

PAVING THE NEW SILK ROAD: THE POWER AND POTENTIAL FOR MULTICULTURAL, MULTIFAITH DIALOGUE ALONG CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD (BRI) ¹

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ABSTRACT

This article targets to analyse traditional interaction as a relief of all social and border disputes in this new century through the China's Belt and Road Initiative connecting the current situation along historical linkages of New Silk Road. To identify and analyze multicultural diplomacy as an innovative tool in this new age by endorsing the image of China's Belt and Road Initiative, by means of the various characteristics of culture as a soft power tool. China is one such country that through the New Silk Road, commonly called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has transcended into a new era of multicultural diplomacy. Multiculturalism is connected with "identity politics" and "the politics of recognition," which charges a promise to increasing degrades appearances and transferring arrangements of illustration as well as interaction which disregards precise units. China's Belt and Road initiative is also an opportunity to uncover Admiral Zhenghe's foundation and build upon it an economic structure that benefits all in the region. In all, China's BRI is undoubtedly intended to change the landscape of Asia over the coming years through its economic ties, traditional and cultural relationship, cultural partnership, multiculturalism, etc.

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Introduction

615 years ago, Admiral Zhenghe set out on the first of five voyages of exploration and trade. His work laid a foundation for regional economic prosperity, intercultural understanding and significant Chinese influence. However, through a

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combination of historical (Chinese internal challenges), political (gone too long, shifting political allegiances) and personal factors (age, lack of descendants), the foundation he constructed was not built upon and, eventually, was buried in the sands of historical memory.

Much like the Marshall Plan's impact on war-torn Europe, the BRI policy framework, if implemented, will have far reaching economic and social impacts on South and Central Asia for generations to come. Ensuring that these impacts are positive for China and the countries of the region will require an equally grand and audacious plan to help China draw upon the cultural and religious richness of the region. This paper proposes a framework of multicultural and multifaith dialogue (MMD) as a means of paving a more peaceful, sustainable New Silk Road through the region.

To flesh out such a framework, the New Silk Road initiative should be contextualized in relation to religious and cultural engagement along its planned route, highlighting opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. Then MMD will be defined broadly and linked to its potential for strengthening economic development. This marriage of multicultural and multifaith dialogue and economic development will then be applied to the New Silk Road setting. Finally, a suite of policy proposals will be discussed, including: a program of dialogues, discussions, and conferences to draw upon, identify and respond to innovative opportunities; a means of clear evaluation of engagement; the creation of dispute resolution for a and partnerships; and the engagement be targeted, coordinated, robust, and implemented with care.

Opportunities and challenges

It has been said that interaction includes cooperation and conflict (Voll 2016). In anticipation of the opportunities for cooperation and recognition of the current and potential future conflicts, it is necessary to propose a general scope for engagement through dialogue with the many faiths and cultures of the planned New Silk Road.

Enormous economic, political and social opportunities lie ahead of China and countries in the region; yet with each opportunity is found serious challenges. For example, the development potential of the region is similar to that of Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of access to vast new markets and natural resources. But how to access that richness without leaving a legacy of environmental damage, strengthened corrupt governments and very little sustainable benefit to local populations?



Another opportunity for the region is akin to the impact of the Marshall Plan, with the possibility of lifting millions of people out of poverty, (re)building economic infrastructure, and shaping social and political institutions for generations. But one challenge to this is doing all this without the cultural and economic affinities that existed between Europe and the US post-World War II.

This is an opportunity to establish lasting peace in the region by bringing into clear focus common interests, somewhat similar to how economic interests overcame centuries-old enmity between France and Germany to form the foundation of the European Union. Sustainable peace is only possible with sustainable development. This can happen by leaving a legacy of physical trade infrastructure as well as social infrastructure: relationships, norms of dialogue and engagement, traditions of peacemaking.

Finally, the BRI is an opportunity for China to take true leadership on the global stage by demonstrating world-leading practices of engagement. But it must overcome historical animosities, cultural and religious barriers, political and ideological differences, and internal opposition to this approach. This can only be done through engaging in dialogue processes that are open to the various cultural and religious perspectives, contributions and contexts.

