

Ancient Silk Road and Indian *Uttarapatha*

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Abstract

This study examines India's strategic imperatives and policy responses toward China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) within the context of contemporary geoeconomics and trade-driven global power dynamics. While China seeks to establish intercontinental dominance through capital-intensive infrastructure, state-backed loans, and maritime encirclement, its model faces growing criticism over debt sustainability and sovereignty risks. In response, India leverages a multi-dimensional strategy that integrates ancient civilizational heritage with modern geopolitical partnerships. By aligning historical soft power - such as Buddhism, Ayurveda, and the heritage of ancient trade routes like *Uttarapatha* and *Dakshinapatha* - with strategic connectivity initiatives including the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), India presents a transparent, sustainable alternative to BRI. This paper evaluates how India counters Chinese encirclement through maritime security networks like the "Necklace of Diamonds" and community-centric development models, arguing that a synthesis of historical trade influence, sovereign-respecting economic partnerships, and strategic innovation is essential for preserving regional stability and restoring India's global commercial prominence. Additionally, this study highlights that these trade routes predominantly corresponded to the ancient Indian *Uttarapatha*.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), *Uttarapatha*, *Ashtadhyayi*, Silk Road, Second Urbanization.

Introduction

This article analyzes the historical convergence of India's ancient trade route '*Uttarapatha*' and the 'Ancient Silk Road'. Additionally, it presents a comparative study of China's current 'Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)' project with these ancient routes, providing evidence to show that since ancient times, these routes have not only served as the foundation of economic prosperity but have also shaped cultural exchanges and global geopolitics. Furthermore, it demonstrates that China's so-called claim over the Ancient Silk Road is misleading. Just as the concept of the Silk Road along the *Uttarapatha* could not be envisioned in ancient times without the active participation of Indians, similarly, in present times, China's current 'Belt and Road Initiative or BRI' project holds no global significance without the involvement of India and Indians.

Evidence of trade and urbanization in North India is not clearly found from the post-Indus Valley Civilization period until prior to the Mahajanapada period (following the First Urbanization). Over time, historians began studying human social, religious, and economic activities. On the basis of information described in contemporary sources and research conducted over the past four to five centuries, today we have succeeded in bringing forward certain definitive facts regarding the economic aspects of ancient Indian history. As separate analyses of new facts emerge, historians are establishing new dimensions to the direction and magnitude of changes occurring in ancient Indian social and economic life.

To understand trade and economic activities, the analysis of primary literary sources and archaeological evidence is essential. Works such as the '*Ashtadhyayi*' authored by Maharshi Panini, Kautilya's '*Arthashastra*', the accounts of Pliny, and the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea clearly indicate that ancient India was not merely

a trading partner, but a primary controlling hub of the global trade system. The period around 600 BCE is considered a mark of the end of a long-standing historical uncertainty and ambiguity in Indian history. It was from this timeframe that numerous new dimensions were incorporated into the political, social, and cultural life of Indian civilization, providing a new direction to history. These multidimensional transformations were so widespread that they laid the foundation for the process of 'Second Urbanization' in the Indian subcontinent.

This Second Urbanization was geographically far more extensive and spread across significantly more remote regions in comparison to its preceding phase (First Urbanization / Indus Valley Civilization). Large-scale deployment of natural and human resources was involved in its construction and operation, as a result of which the size of the population benefiting from and impacted by it was also exceptionally large compared to earlier times. The increasing centralization of state systems during the Mahajanapada period acted as a catalyst in accelerating this urban and economic development. The concept of strong and expansive empires, and ultimately the merger of other states into a powerful Mahajanapada like Magadha, rendered the role of trade and commerce absolutely indispensable to the entire process of state-building. The direct outcome of this unprecedented expansion of trading activities manifested in the emergence of specialized land and sea trade routes, as well as the establishment of new urban centers (cities) serving as the focal points of economic activities.

Although the pace of urbanization and commercial growth was relatively slow and limited prior to the Mauryan period, it acquired extraordinary momentum under the comprehensive development and administrative control of the Mauryan Empire. Later, the post-Mauryan period presents a clear example of the consolidation and maturity of this entire process, where literary and archaeological evidence reveals descriptions of urban settlements that were even more extensive, prosperous, and diverse than those of the Mauryan

period. In fact, the political and administrative structures of Mauryan and post-Mauryan India point toward a highly organized and prosperous economic system. The primary credit for this economic strength can be attributed to seamlessly operating internal and foreign trade, as well as the prosperous trading centers associated with them. Thus, rather than viewing this entire process of trade route development and urbanization occurring between 600 BCE and 200 CE in isolation, it needs to be analyzed as a continuous flow (continuity).

