia

Despite getting a lot of criticism within the country, the Indonesian government still welcomed BRI. In the latest development, Indonesia also attended the second BRI meeting in Beijing, China by sending Vice President Jusuf Kalla on April 25, 2019. On this occasion, Indonesia stated that it continued to support the BRI program and continued to expect cooperation. The Indonesian government has so far seen opportunities for cooperation from various aspects of the economy and Indonesia's needs for investment and infrastructure development that can boost Indonesia's economy in the long run.

Seeing various statements from the leaders of China, the new silk line is known as BRI does not offer new alternative norms and ideologies from the path of capitalism that developed in Europe. The emphasis is now on the development of economic infrastructure, which can later improve connectivity

and facilitate trade. China, in the context of capitalistic, competitive trade, will get a big advantage because their products are cheap and also of higher quality than those of other countries products. With greater connectivity, these products will dominate the world market, especially those in the new silk lane.

The rise of the Chinese economy was the same as the economic revival of Europe and Japan after the Second World War, which originated from the spirit and model of capitalism. The only difference is that China offers cheap products. These products are a modification of the Western and Japanese technologies that have existed so far. If Japan had succeeded in competing because of perfecting Western technology by producing cheap but still quality products, now China further modified and imitated the technology also to provide products that were cheap and able to compete in the world. China also benefits from more competitive production costs because of the availability of a large and inexpensive labor force in the country.

For Indonesia, this is what must be anticipated. The arrival of Chinese products on a massive scale is similar to the inflow Japanese products before this. According to market law, this becomes inevitable. Moreover, Indonesian products generally are not able to compete with the same foreign products so far. The difference between the economic expansion of Japan and China is also in terms of technology transfer. Japan does not want to fully transfer technology because it will harm their industry in the future. China also does the same thing but by bringing its workforce to other countries, including Indonesia. From the past, both dealing with Japan and now with China, Indonesia's bargaining position has always been weak. Indonesia did not succeed in obtaining and conducting technology transfer from Japan properly. The same thing is also likely to happen between Indonesia and China.

If you want to say that China has carried out economic imperialism, then actually foreign economic imperialism has been around for a long time since the arrival of the West and then Japan in the colonial time. Chinese imperialism has a slightly different meaning because it does not involve an ideological threat but rather an economic threat. Therefore, rather than speaking in a populist manner about foreign threats, it is better for people to talk about how to overcome the danger of economic control by China. In this case, the terms of the cooperation agreement must be strengthened. Perhaps, Indonesia needs to learn from Donald Trump. Trump, who is from a superpower country with a fairly strong bargaining position, has begun to be overwhelmed dealing with China, and therefore acted decisively.

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