Defining MMD

MMD occurs when members or representatives of different faith and/or cultural communities come together or with secular institutions with the goal, at least in part, to develop or strengthen understanding of each other. Coming together can be in the form of official or ad hoc discussions and exchanges, collaborative projects or coordinated activism. As such, MMD “fosters the (re)building of trust relations and enhances social cohesion...both locally and globally, by recognizing the importance of integrating religious identities into inter-group dialogue” (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2010: 13). Such dialogues can help “to overcome philosophical and religious extremism, stereotypes and prejudices, ignorance and indifference, intolerance and hostility” (Union 2003: 3) and even strengthen sustainable economic development.

A dialogue process that engages with faith or cultural communities together with secular institutions can have significant collective and generative impacts on economic development. First of all, MMD can strengthen social cohesion and peace (Council 2014), thus breaking the link between religious fragmentation and conflict. Second, MMD brings together a range of perspectives, insights, traditions and worldviews that may be used as fuel for innovation (Carmignani and Adams 2016).

Further, in addition to these collective aspects, MMD also has a generative feature. The act of bringing together different perspectives, in a respectful, safe setting, allows the generation of new interpretations and collaborative perspectives that can be added to the economic development resource base (Grim 2014).

A fourth, but no less important, way interfaith dialogue can impact economic development is its capacity to unite and give greater articulation to the corrective or normative perspectives of faith communities, for example in the areas of social responsibility and sustainability (Adams 2014). This is especially important in this context, as it will help make the development more appropriate/sustainable/ethical.

The fifth way that MMD can impact economic development is that it acts as a sort of barometer for the health of human rights in an area. This is perhaps not as direct an impact, but successful MMD requires and reinforces various human rights, such as freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion (Verhagen 2008), which in turn provide support to economic development endeavours.

Two Potential Policy Frames

Because the success of this initiative requires engagement with a wide array of cultures, religions, governments, languages, economic systems, stakeholders and contributors, it is impossible to give a detailed map for each step of the way. Instead, a number of fundamental principles should be applied to give direction in a unified setting.

One way to structure an approach to engagement would be to draw upon an historical figure in the region that provide guidance or a framework. One potential figure is Admiral Zhenghe, a leading military, political and economic figure in the Ming Dynasty and, arguably, the greatest seafaring explorer and developer of trade of his time. China's Belt and Road initiative is an opportunity to uncover the foundation laid by Zhenghe and use it to strengthen Chinese engagement in the region. This foundation can be summarised in at least six principles or guiding ideas.

Economic

The first is that it would be economically driven, rather than military or political. For example, in Zhenghe's efforts, the military was called upon to enforce, not force, trade structures, such as fighting pirates. Nor was the military used to coerce trade partners. Also, Zhenghe's work was not to seek regime change for more favourable partners or influence.

Influential

This leads to the next principle; Zhenghe's forays were to increase Chinese influence and prestige, not conquer. As developers and enablers of trade, China was set to gain significant regional influence and leadership.

Proactive

A third principle that can be distilled from Zhenghe's work is that these appeared to be proactive initiatives; they were not in response to threats from abroad, nor to scarcities within China. This allowed the implementation and engagement to be more open to a wide range of possibilities and opportunities.

Educative

Fourth, these trade voyages were educative, even scholarly. They brought back learnings, wisdom, scholars, and ideas to enrich Chinese thinking and practices.

Mutuality

Zhenghe's voyages also cemented a mutuality in relations between states, particularly in the practice of ambassadorial exchanges and communications.

Multifaith and cross-cultural

Perhaps most pertinent to this argument is that Zhenghe's work was multifaith and cross-cultural. It was multifaith from the start, as Zhenghe was a Muslim who gave gifts to a Buddhist temple, and who left under the blessing of the indigenous goddess Huguo Mingzhu Tianfei. And he continued this ethos as he engaged with the language and culture of kingdoms and lands he visited.