Commercial activities commenced from the middle of the first millennium BCE. This trade was primarily related to essential commodities such as salt, metals, etc. During the Mauryan period, the importance of early routes increased further. There were two reasons for this expansion: gold, diamonds, and precious stones mined in the Deccan were transported via trade routes, fulfilling the requirements of the royal treasury; and the state earned revenue by collecting taxes from merchants while simultaneously encouraging trade. Collecting trade and agricultural revenue was necessary for the state to pay salaries to its army and administrative apparatus. We also know that trade was conducted via both land and sea routes. During the Mauryan period, maritime trade occurred mainly along coastal areas. The ports on the western coast were presumably Bharuch at the mouth of the Narmada and Sopara near modern Mumbai. In the east, Tamralipti, or modern Tamluk, was an important route for ships bound for Burma.

In ancient times, there was immense demand for Indian goods in foreign markets. During this period, two major powerful empires emerged on the global stage - the Roman Empire in the West and China's Han Empire in the East. Within the Roman Empire, there was vast consumption of products originating from Eastern countries (especially Asian regions), such as Indian spices, rare aromatic woods, and other luxury items. On the other hand, the Han Empire

also provided extensive state patronage and encouragement to the merchant class. Consequently, a robust network of commercial, strategic, and cultural contacts developed among India, Central Asia, and China. It is particularly noteworthy that in present times, China has laid the foundation of its highly ambitious 'Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)' project using its historical 'Ancient Silk Road' as an ideological basis. The present research paper provides a nuanced analysis of China's ancient economic and commercial status alongside the strategic perspective of the Government of India in the context of China's new 'Belt and Road Initiative' policy; it also highlights the current policies adopted by India and potential steps that could be taken in the future. Furthermore, in-depth deliberation has been carried out on how the major trade routes and prosperous urban centers, with which ancient Indian merchants were well acquainted, can be restored and reactivated in modern contexts.

A large number of inscriptions have been recovered from various Buddhist sites across the country, shedding significant light on the socio-economic life of that time. While these inscriptions provide detailed accounts of diverse grants and offerings made to Buddhist sanghas (monastic orders) on one hand, they also offer clear indications regarding various professions and the prosperity of trade routes on the other. For instance, inscriptions discovered from Mathura mention different tiers of the merchant class, such as '*Vanik*' (traders), '*Sarthavaha*' (caravan traders), and '*Shreshthin*' (guild heads). Furthermore, accounts of individuals associated with various occupations - such as goldsmiths, jewelers, treasurers, and iron merchants - are also found. Additionally, these inscriptions describe contemporary artisan guilds (*Shreni*), one of which has been specifically authenticated as a guild of flour-milling/processing artisans. Beyond *Uttarapatha* and *Dakshinapatha*, these sources also mention several other regional and inter-regional trade routes, upon which detailed research and in-depth analysis remain to be conducted.

Regarding literary evidence, the Jataka tales mention a specific village near Kashi (Varanasi) where a large number of carpenters (woodcraftsmen) resided, and merchants visited regularly for commercial purposes. Additionally, another major method of procuring goods or raw materials was traveling to ports; whenever a merchant ship anchored at a port, traders would gather there to purchase goods in bulk and abundant quantities.

Bactria in the Oxus Valley of northern Afghanistan was a major center for international trade with Central Asia and China. From this city, a route passed through Kapisa and the Kabul Valley to reach the core region of the Kushan Empire. In the Indian subcontinent, various sources mention two main routes: *Uttarapatha*, or the Northern Route, which connected the major centers of the northern region, and *Dakshinapatha*, or the Southern Route, which connected the centers of peninsular India. *Uttarapatha* originated from Pushkalavati or modern Charsadda, passing through Taxila, Mathura, Kaushambi, and Varanasi, and reached Champa and Chandraketugarh via Pataliputra.

The 'Kushan period' holds a special significance in establishing Indian control over the Silk Road. During the reign of Emperor Kanishka, the Kushan Empire established direct authority over a vast territory of the Silk Road (from Bactria to North India). Maharshi Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* also mentions *Uttarapatha*. The mention of '*Uttarapathenahritam*' in its fifth chapter also serves as an assertion of Indian rights over this route. The Indian empire collected taxes from Chinese and Roman merchants passing through this route and provided them with protection. The discovery of Kushan-era gold coins and Roman 'Denarius' coins proves that China never held a monopoly over the Silk Road.

This ancient route existed during the Mauryan era and finds mention in Greek works. Another route from Mathura extended westward toward Sindh; horses were brought north along this very route. Mathura was also connected to Ujjain and the port of Bharuch

at the mouth of the Narmada. A third route ran parallel to the Indus River and connected Taxila. It is a significant fact that the main route ran parallel to the Ganges River. References to the transportation of goods by boats via the river are found at several places. Numerous small routes were connected to this main highway, one of which reached Nepal via Vaishali and Shravasti."

