

COMMENT 214 - *Central Asia and the EU-India connectivity partnership* - Reinventing the spicy network

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1. Introduction

The EU-India summit of May the 8th 2021 approved a vast array of common initiatives – among which the [EU-India Connectivity Partnership](#), the most important European global connectivity enterprise yet.

Based on ‘shared values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights that underpin their Strategic Partnership’, it comprises four chapters: (1) digital; (2) transport; (3) energy and (4) people-to-people. The Connectivity Partnership is presented as ‘a transparent, viable, inclusive, sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based approach’ to connectivity.

The Euro-Indian connectivity partnership is the soundest and most comprehensive political model for cooperation inspired by European experiences. It builds on earlier initiatives such as the [Euro-Japanese partnership](#) and the general framework of the EU-Asia connectivity, which is well summarised in a recent European [working paper](#).

This paper aims to suggest leads for a more comprehensive European strategy, starting by some thoughts on the history of connectivity and on the history of a historically – and most literally – central region which no connectivity strategy can ever forget: Central Asia!

1. The spicy Euro-Asian network

The term ‘Silk Road’ was coined in 1877 by the German geographer and geologist Ferdinand P.W. von Richtofen in his ‘die seidenstrasse des Marinus’ (Chin, T.

[2013](#)). Said term emerged in the context of transcontinental roads linking Europe to China, referring to the ancient geographer Marinus of Tyre as well as to Ptolemy of Alexandria.

Silk is derived from a Latin word meaning from the land of the Chinese (Galli, [2017](#)) implying a strict relation between the merchandise and its origin. Galli makes the case – very much following the perspective of the Herrmann 1922 map of ‘silk roads’ he reproduces – that already in Roman times a complex set of ‘Eurasian networks’ was present rather than a specific road or even a small set of alternative roads. Still, according to Galli:

‘140 products are mentioned in the famous nautical handbook called *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (dated ca. 70 CE) [...]. These products can be arranged in four main categories: spices; high quantities of textiles and garments of different types (above all, Chinese silk, Indian cotton, and linen from Egypt); objects and precious materials (gold, silver, precious stones, etc.); food, cosmetics, colouring, etc.’

Loewe ([1971](#)) refers a most famous estimation of the Roman trade deficit with the East during the middle of the first century AD – at 100 million sesterces, 55 of which with India and the rest with other countries in Arabia and China.

The point that spices are far more important than silk in the Eurasian trade is made elsewhere – for instance, in Żuchowska, M. ([2012](#)), whose book is titled ‘More Precious than Gold. Spices from the Edges of the World in the Mediterranean Kitchen in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantine Times’.

Whereas not everything coming from India constituted spices, and not everything coming from China constituted silk, back in these times spices were likely to be the dominant traded good on Eurasian networks. Some circumstantial evidence helps reinforcing this conviction.

Etymologically, pepper comes from the Sanskrit word *pipli*, through a Persian variant (Crawford, [1868](#), p.188). As the author explains, *pipli* is the Sanskrit word used to name long pepper, not black pepper. Long pepper originated in the North of India – as far as the first ranges of the Himalayas (p.189). Its widespread use predated black pepper both in India and in Europe (Laskow, S., [6 April, 2016](#)). According to Crawford, J. ([1868](#), p.188), black pepper originated in Malabar and was later cultivated in other tropical climates. However, the plant cannot grow on temperatures under 18° C ([Grant, A.](#)). The importance of pepper trade – and as well of other spices – did not diminish from ancient to modern times, contrarily to what

happened with silk, whose technology was gradually disseminated out of China – first to India, then to Byzantium, then to the Italian republics and elsewhere.

From the high Middle Ages onwards, spices are the only driving force for European long-distance trade. The situation is not different in other corners of the world. Marco Polo (Wright, [2002](#), p.268) estimates the quantity of pepper imported by China through Quanzhou to be a hundred times more important than that imported to Europe through Alexandria (at the time, at the edge of the most important route into Europe). T'ien Ju-kang's ([1981](#)) account of the famous Chêng-Ho voyages shows that pepper was the driving force for the Chinese maritime expansion, exactly the same way as it was for the European maritime expansion.

