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State, Market and  
Infrastructure:  
The New Silk Road

*Peter Nolan*

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**MÉN** – Puerta, umbral. El carácter simboliza una puerta de una sola hoja. En el caso de los Cuadernos de Trabajo del Cechimex se escogió el acto de editar y publicar, abrir puertas al conocimiento y a la discusión. Nos pone en contacto con el pensamiento sobre los temas que nos interesan y permiten un diálogo bilateral, base del trabajo del Centro de Estudios China-México de la Facultad de Economía de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Es así que estamos ofreciendo una “puerta” en donde todos podemos acceder a otro lugar en cuanto al conocimiento se refiere.

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# State, Market and Infrastructure: The New Silk Road.<sup>1</sup>

Peter Nolan<sup>2</sup>

## Resumen

El crecimiento de la infraestructura ha sido esencial para atraer al capital internacional y nacional a China. Los gobiernos locales y centrales de China han realizado funciones primordiales en la estimulación de la expansión de infraestructura, y los bancos estatales han sido cruciales para el financiamiento de la misma. Asimismo, la mayoría de los estímulos financieros se han asignado a la expansión de la infraestructura y la creación de activos productivos que beneficien el desarrollo. A partir de la vasta experiencia en la creación de infraestructura China pretende relanzar la *nueva ruta de la seda* (por mar y tierra) a través del sur y sureste de Asia para desarrollar proyectos carreteros y portuarios para facilitar el comercio de bienes y materias primas así como la movilidad de pasajeros. Todo ello para fortalecer las relaciones diplomáticas y el crecimiento de la región.

**Palabras clave:** Infraestructura, desarrollo, comercio, nueva ruta de la seda, proyectos.

## 简述

基础设施建设与发展是吸引国内外投资的根本。中国自中央到地方各级政府极力推进基础设施建设，国有银行当然在此也发挥了巨大作用。另外，大多数的财政刺激安排在为促进国家发展而进行的基础设施建设和固定资产投资。在大量的基础设施发展经验来看，中国旨在通过建设南亚及东南亚的高速公路和港口工程，促进商品的贸易往来和客运数量，由此建设新的陆地与海上丝绸之路，发展地区的繁荣和外交关系。

**关键词:** 基础设施建设、贸易、新丝绸之路、工程。

## Abstract

The growth of infrastructure has been essential to attract international and domestic capital to China. Local and central governments of China have made major functions in stimulating the expansion of infrastructure, and the state banks have been crucial to the financing thereof. Also, most of the financial incentives have been allocated to infrastructure expansion and the creation of productive assets to boost development. From the vast experience in infrastructure development, China plans to relaunch the new Silk Road (land and sea) through South and Southeast Asia to develop highway and port projects to facilitate trade in goods and commodities and mobility of passengers. All this to strengthen diplomatic relations and growth of the region.

**Keywords:** Infrastructure development, trade, new silk road, projects.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Tim Clissold, Stephen Perry and Zhang Jing for their comments on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Nolan is the co-ordinator for the core paper on Globalisation, business and development. He supervises a number of MPhil Students in the Centre of Development Studies as well as a large number of students in the Centre of Development Studies and the Judge Business School. He holds the Chong Hua Chair in Chinese Development and is Director of the University's Centre of Development Studies, University of Cambridge. He is the Director of the Chinese Executive Leadership Programme (CELP), which each year brings CEOs from China's largest firms to the University of Cambridge for a three-week training programme, taught by a combination of academics and the leaders of international firms. He has spoken at the Chinese Government's annual China Development Forum since its inception in 2000. In 2009 he was awarded the CBE (Commander of the British Empire) 'for services supporting China's integration into the global economy'.

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## 1. State, market and infrastructure

Infrastructure is crucial for development. It is necessary in order to liberate the creative energies of entrepreneurship. In countries at all stages of development, markets often fail to provide the necessary level of infrastructure provision. The requisite extent and nature of state involvement in infrastructure may vary between countries of different sizes and traditions, and at different points in history. The complex relationship between government provision of infrastructure provision and development was captured precisely by Adam Smith's proposition:

'The third and last duty of the sovereign or commonwealth is that of erecting and maintaining those public institutions and those public works which, though they may be in the highest degree advantageous to a great society, are, however, of such a nature that the profit could never repay the expense to any individual or small number of individuals, and which it therefore cannot be expected that any individual or small number of individuals should erect or maintain. *The performance of this duty requires too very different degrees of expense in the different periods of society*' (Smith, 1776, vol. 2:244).