A second, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, approach to establishing a foundation of principles to direct this initiative is to 'secularise' the framework, meaning to draw upon principles uncoupled from cultural, historical or religious figures.

Targeted

The process needs to be targeted. No single MMD can address the entire range of opportunities and challenges to the BRI development. Therefore, the objective needs to be well understood before designing a process to address it. Is the target area cultural and/or religious, cooperative or conflictual, regional, national, or local?

Informed

Then, with a clear objective laid out, the way forward would need to be informed by evidence and skilled analysis, defining "indicators and data collection across different modalities of interaction to map" (Dellios 2020) the economic and cultural landscape of the region. The importance of this step cannot be overstated, as much of the success of this initiative relies on this mapping exercise.

Coordinated

For an initiative of such grand scope and complexity to succeed, there would need to be a structure or system of coordination between its various parts. This is not to say the coordination be in lockstep or led by a single entity, but communication between various parts working towards the same, general goals.

Collaborative

Again, for an initiative of such grand scope and complexity to succeed, there will be a need to work with a broad array of religious, cultural, private, public and NGO actors to collect the data, to interpret the inputs, to guide the analysis and to design the various procedures, processes and programmes. This should be a collaborative, respectful relationship.

Robust

It is essential that the process be robust. BRI is a large initiative, with long-term impacts, many of which are unidentifiable at this time. There will be advances and retreats, progress and setbacks. A robust process will survive these "bumps in the road" by addressing a real issue of need, by being inclusive of the breadth of stakeholders and decision makers, by being flexible and adaptive to changes in the socio-political environment and by having the resources to support it throughout the timeframe of concern or until objectives are met.

Finally, a robust process would be supported by a solid monitoring and evaluation design. Not all MMDs are of equal efficacy. Having a clear understanding of what the target area is will go a long way to developing the monitoring and evaluation instrument.

Implemented with Care

Care must be taken when implementing an MMD process. If poorly implemented, the process can have the opposite effect by strengthening negative interpretations and justifying separation, fear and alienation between groups. Or, they can be co-opted by fringe groups to give a veneer of legitimacy to otherwise extreme positions. Therefore, trust must be established; understanding of the community, group or individual must be obtained; and cultural, religious, and/or economic needs must be recognized and taken into consideration.

Another aspect of careful implementation is assuring that funding sources are varied, so that one set of interests does not skew the results, or one set of perspectives does not colour interpretation.

Engagement Structure

In addition to the principles guiding the work being undertaken in such a complex setting, it is also essential to provide direction on how the engagements would take place. Here are a few notes on what to consider when designing dialogue processes and fora.

Dialogues

One dialogue or even one dialogue process will not suffice to address the myriad contexts and challenges facing the BRI as it rolls forth. Processes will need to be occurring simultaneously at multiple levels, albeit in a coordinated fashion. The highest level of dialogue would be at the policy level. I say policy level instead of regional level because regional or even jurisdictional boundaries rarely map directly onto international initiatives. The focus needs to be on the problemshed, not the regional definition. However, jurisdictions and boundaries are important, particularly at the national level, where authority to enact and enforce laws and policies is more effective. Thus, national-level dialogue processes should also be functioning, responding to and feeding back into the policy-level processes.

Conflict resolution

Embarking on the BRI risks encountering and creating multiple conflicts. Therefore, significant work will need to be done to address those generated by BRI implementation, as well as those already in place that risk to impact policy implementation.

Training

Just as it is important to be intentional about the design and implementation of dialogue and conflict resolution processes, it is equally important to recognise that facilitation and participation in these processes are not skills that all possess. Therefore, a broadly supported program of training, communication of lessons learned, and other resources should be easily accessible to all involved.

Conclusion

The power and potential of multicultural and multifaith dialogue is that it can vastly improve the economic, political and social well-being of millions. Much like the Marshall Plan's impact on war-torn Europe, China's Belt and Road policy framework will leave its mark on the economic and cultural landscape of societies across South and Central Asia for generations to come. What these impacts are and how positive they will be for China and the countries of the region will depend largely upon how well China is able to engage with and draw upon the cultural and religious richness of the region.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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