Another Chinese author, T'oung Pao ([1982](#), p. 222) explains that in the Chinese language pepper is called Hu-chiao – Hu referring to 'Central Asiatic nomads' and chiao being a Chinese designation for the 'pungent plant of the genus *Zanthoxylum*.' The author concludes that the 'first pepper must have been imported into China mostly by way of the overland route rather than the sea route'. It might as well be that, just as it was the case with Europe, the first pepper entering the Chinese market was long pepper rather than black pepper, as long pepper was cultivated up to the first ranges of the Himalayas. In this case, the Central Asian route might have been the most indicated.

But the relation between Central Asia and the spice trade has many features, a fact recognized by the UNESCO '[Silk Roads Programmes](#)' as it highlights the role of spices on these networks by quoting specific examples such as 'cinnamon from Sri Lanka and cassia from China'.

Whereas the secrets of silk production were slowly but steadily broken, first in Asia then in Europe, and as black pepper as well as the bulk of other species cannot be grown in a natural environment outside the tropical climates where they originated, the relative importance of spices in Euro-Asian trade networks steadily increased overtime.

In the fifteenth century, when the new roads for maritime expansion were being built (both from Europe and China), only spices, precious metals and minerals were motivations. Silk, as well as many other industrial products such as pottery – Chinese porcelains kept their fame and distinction well into the twentieth century – were certainly traded, but they did not play an important role on the complex communications networks. These are still widely named 'Silk Roads'; however, we

think they would be more accurately named as networks of spices or ‘Spicy networks’.

2. The revival of the spicy Euro-Asian network

Connectivity in the last decade was dominated by the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI), also known as the ‘Silk Road’. This action is finally leading democracies around the World – in Eurasia and elsewhere – to understand how important it is to launch their own plans.

According to the [White House](#), the G-7 launched the Build Back Better World (B3W) campaign which aims to match the existing BRI. According to the White House, the B3W ‘will provide a transparent infrastructure partnership to help narrow the \$40 trillion needed by developing nations by 2035’, an interesting figure in a framework that remains still very unprecise.

The G-7 references are in line with the general principles set at the [EU-India Connectivity Partnership](#) and were echoed in subsequent bilateral meetings, such as the EU-US summit. However, they are quite far from a concrete plan to manage, broadly within a decade, 40 trillion dollars of world investment.

Yet, if B3W promoter’s promises on transparency and values-based initiatives are to be taken at face value, they must fulfil two basic conditions: (1) be open to everyone on the basis of objective, verifiable and agreed principles and (2) imply an invitation, already at this conceptual stage, to all the potential beneficiary countries to take part on the proceedings, so that the plan’s modalities might at the same time be transparent and take in due consideration the points of view of all participants.

The White House should resist all attempts to narrow this initiative to national actors and mechanisms. And it must resist any attempt to replace a set of clear and simple goals and principles with euphemistic sophistry. The founding club could be formally enlarged to the EU – which has a de facto seat on the proceedings – and, most importantly, to the EU connectivity’s main partner, that is, India. This could insure that, right from the conception phase, a developing sensibility would be shown.

The second most important feature would be to institute a set of independent bodies responsible for overseeing the endeavour from a variety of points of view, starting with sound financial management and encompassing environmental, social, and regional objectives.

A great care in combatting conflicts of interest is a second must. Whereas the major financial source will have to be private, the most decisive challenge is to ensure that public interest will mould the terms of competition and participation by private actors. If states allow private interests – most in particular when these act in collision – to rule the game, the scheme will not achieve its purposes.

Transparency is the third condition. Transparency must include strict rules to prevent institutional disinformation as well as other sorts of manipulation.

Once the founding club and a set of clear and simple principles is established, other states should be invited to join the scheme and participate in the definition of operational rules at an early stage.

This should be done at a quick pace – and allow Central and South Asian countries to join the B3W so as to mark their points of view and help these countries better face their own development challenges.

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