

The Maritime Silk Road— 1405 and 2013

by Mike Billington

March 13—In October 2013, during a visit to Indonesia, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the launching of the New 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, just one month after announcing the New Silk Road Economic Belt, while on a visit to Kazakhstan. These two initiatives, followed in 2014 by the plan to put together the BRICS New Development Bank, during their July Summit in Brazil, and China's establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank that Fall, constitute a new paradigm for mankind, as a counter to the self-destruction of the trans-Atlantic nations by the bankrupt London and New York banking system. China is offering a program of major infrastructure projects for the developing nations of the world.

The old, caravan Silk Road through Central Asia, dating back to Roman times, is well known. Less well known is the precedent for the New Maritime Silk Road—the massive armadas of the Ming Dynasty of China in the early 15th Century, by far the largest and most extensive voyages of diplomacy and exploration in the world at that time.

In 1405, nearly 100 years before Columbus sailed west in an effort to reach Asia, the Ming Dynasty commissioned the first of a series of seven voyages, with huge armadas, under the direction of a Muslim admiral named Zheng He.

The First Voyage

Sailing on the first voyage were 311 ships, 62 of them the so-called Treasure Ships, which were about three times larger than any ships in Europe, such as those of Columbus in his voyages to the Americas. The Treasure Ships each contained nine masts, were over 400 feet long and 170 feet wide, with four decks. This was the largest fleet that the world had ever seen in 1405, or would see again until World War II!

The ships sailed through the South China Sea, visiting the Philippines and the Indonesian islands; they

went to Malacca and passed through the Malacca Strait into the Indian Ocean. They visited Thailand, Sri Lanka, and India. They went into the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, and down the east coast of Africa as far as Madagascar and Mozambique, and perhaps all the way to the Cape of Good Hope. There were offshoots from these voyages that went to Mecca and to Egypt.

These were not the first foreign voyages by China. There are records of Chinese traders plying these waters going back to Roman times. During the Sung Renaissance in China, in the 11th and 12th centuries, these trading missions were restored after several centuries of neglect.

But the Ming armada of Zheng He far surpassed in scale and vision anything that had come before. The voyages were almost entirely peaceful, although they fought and defeated several pirate gangs along the way, and confronted a hostile force in Sri Lanka. No land was conquered.

This was a hugely successful diplomatic mobilization. Some 30 nations sent emissaries back with Zheng to China.

They were also trading missions. The ships were loaded with porcelain, silks, gold, and silver. In return, they brought back ivory and other precious goods, as well as exotic animals unknown in China, including a giraffe, ostriches, and zebras.

Zheng wrote in his diary: “We travelled more than 100,000 li of immense water spaces and have beheld in the ocean huge waves like mountains rising in the sky, and we have set eyes on barbarian regions far away, hidden in a blue transparency of light vapors, while our sails, loftily unfurled like clouds day and night, continued their course as rapidly as a star, traversing those savage waves as if we were treading a public thoroughfare.”

For reasons that are not entirely clear to historians,



Admiral Zheng He's first voyage in 1405 included more than 300 ships, the largest fleet the world had seen until World War II; Zheng's armada traveled as far as the east coast of Africa.

the Zheng He missions were scrapped after the seventh voyage in 1435, and China largely cut itself off from the rest of the world.

During the same period, Europe was coming out of the Dark Age of the 14th Century, when plague and perpetual warfare had wreaked havoc across the continent. A turning point came with the 15th-Century European Renaissance in science, art, music, and statecraft, centered on Florence, Italy, and the convening of the Great Council led by Nicholas of Cusa. Cusa's concept of the sovereign nation-state was that a nation must be ruled according to the will of the governed, and that the interest of one nation must also be based on the interests of the other sovereign states.

Xi and Mahathir

Today, it is the West that is collapsing, and China which is initiating a new Renaissance.

When Xi Jinping left Indonesia after his announcement of the New 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, he stopped in Malaysia, where he met with former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, as well as current Prime Minister Najib Razak. Dr. Mahathir, prime minister through the 1990s into the 2000s, had famously stood up against the speculators and the IMF in the so-called Asian crisis of 1997-98, rejecting IMF dictates and imposing currency controls to protect his nation.

Xi and Mahathir together established a new institution, the "Cheng-Ho (Zheng He) Multi Cultural and Friendship Association." In an interview with this author published in the March 7, 2014 *EIR*, Dr. Mahathir said of Zheng:

"He is a remarkable leader, a remarkable man. He

came with very powerful forces not to conquer, but to establish diplomatic relations with countries. China never attempted to conquer countries. They wanted to establish diplomatic relations and trade with these countries.