## 2. Infrastructure in China's development

### 2.1 Pre-modern China

Up until the eighteenth century China's technological level was more advanced than that of Europe (Li Bozhong, 1986, 1998, and 2000). In the eighteenth century China produced around one-third of global manufacturing output, compared with less than one-fifth in the West (Bairoch, 1982). The foundation of China's long-run economic dynamism was the force of a competitive market economy. In the eighteenth century, Father Du Halde, the Belgian Jesuit priest wrote:

'The particular riches of every province, and the ability of transporting merchandise by means of rivers and canals, have rendered the empire always very flourishing...The trade carried on within China is so great, that all of Europe cannot be compared therewith' (quoted in Ho Ping-ti, 1959:199).

In order for the market mechanism to function effectively, the Chinese state performed critically important functions. They included the framework of peace and law, famine prevention, commodity price stabilization, and control of the money supply. However, the most important state function at both the local and the national level was water control. This included massive centrally administered schemes such as the Yellow River Authority and the maintenance of the Grand Canal, as well as a myriad local water control structures. The early Qing scholar-official, Gu Shilian, stated:

'The ideal magistrate is an official who is close to the people. Flood and drought should be of as much concern to him as pain or sickness of his person. He should survey the topography of the region, ask about conditions of drainage, and investigate sluices and locks...All these affect the conditions of the public treasury and the welfare of the people and must be carefully considered by the magistrate' (quoted in Ch'ao Thing-chi, 1936:72).

### 2.2 Modern China

Under China's policies of reform and opening up, the scope of the market economy has steadily expanded. Expansion of China's infrastructure has been a crucially important factor in the release of market forces. Since the late 1970s China has made remarkable progress in expanding its ports, roads, railways, airports, electricity supply, sewage treatment, water supply, and telecommunications network, as well as its schools, universities, hospitals, and housing.

The growth of infrastructure has been essential to the creation of an environment in which both domestic and international capital wishes to invest. Infrastructure can be compared to the 'cage' within which the 'bird' of market forces can spread its wings as the cage expands. China's local and central governments have performed vitally important functions in stimulating infrastructure expansion, and the state-owned banks have been crucial to infrastructure finance. In the West, less than one-fifth of the total financial stimulus package since 2008 has been devoted to infrastructure repair and expansion. In China most of the financial stimulus package has been allocated to infrastructure expansion, building productive assets that benefit development.

Between 1990 and 2011 China's consumption of electricity increased from 623 b. kwh to 4,193 b.kwh and the volume of freight traffic increased from 2.6 trillion ton-km to 15.9 trillion ton-km (Table 1). In the urban areas, the amount of residential housing space per person increased from 14 sq m. to 33 sq m, the proportion of the population with access to gas increased from 19 per cent to 92 per cent, the proportion with access to tap water increased from 48 per cent to 97 per cent, and the number of public transport vehicles per 10,000 people increased from 2.2 to 11.8. By 2011 China had 74 mobile phones per 100 people and over 500 million internet users.

### 3. Infrastructure and the Silk Road

#### 3.1 The land route.

##### Old Silk Road

China's Old Silk Road developed during the Han Dynasty, when the Europe was united under Roman rule. Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, China's trade across Central Asia to Byzantium continued, operating through a network of intermediary merchants. Trade across the Old Silk Road routes expanded during the Tang Dynasty and flourished thereafter under Muslim rule across much of Central Asia. As well as silk, the products produced and traded along the route eventually included woolen and cotton textiles, carpets, tapestries, and draperies. In his journey across Asia to China Marco Polo encountered a long sequence of vibrant commercial cities, including Baghdad and Basra (in today's Iraq), Tabriz, Yazd, and Kerman (in today's Iran), as well as Kashgar (Kashi) in Xinjiang:

'Kashgar has villages and towns aplenty. Its inhabitants live by trade and industry. They have very fine orchards and vineyards and flourishing estates. Cotton grows here in plenty, besides flax and hemp. The soil is fruitful and productive of all the means of live. This country is starting-point from which many merchants set out to market their wares all over the world' (Marco Polo, 1974:80).

