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The Silk Road International Library Alliance: A Library Alliance along the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

Recently, the People's Republic of China (PRC) launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is a significant infrastructure project modelled in the line with the historic Silk Road. The main goal of the BRI initiative is the connectivity and trade amongst the member nations worldwide. Along with the BRI project, the Chinese government has recently started people-to-people contacts as an expanded component of BRI. Among the many other programs, 'The Silk Road International Library Alliance' (SRILA) is one of the most current cultural exchange programmes. The goal of this initiative is to establish connections and foster cooperation between the libraries among the BRI member countries. This paper investigates the alliance, its structure, and its operations. The SRILA appears to be in the embryonic phase but has the potential to grow into one of the largest library alliances globally. Countries from the Middle- and Lower-income groups might be benefitted from the alliance. However, it is in the germinating stage and yet to be mature.

Keywords: China, Library cooperation, Silk Road, Silk Road International Library Alliance, Library Alliance, Belt and Road Initiative.

Introduction

The term "Silk Road" was coined in the late 19th century¹. It refers to an extensive network of linked road used as trade routes. For centuries, the Silk Road enabled communication between the Eastern and Western part of the globe along with its route. Trade, economic prosperity, flow of ideas, technology, and goods were all made possible by this ancient trade route. Over all the 'Silk Route' had a significant impact on the development of human civilizations along its path.

The roots of the Silk Road can be traced back to 130 B.C. during the Han Dynasty in China. During that time the trade with the West was officially commenced. The emergence of trade between Greece and China in the first and second centuries B.C. led to its prominence. However, this complex network of relationships through the route extended beyond the trade of silk to include a wide range of goods, such as textiles, precious metals, spices, technologies, and culture. It

was estimated that the length of the Silk Road was about 10,000 miles². Over time, the network of routes linking Europe and the Middle East with the Far East had changed.

The major activity along the Silk Road was the trade³. It brought significant economic advantages to empires like the Roman and Kushan empires⁴. This trade route became vital to the survival of numerous civilizations because of the need for exotic commodities. This in turn fueled economic activity and the creation of vibrant urban centres along its route.

Beyond the trade, the Silk Road served as a route for cross-cultural communication⁵. Through the route, it was easier for people to travel great distances and spread ideas, beliefs, and artistic inspirations. The Silk Road was a major road for the dissemination of diverse culture, ideas, and religion. The major religions like Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism spread along its course⁶. Moreover, the Silk Route greatly influence the cross-cultural exchange, and diversity that defines the modern world.

Additionally, many major discoveries and technologies diffuse through the Silk Road⁷. Western innovations, like glass making and some farming techniques, made their way to the East, while Chinese inventions like paper making, printing, and gun powder found their way to the West. The intellectual exchange along the Silk Road had a significant influence on the advancement of science, technology, and innovation all over the globe⁸. The Silk Road had significant influence on the human history. Its historical relevance includes the spread of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices in addition to commercial transactions. The Silk Road remains a symbol of interconnectedness, diversity, and the enduring impact of cross-cultural exchanges on the development of civilizations.

The Silk Road's downfall started due to the difficulties, such as political unrest, hostilities, and the proliferation of many diseases⁹. Moreover, the emergence of alternative marine routes, the Mongol invasions, and the Ottoman Empire's choice to forgo commerce with China in 1453 A.D. are some of the reasons for the Silk Road's decline.

The common technological, cultural, and economic legacies of the Silk Road had a long-lasting influence on many civilization¹⁰. The phrase "Silk Road" has been resurrected in modern times with the recent Chinese's initiative. The People's Republic of China (PRC) initiated "One Belt One Road" or "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) along with the ancient Silk Road. It is a significant project that the Chinese government has undertaken with the goal of fostering stronger cultural and economic relations throughout Eurasia.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

In the year 2013, The Chinese President Xi Jinping has announced The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)¹¹. It is an ambitious attempt to revitalize and expand the ancient Silk Road trading networks. The goal of this large-scale project is to promote international connectedness by building economic alliances, infrastructure, and cultural exchanges¹². With over 151 participating nations, the BRI is positioned to transform global relations and promote greater interconnection¹³.

The ancient trade routes 'Silk Road,' linked the East and the West for millennia. However, the modern Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) broadens the notion of the Silk Road to encompass both land-based commercial corridors (the "Belt") and

maritime routes (the "Road"). Whereas the original Silk Road permitted interactions mostly through land routes. This contemporary endeavor aims to establish an all-encompassing network surrounding Asia, Europe, Africa, and even America.

The BRI places a strong focus on infrastructural development¹⁴. Building ports, pipelines, railroads, and roadways along the BRI routes are intended to lower transportation costs, increase economic growth, and improve connectivity¹⁵. In addition to helping the participating nations, this infrastructure creates new opportunities for international trade and investment. Even Chinese assistance under the BRI project contributes to the growth of libraries in Africa¹⁶.