"This contrasts with the first Portuguese—with Vasco da Gama, Afonso de Albuquerque, and Diogo Lopes de Sequeira—who came here in order to conquer. The Portuguese arrived in Malacca in 1509. Two years later, they conquered Malacca. The Chinese had been in Malacca for

many, many years before that, and never conquered Malacca, although they had so many Chinese in this country who could have formed a fifth-column for them. But they never tried to conquer.

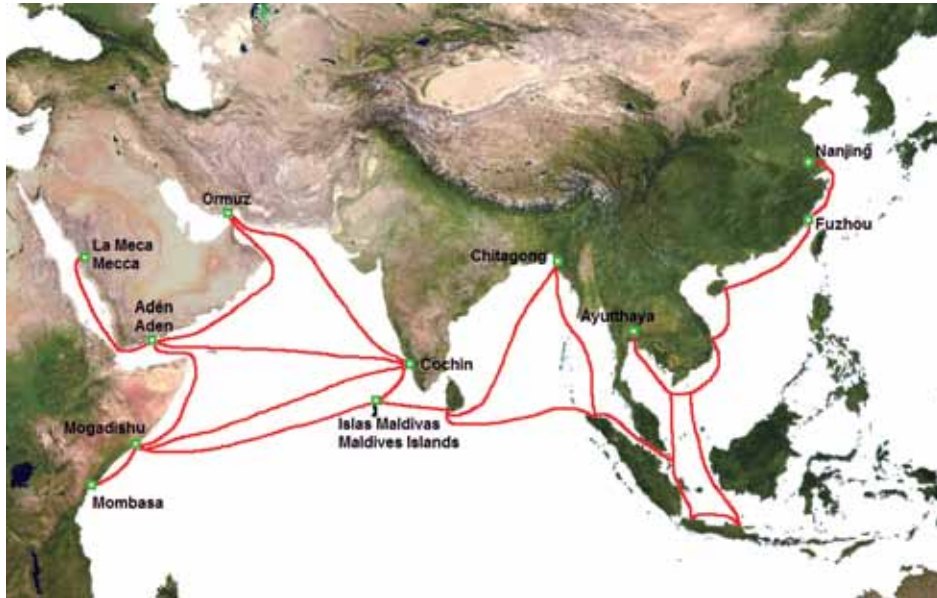
"So there is this difference between Zheng He and the Portuguese and the other Europeans. Zheng He established friendships. So this Association that we are going to form is in order to celebrate friendship between nations. There will be an award for the people who work most to bring about friendship between countries."

It is clear that Malaysia, as well as virtually every nation of Asia, South America, and Africa, view China in the same way—as interested in development and friendship, in contrast to the centuries of Western looting, opium trade, gunships, slave trade, and financial dictatorship under the British Empire and its European partners. In fact, Dr. Mahathir added in his *EIR* interview, in regard to the threat of global war: "But at the back of this all is the British. The British have caused more damage in this world than anybody else, through their colonial policies in the past, and through the conclusion of their decolonization process—all these things have left behind a legacy that leads to war."

The New Maritime Silk Road

Today the Maritime Silk Road is truly global in scope. China has established a \$40 billion fund for the Maritime Silk Road, for ports and related infrastructure, not only along the old route of Zheng He, but now extending into Europe and even into the New World. A Chinese construction firm from Hong Kong is oversee-

FIGURE 1
The Journeys of Zheng He 1405-1433



ing a new “Panama” canal in Nicaragua, to allow huge tankers which cannot pass through the current Panama Canal, to travel between China, and Brazil and Argentina.

The Chinese are now considering support for the effort to build a canal in southern Thailand, the Kra Canal, a campaign supported by Lyndon LaRouche for the past 40 years, which would turn the region into a hub for the development of the entire Pacific and Indian Ocean basins.

Because of the Suez Canal—and especially with the completion of Egypt’s second Suez Canal—the Chinese Maritime Silk Road can now pass through the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. Already, China’s huge shipping firm COSCO has a 35-year concession in the port of Athens, Greece, at the Piraeus Container Terminal, managing the two main container terminals at the port—one of Europe’s busiest.