Collective action was vital to vibrant Silk Road. Safe resting places for merchants along the trading routes were essential to thriving commerce along the Silk Road. Up until the eighth century 'Buddhist institutions provided the infrastructure all along the Easter Eurasian section of the Silk Road' (Liu Xinrui, 2010: 72). From the tenth century onwards 'Islamic institutions, like the Buddhist ones before them, established themselves on all the major trade routes... [providing] the infrastructure for a large section of the Silk Road' (Liu Xinrui, 2010:106).

Trade along the land route remained vibrant throughout the pre- modern era, through to the eighteenth century (Levi, 1999). However, under traditional technologies, which mainly used camels and mules, transport costs across the Silk Road routes were high, and trade along the sea route gradually outpaced that along the land route.

##### New Silk Road.

The development of road and, especially, rail technologies and the transformation of political structures in Central Asia opened up the possibility for a new era for the land route. Under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union the vast land mass stretching from Europe to the Pacific was unified politically. Between 1891 and 1916 the Russian Imperial state constructed the Trans-Siberian Railway across the vast expanse of the steppes, and built rail links to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Under the Soviet Union the density of rail links in Central Asia was greatly expanded, helping to stimulate the region's economic development.

Technical progress in railways, including electrification, container rail trucks, and modern signaling systems, have facilitated increased efficiency in rail systems. The fastest recorded journey across the Trans-Siberian Railway from Beijing to Moscow is just eight days, with two weeks the normal time taken. This compares with 40-50 days for transport between Europe and China by the modern sea route. As infrastructure investment develops, using modern technologies for both road and rail, including high-speed trains, the times taken to transport goods between China and Europe will fall and the reliability of the links will increase.

#### 3.2 The sea route.

##### Old Silk Road

Trade across the South China Sea (Nan Hai) to Southeast and South Asia is of great antiquity, and was already well developed by the Han Dynasty. The trade across the Nan Hai greatly expanded during the Tang Dynasty:

'The south China Sea was the main trade route of what may be called the Asia east-west trade in commodities and ideas. It was the second Silk Route. Its waters and islands straits were as the sands and mountain passes of Central Asia; its ports were like the caravanserais. It became to the southern Chinese what the land outside the Jade Gate was to the northern Chinese' (Wang Gungwu, 1998).

Guangzhou was at the centre of the thriving trade with southeast Asia for the next thousand years. In the thirteenth century, Marco Polo wrote of the city of 'Zaiton' (Xiamen) thus:

'Zaiton is the port for all the ships that arrive from India laden with costly wares and precious stones of great price and big pearls of fine quality. It is also a port for the merchants of all the surrounding territory, so that the total amount the traffic in gems and other merchandise entering and leaving the port is a marvel to behold' (Marco Polo, 1974:237).

From the sixteenth century onwards European shipping technologies progressed and European middle class demand increased. Europe's purchase of Chinese tea, porcelain and heavy textiles (eg 'nankeens') greatly expanded. The nineteenth century 'clipper' ship represented the apogee of sailing ship technology. It required around 120-150 days to sail between China and Europe, compared with the years required in the pre-modern era by the land route. By the early nineteenth century the volume of maritime trade between China and Europe greatly exceeded that cross Central Asia.

In the nineteenth century the Sea Route was revolutionized by the steam ship, owned and operated mainly by European companies. By 1900 the Nan Hai was encircled by European colonies, including Indonesia, the Philippines, Indo-China, and Malaya. In Southeast Asia communities of Chinese people developed gradually up until the eighteenth century, but accelerated thereafter under European colonial rule.

### **New Silk Road.**

Large investments in infrastructure in the countries along the sea route are necessary if the New Silk Road to achieve its full potential.