Through encouraging investment and commerce among member nations, the BRI develops economic alliances¹⁷. Establishing economic corridors helps companies to reach new markets more easily. The faster connectivity promotes regional and international economic integration. The goal of this economic cooperation is to establish a win-win scenario that will propel prosperity in both industrialized and developing nations.

Beyond financial concerns, the BRI places a strong emphasis on cultural exchange as a way to promote understanding between nations¹⁸. The BRI's facilitation of interconnection promotes the sharing of customs, ideas, and values, which adds to the diversity of cultures around the world¹⁹.

In a speech, the Chinese President Xi Jinping outlined eight key action areas at the 'Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation' held during 17-19 October 2023. These actions are as follows: *First*, to establish a network of connections; *Second*, to encourage an open global economy; *Third*, to engage in real-world cooperation; *Fourth*, to support green development. *Fifth*, to stress on innovation in science and technology, *Sixth*, to encourage interpersonal interactions, *Seventh*, to encourage Belt and Road cooperation based on ethics, *Eighth*, to improve institutional building for BRI cooperation²⁰.

As a part of the above-mentioned steps, in the sixth point, the Chinese President is putting special attention on encouraging people-to-people contact. China has put major stress and implement the following key efforts to increase cultural exchange and interaction among the BRI member countries. The *Silk Road International League of Theatres*, the *Silk Road International Arts Festival*, the *International Alliance of Museums of the Silk Road*, the *Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums*, and the *Silk Road International Library Alliance* are the organisations it has established in order of precedence. Additionally, China has started the *Chinese government scholarship Silk Road Programme* as well as the *International Tourism Alliance of Silk Road Cities*²¹.

The Silk Road International Library Alliance

On May 28, 2018, the Silk Road International Library Alliance (SRILA) was founded. The National Library of China (NLC) is the nodal agency of the alliance. The programme is sponsored and guided by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China. The project is an open, non-profit, non-governmental organization aim to promote worldwide library cooperation mechanism and platform.

The National Library of China (NLC) is the alliance's headquarters. It has a steering committee, and all the Alliance's operations are managed by the committee²². As of January 2024, there are presently 42 member institutions in the alliance, comprising 4 local and 38 overseas institutions.

All the 38 international libraries are from the member countries of BRI initiative. Among the member libraries, there are eight libraries from the High-income economics, three libraries from Low-income countries, sixteen libraries from Lower-middle-income countries, and fifteen libraries from Upper-middle-income countries. In the continent wise break-up, thirteen member libraries are from East Asia and the Pacific, sixteen libraries from Europe and Central Asia, two libraries are from Latin America and the Caribbean, seven libraries are from the Middle East and North Africa, three libraries are from South Asia, and just one member is from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Since its inception, the Silk Road Library Alliance has hosted number of forums and conferences to discuss the policy matters and other related issues. The First Forum of the Silk Road International Library Alliance held in Hangzhou, China scheduled on 28th May 2018. This is the first forum of the proposed association to encourage collaboration and cultural interaction amongst libraries along the Silk Road. Beside this the forum held several meetings and conference to decide its action plan and other issues.

Conclusion

The BRI is a Chinese initiative in the 21st century to promote economic growth and global connectivity²³. It is a dynamic story that will surely influence future trade, cross-cultural exchanges, and international relations²⁴. Although it has a lot of promise to improve cross-cultural communication and cooperation, it has many criticisms. Some see it as a ray of hope and many other see it as a new form of Chinese supremacy. However, to fulfil its ambitious aims and objectives, the initiative must recognize all these issues and to deal with it²⁵.

The BRI initiative raises the following issues despite its lofty goals²⁶. It is assumed that the large-scale infrastructure projects under the BRI will have a detrimental environmental impact. Moreover, among the few main worries are the member nations' ability to pay their debt due to the high cost of large infrastructure projects and the geopolitical issue brought on by the initiative's size and impact.

Along with the Belt and Road Initiative, the Silk Road International Library Initiative is a large-scale project to improve people-to-people exchanges among its member nations. The project has the noble idea to connect the libraries of the participating countries. Perhaps the libraries of the member countries will be beneficiary of this grand initiative.

Nevertheless, not every BRI member is covered by the SRILA. Maybe a lot more libraries will join the network in the future to make it more inclusive.

Regarding the protection and conservation of cultural heritage, the idea for the digitization of artefacts is an innovative initiative. With the involvement of stakeholders from all sectors, this massive project will undoubtedly assist the resource-scarce libraries in both the developed and developing worlds.

The concept of digitizing relics is a novel approach to the preservation and protection of cultural property. This vast project, including stakeholders from all sectors, will surely help the libraries in both the developed and developing worlds that are struggling with insufficient resources.

Footnotes

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