

RAGING SILK ROUTE: A BROADER PERSPECTIVE OF THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

The current Russian war to occupy Ukraine reminds us of the German occupation of Czechoslovakia and Poland and how it unfurled the Second World War. No wonder Nations today and their people are condemning such an advance that might lead us to the next Big War.

Among such speculations one asks why on Earth is Russia doing this? You can Google the political, historical, economic or regional reasons as a topic for your next conversation, but what I am essentially concerned with is - Is there any pattern?

Studying world history for quite some time makes it easy to categorize the reasons for the wars in various dimensions, but at the same time it also reveals a sense of similarity in those reasons. Let us turn our attention to the most dynamic continent of the century, i.e. Asia.

Today Asian continent is economically growing most rapidly but is also the most unstable region in the world. Yemen crisis, Iran nuclear crisis, Israel-Palestine conflict, Afghanistan-Taliban crisis, radicalism in Central Asian Region, India - Pakistan, India - China, South China Sea issues, Armenia- Azerbaijan conflict - the list goes on and on with the current Russia - Ukraine War as an addition to it.

While observing these wars and conflicts on the world map, I observed that most of these unstable regions have one thing in common - they all once prospered together from the trade on the Silk Route.

We all have learnt about the Silk route one way or another; but I feel it is essential at this point that I write briefly about it, so that all of us reading this can be on the same page.

The Might of the Silk Route

Silk Route (Fig. 1) is an ancient trade route, linking China with the Western European Nations. It is around 1500 years old and 6500 km long. It began with the Han dynasty's expansion into Central Asia around 114 BC and since then has been under various empires in different regions including Roman, Byzantine, Turkish, Mughal, Mongol empires etc.



Fig 1: Showing Silk Route

The scenic imagery of traders joining together in caravans with camels or other pack animals while travelling mountains and deserts is what defines the silk roads of the past. It is only due to this trade that Indian textiles became famous worldwide, making it opulent and conferring on it the title of "The Golden Sparrow".

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There was never a good war, or a bad peace

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- Benjamin Franklin

While trading was certainly at the heart of the Road, religion and ideas spread along the Silk Road just as fluidly as goods. Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, and to some extent Christianity spread to the world along the Silk Route. The exchange of information gave rise to new technologies and innovations that changed the world; for instance, the horses introduced to China contributed to the might of the Mongol Empire, while gunpowder from China changed the very nature of war in Europe and beyond.

It is hence clear that the contact of a nation with The Road was essentially a Midas touch. The insurmountable wealth amassed by rulers controlling the Road was a source of power and greed. Therefore, every ruler aspired to control it. The recent attempt by China to reinvigorate the Silk Route via its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) shows that the relevance of the Road has not died out even in today's digital world.

Wars at the behest of The Road

With greed comes a desire for expansion, and with such a desire comes conflict. I shall elaborate on the word "expansion" through which I'll try to reveal the distinct but interrelated causes of those conflicts.

Before going to the causes, it is essential to note that these wars are as old as the Road itself; it is not a new phenomenon and by its nature they shall not cease in the future.

Political and Economic expansion - The root of power of a nation has always been its economy. And with the economy comes greed satisfied only by further expansion of territory. To substantiate this let's consider few examples.

The desire to be the most wealthy and powerful empires led to territorial ambitions that the world recalls till today - those of Alexander The Great and Genghis Khan. Both attempted to capture the route from Europe to China for world dominance.

A more contemporary example that most of us will relate to is the rise of China as a manufacturing giant of the world and its simultaneous direct and indirect (by debt-trapping) occupations of Pakistan, South China Sea, Iran, Central Asia,



Fig 2: Showing Ukraine (Black Sea) as an essential checkpoint on the Silk Route



etc (all along the Route).

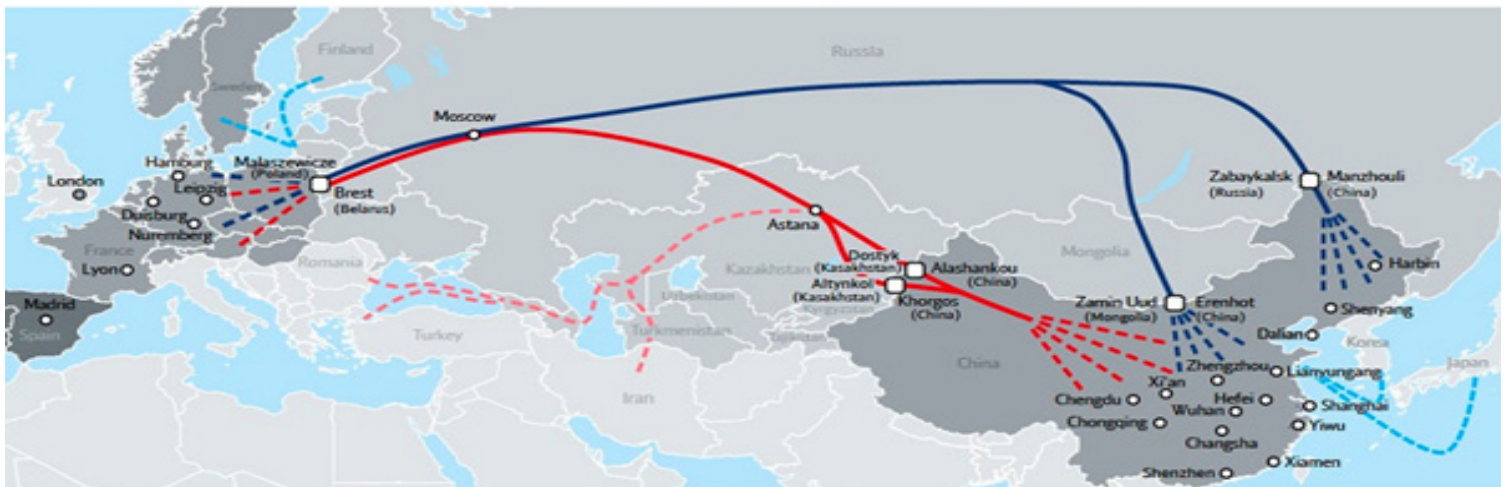
Religious and Cultural Expansion - Belief is an area of life that resists change the most. The Road not only introduced religions and cultures that were new, but also contradicting at times. It is natural that such changes will face a severe backlash, often manifested as wars, ethnic conflicts, communal conflicts etc.

A fantastic example of this is The Crusades - a series of magnanimous wars between Islam and Christianity from the 11th to 13th century AD fought in Eastern Europe and Western Asia, primarily along the Silk Route.



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The radicalism, ethnic conflicts and terrorism prevalent in Western Asia, Central Asia and Western China today are remnants of conflicts due to the infusion and backlash of cultures.

In the above dimensions I have tried to give you food for thought so that you can categorize your recollections of different wars and conflicts and find out their reasons.

The Current War

Let's circle back to the Russian - Ukraine war and try to find out the reason embedded in the Silk Route. The current crisis dates back to the 18th century, when Russia made major attempts to control the Silk Road by controlling the Black Sea (an essential checkpoint on the Silk Road (Fig. 2)). A series of skirmishes finally led to Crimean Wars (1853-56) which led to the loss of Russian control over the Black Sea. Since then, Russia has made numerous attempts to capture Ukraine (one of the indirect causes of the First World War) including the current crisis.

(My aim is not to overwhelm you with facts, but to provide you with a broad overview of the origin of the current crisis and its relation to the Silk Road.)

What will be the future of current crisis? Are we at the brink of another World War or will it end as just another skirmish? These questions have no answers for the time being.

Let's hope for the best.■

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