The G20 meeting in Sydney in February 2014 took the topic of 'finance for global infrastructure' as a central theme. In the high income countries, ultra-low interest rates have stimulated a renewed bubble in the price of equities, property and other 'assets', with the benefits confined to a small section of the population. In most developing countries, development is constrained by lack of infrastructure development.

Infrastructure provision in South and Southeast Asia still lags behind that in China. Compared with other large Asian countries China enrolls a larger share of the relevant age group in higher education, has more hospital beds per 1000 people, and much higher electricity consumption per person (Table 2). China also has a higher percentage of the population with access to sanitation facilities and a higher proportion with electricity. China's transport infrastructure is strikingly more highly developed than that in other large Asian countries. The four Asian countries with the highest populations apart from China are India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia, with a combined population of 1.8 billion compared with 1.3 billion in China. However, China's haulage of goods by rail, the volume of container traffic through its ports, the number of passengers and the volume of freight carried by air, are many times larger than that of the other four large Asian countries taken together (Table 3). China's depth of experience in financing, building and operating transport infrastructure is unparalleled in developing countries.

There are large potential mutual benefits from international co-operation in the provision of a wide range of infrastructure projects that can support accelerated growth and improvement of mass welfare in the countries along the sea route of the New Silk Road.

### **Conclusion.**

Infrastructure provision is a vitally important instrument for expanding international economic relationships and thereby deepening cultural interaction. In recent decades China has accumulated more experience than any other country in financing, building and operating infrastructure projects. Infrastructure is central to development of the New Silk Road. Peaceful international relations are the fundamental pre-requisite for success of the New Silk Road. Deng Xiaoping's approach of 'setting aside disputes and pursuing joint development' provides an important guide for the philosophy of infrastructure development along the New Silk Road, whether by land or sea.

**Table 1. Expansion of China's infrastructure, 1990-2011**

	1990	2000	2011
<i>Freight traffic (b. ton-kilometres) of which:-</i>	2,621	4,432	15,932
Railways	1,062	1,377	2,947
Highways	336	613	5,137
Waterways	1,159	2,373	7,452
Petroleum/gas	63	64	289
Civil aviation	negl.	5	17
Electricity consumption (billion kwh)	623	1,347	4,193
Of which:-			
Industry	487	1,000	3,087
Households	48	145	512
<i>Cities</i>			
Public transport vehicles (buses, trolley busses etc.) per 10,000 people	2.2	5.3	11.8
Percentage of population with acces to:			
gas	19	45	92
tap water	48	64	97
<i>Building construction:-</i>			
Floor space of buildings completed m. sq meters	196	807	3,164
Residential housing space p.c. (sq metres):-			
rural areas	18	25	36
urban areas	14	25	33
<i>Information technology:-</i>			
Mobile phones per 100 people	-	7	74
Numer of internet users (m.)	-	23	213

Source: ZTN, 2012: 276, 378, 393, 602, 623 and 657-8.



**Table 2. Selected indicators of China's infrastructure compared with four large Asian developing countries**

	Enrolment in tertiary education (%age group) (2010)	Hospital beds per 1000 people (2005/10)	Percentage of population with access to improved sanitation (2010)		Percentage of population with access to electricity (2009)	Electricity consumption per person (kwh) (2009)
			urban	rural		
China	26	4.2	74	56	99	2,631
Bangladesh	11	0.3	57	55	41	252
India	16	0.9	58	23	66	571
Indonesia	23	0.6	73	39	66	590
Pakistan	5	0.6	72	34	62	449

Source: World Bank, 2012: 86-7, 101-1, 108-9,166-7, 288-9, and 324-5.

**Table 3. China's transport infrastructure compared with four large Asian developing countries**

	Goods hauled by rail (billion ton-km) (2000-2010)	Container traffic through ports (million TEU) (2010)	Air passengers (millions) (2010)	Air freight million (ton-km)	Population (million)
China	2,451	129.6	268	17,441	1,338
Sub-total for four large Asian developing countries	611	21.7	107	2,775	1,788
of which					
Bangladesh	1	1.4	2	85	149
India	600	9.8	64	1,720	1,225
Indonesia	4	8.4	35	660	240
Pakistan	6	2.1	6	310	174

Source: World Bank, 2012:320.

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