Li Keqiang, the prime minister of China, went to Belgrade, Serbia in December for a meeting with 16 countries from central and southern Europe, where they put in motion a plan, which is already being implemented, for high-speed rail connections from the Piraeus port up through Macedonia, through Serbia, Hungary, and into Western Europe. It is expected to be on line by 2017.

So, Greece is effectively the end point of the New Maritime Silk Road. And, in fact, some of the rail connections from China along the New Silk Road through Central Asia will terminate in Greece, making Greece the connecting point of the New Silk Road and the New Maritime Silk Road.

Now, think about what’s going on in Greece, and how the Greeks look at this. On the one hand, they’re being told by the Troika (European Commission, ECB, IMF) that 50% cuts in pensions are not enough; they have to cut the pensions more; 60% youth unemployment is not enough—they have to stop employing people, all to meet the austerity

conditions to make them “worthy” of new loans, loans which will never even make it to Greece in any case, but simply be transferred from one account to another back in the U.K. or in other Eurozone banks, because they are only intended to pay off debts. Debts that can’t be paid, and that are, in fact, illegitimate and should not be paid. That’s what they’re being offered by the dying paradigm in Europe.

What are they being offered from the BRICS, from China’s Maritime Silk Road? To become the hub for a transcontinental development plan, and possibly the first European member of the BRICS. The hub, the connecting point between the BRICS and a new Europe, a Europe which rejects the dying Empire. Greece is ready to join the BRICS, and in fact, its only hope for survival is to join the BRICS, as is true for Europe as a whole.

The ‘Silk Road Lady’

Preceding the National People’s Congress taking place this month in China, a spokesperson for the Congress told a press briefing, when asked if the New Silk Road would be on the agenda, said, yes, yes, indeed, it would be a major part of the agenda (see above article). And it’s important to note, she said, that the Silk Road has been on our agenda for 20 years.



Xinhua News Agency

Chinese President Xi Jinping (right) and former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, meeting in Kuala Lumpur in October 2013, established a new institution, the “Cheng-Ho (Zheng He) Multi-Cultural and Friendship Association.”

But, before, we didn’t have the money to do it. Now we do.

Twenty years ago, Schiller Institute founder Helga Zepp-LaRouche, together with the Chinese government and others, organized a major conference in Beijing on the New Silk Road, although the Chinese chose to call it the Eurasian Land-Bridge. But Zepp-LaRouche’s term was the New Silk Road, and she is known in China as “the Silk Road Lady.” Now the Chinese have gone back to her term.

What is involved? Rail connections, ports, power development, water projects—it’s essentially bringing these nations together around the idea of mutual trade and development. And of course, it’s going to include Africa, as the original Zheng He operations did. In fact, China is now leading the development process across the African continent.

The Africa section of the [EIR Special Report](#), “The New Silk Road Becomes the World Land-Bridge” contrasts the rail system that’s there now, as built by the European colonial powers, to what the Chinese plan today, and have already begun building. What’s there

today is nothing but rail lines from the ports to the mines, You can’t even get from one country to another. The colonial powers were only interested in grabbing raw materials and getting them out, taking them back to Europe.

Now, China needs the raw materials too, as do Japan and Korea and others. But they are paying for them. Not by loading up the poor nations with debts, but by building infrastructure which creates modern nations. Premier Li pledged that China would build high-speed rail lines connecting all the capitals of Africa, as well as lines crossing the continent. These two opposite visions illuminate the difference between the imperial policy of European colonialism (and the current policies of the U.S. and Europe), and those of the BRICS nations.

What is the U.S. response to this? Actually it was stated even before China began its Silk Road projects—the Obama “pivot to Asia,” which is intended to create a ring around China, militarily, and economically through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade deal which excludes China. The U.S. has turned the Philippines into a massive U.S. military base. It is placing high-altitude missiles and radar systems along the Chinese border, threatening both China and Russia, while at the same time pushing war against Russia in Europe.

At the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) conference in Beijing last November, President Xi invited President Obama to join the efforts of China and other Eurasian nations, including Russia, in the development of the New Silk Road. A petition being circulated by Zepp-LaRouche’s Schiller Institute calls on the U.S. and Europe to “Have the courage to reject geopolitics and collaborate with the BRICS, . . . readopting the principle of the Treaty of Westphalia by basing foreign policy on the principle of the benefit of the other, which ended the Thirty Years War in Europe, and on John Quincy Adams’ concept of a community of principle among sovereign nation states.”

The petition can be read and signed at the Schiller Institute [website](#).

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