

Iran's Role in the Silk Road in the Third Millennium

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[Dedication in Arabic]

Honorable audience, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very glad to be here with you in this session, in which I want to recall a few historical periods and facts showing that Iran is committed to the development and revival of the Silk Road.

Iran's relationship and critical role in the construction, maintenance, and renewal of the Silk Road is entering its Third Millennium. The ancient cultures of Iran, China, and the Middle East generally had cooperation not only on commercial but also on security, diplomatic, and cultural issues.

As history attests, toward the beginning of the First Millennium, the Parthian Dynasty ruling over Persia benefitted massively from customs duties levied on goods transported between Roman-dominated Europe and China on the Silk Road that stretched under their dominions from the Euphrates in Mesopotamia to Western China. The Parthian Dynasty, which was in favor of expanding East-West trade relations, closely supervised and maintained the road.

The Silk Road consisted of a series of land and marine routes that linked various civilizations. This road made a great contribution to the development of human civilization. In Iran, the Silk Road was of special importance. Considering the role of silk in ancient times, it can be said that the history of Iran and the Silk Road were intertwined. The trade and cultural exchange between the two great countries of Iran and China were carried out via the Silk Road.



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It seems that as early as the 6th Century BC, King Darius the Great established military checkpoints on these roads in order to ensure the safety of the caravans. The road between the cities of Shush and Sardis was the continuation of the Silk Road, which had been built to boost the silk trade between East and West. By playing a key role in the Silk Road, Iran made great contributions to the booming of the silk trade and other commodities to the West. During the Parthian era [247 BC-224 AD], the Silk Road was still an important route for the exchange of commodities among various countries. Some steps were taken to repair and expand the Silk Road during the reign of the Parthian Emperor Mehrdad II, the Great [123-88 BC].

The Islamic Renaissance

Around the end of the First Millennium and the beginning of the Second Millennium, Iran was at the center of the Islamic Renaissance. The Islamic state had extended from western China, the Indus River, and all the way westward to North Africa and Spain. Iran's role as a scientific, philosophical, and cultural center was boosted by its geographical location and heritage. With the help of Chinese paper production techniques, Chinese, Indian, Persian, Arabic, and Greek science and philosophy were translated and proliferated over most of the inhabited globe. This was the greatest process of exchange of ideas between cultures ever, leading into the European Renaissance in the 14th Century.

The revival of the Silk Road would have consider-

able benefits for Iran, China, and their neighbors, and would prove the geopolitical role of Iran as a commercial and diplomatic intersection in the world.

Iran has made great endeavors to revive the Silk Road in the last decades of the Second Millennium and the beginning of the Third.

The railroad of Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tejen (in Turkmenistan), which was located on the ancient Silk Road, was put into operation in the presence of his Excellency Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former President of Iran, with the presence of 11 heads of state, and diplomatic representatives of 45 countries from around the world, on May 14, 1996. On that occasion, Ayatollah Rafsanjani stated that “one can easily notice that, even though the Silk Road was a trade route for ferrying goods, it played an important and effective role in cultural, social, and artistic communications. The revival of the Silk Route, through construction of the lengthy Persian Gulf (or Bandar Abbas)-Sarakhs-Tajan railway, which once again links China to Central Asia via Iran, is in continuation of efforts of Iran to expand the Silk Road.”

In 1998, Iran completed a railway connection to the northwest from Tabriz to Van in Turkey. Thus, the New Silk Road was connected to Europe again. In 2001, the Mashhad-Bafq-Bandar Abbas line was completed, connecting landlocked Central Asia to the Persian Gulf. Iran also completed the Bafq-Kerman-Zahedan railway to Pakistan’s border, connecting Iran to the Indian Subcontinent. The North-South Corridor connecting Russia, Iran, and India is being constructed now through Armenia and the Caucasus. From India, through Chabahar Port in southeast Iran, and the completed Iranian railway system, Southeast Asia and the Indian Subcontinent will be connected to Northern Europe.

By constructing this network of railroads, commercial transit on a global scale has been reduced between East-West and South-North by weeks, compared to sea routes. Besides trade, this development corridor-building has massive implications for the economic, social, and political developments for the peoples involved. From the very beginning, the construction of this railroad and revival of the Silk Road, which was accomplished by contrivance of Iran’s authorities, was meant to provide the basis of economic growth and diplomatic relations promotion in the region. As was stated at the inauguration ceremony in 1996, Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani wished the Silk Road to be the road to peace and friendship by connecting this railroad to it.

The Islamic Republic of Iran also welcomed the

recent initiative announced by President of China Xi Jinping to launch the Silk Road Economic Belt. Last May, President Hassan Rouhani, after meeting President Xi in Shanghai, spoke to the press on Iran-China relations. He said: “China is now Iran’s biggest trade partner. We have many cooperation agreements with China on international and regional issues.... We agree with the idea of the revival of the Silk Road. In the past, China has been engaged with the countries alongside the Silk Road in the aspects of culture, economy, and trade, and also in other areas like energy and transportation. These ties between China and Iran and other countries in the region can be resumed. So the plan of the Silk Road Economic Belt could be successful.”

Last month, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit convened in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, which was a strong reminder of the ancient Silk Road that is being reconstructed.

Toward Global Peace

The world needs peace and friendship. The New Silk Road can extend to Europe and become our ambassador to Europe and the world. It does not mean that we should forget peace and friendship in other arenas. In my capacity as the president of Charity Foundation for Special Diseases (CFSD) I have felt the pain and suffering of special patients who have been negatively affected by unpeaceful measures, especially sanctions that can compromise people’s health. We all should do our best for peace in all aspects of human life. CFSD has made appropriate reactions to echo the harms, and communicate the voice of patients for peace, and illegality of any sanctions that target innocent people. I, also as the secretary general of Women’s Solidarity Association of Iran (WSAI), have always tried to cooperate with other NGOs in the world for the purpose of peace that could be motivated by women, both in and out of Iran. WSAI has done its best to promote women’s organizations and an active presence of women in social and cultural arenas, and to help the process of development of their societies by striving to solve problems facing women.

Now the Schiller Institute, by having a brilliant and credible history of efforts to maintain and ensure peace and progress for all nations, fighting against war and violence, and launching endeavors for respecting human rights and dignity, could propel public opinion toward global peace through holding such conferences. In the end, I would like to thank you for all your initiatives and efforts.