Uttarapatha was not merely a medium for the movement of goods, but a vehicle for the exchange of ideas and culture. Through the convergence along this route, Buddhism spread from India to Central Asia and China. The Gandhara art style is direct proof of this. China's BRI is limited merely to physical infrastructure, whereas the structure of ancient *Uttarapatha* was rooted in deep cultural, social, and political relationships.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) policy

The present era is fundamentally a period dominated by economic forces and commercial prowess. Today, several small nations- though severely constrained in terms of geographical size and population, and grappling with a paucity of natural resources - are proving capable of steering and influencing the global economy purely on the strength of their trade and commerce. Although these countries are not particularly prominent or powerful from a military standpoint, they maintain a robust standing on the international stage owing to their favorable geographic/strategic locations and vibrant commercial activities; numerous nations of Europe and East Asia serve as direct examples of this phenomenon. Likely with the objective of acquiring a similar global influence and strategic leverage, a superpower like China is resorting to far-reaching policies such as the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (formerly known as 'One Belt, One Road') in the form of an intercontinental trading network. Through this policy, China is attempting to gain an upper hand on the strategic front by expanding its geopolitical and economic influence over countries and historical trading cities connected to the ancient

Silk Road. In this scenario, a comprehensive, in-depth, and instructive study on what India's potential efforts could be in response to China's commercial and strategic encirclement, and how India can re-establish its historical commercial influence, appears to be extremely timely and relevant.

However, major projects of the Government of India - such as Project Mausam, the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, Bharatmala, Sagarmala, and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline Project, among others - emphasize adopting a novel approach based on the achievements of ancient India.

The 'One Belt, One Road (now BRI)' project was launched by China in the year 2013. This project is a part of China's foreign policy. Several major countries from Asia, Africa, and Europe are included in this project. Since the year 2016, the 'One Belt, One Road' project has been known as the 'Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)' project. Through this project, China is redeveloping the ancient Silk Route. Via this important project, China is constructing overland and maritime routes from Central Asia to Europe and then to Africa through roads, railways, ports, pipelines, and other infrastructure facilities.



The objective of this project of China is to connect the countries of South-East Asia, Central Asia, the Gulf region, Africa, and Europe via road and maritime routes. China's project will work toward connecting more than 100 countries across the world through road, rail, and maritime routes. According to China, different countries of the world will come closer to one another through this project, which will help enhance mutual connectivity along with economic cooperation. According to China, the purpose of this project is economic, the completion of which could change the global landscape. Thus, the BRI initiative is an ambitious infrastructure development and connectivity project proposed by China, aiming to connect China with Europe, Africa, and Asia through roads, railways, and waterways. This is a strategy of China focused on connectivity, through which connecting roads, railways, ports, pipelines, and other infrastructure via land and sea across Asia, Europe, and Africa has been envisioned. Encompassing 70% of the world's population and 75% of known energy reserves, this project will connect China's production centers to global markets and natural resource centers. The first route under the BRI is the route starting from China and

passing through Russia and Iran to reach Iraq. The second route under this plan is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). There is a plan to extend this route further to Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The primary objective of this project is to connect China with neighboring countries as well as Europe via road routes, so as to boost global trade. Along with establishing road connectivity from China to Turkey, the goal of connecting ports of several countries with each other has also been included in this plan. Strategic as well as practical, BRI is effectively a vehicle for China to export its goods, through which it seeks to emerge as a global power by utilizing its massive foreign exchange reserves for the development of ports, industrial centers, and Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

In the global competition for strategic leverage, energy corridors and transit infrastructure function as vital components of economic power and geopolitical dominance. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) heavily emphasizes energy security through projects such as the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline network, the Myanmar-China Oil and Gas Pipeline, and energy networks embedded within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). These pipelines serve a dual strategic imperative for Beijing: securing steady supplies of hydrocarbons from Central Asia and the Middle East to fuel its industrial base, and mitigating its critical vulnerability at the Malacca Strait- a maritime choke point through which a major portion of China's energy imports must pass. By establishing overland pipelines that bypass contested maritime zones, China aims to insulate its economy from potential naval blockades and assert energy hegemony across Eurasia. In response to these strategic vulnerabilities and energy dynamics, India has adopted a comprehensive framework of energy diplomacy centered on diversification, trans-regional connectivity, and sustainable infrastructure. A primary initiative in this domain is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline project. Envisioned as a vital energy bridge between resource-rich Central Asia and energy-deficient South Asia, TAPI aims to transport natural gas from

Turkmenistan's Galkynysh field to India. Beyond its primary economic objective of securing clean energy, TAPI holds profound geopolitical significance: it enhances regional economic integration, fosters commercial interdependence across South and Central Asia, and offers a transparent alternative to Chinese state-financed energy networks.

However, the operationalization of TAPI faces persistent challenges, including regional security instability, transit friction, and geopolitical volatility along its route. To mitigate these risks and secure its energy lines, India continues to balance its participation in TAPI with alternative energy and infrastructure corridors, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and strategic investments in Iran's Chabahar Port. Furthermore, through participation in multilateral energy frameworks like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), India seeks to integrate green energy grids and hydrogen export pipelines alongside traditional transport networks. By linking physical energy connectivity with regional stability, financial transparency, and environmental sustainability, India asserts its position as a responsible regional stakeholder, offering an equitable energy-sharing model that counters unilateral, state-driven infrastructure expansion across Asia.

To effectively counter the long-term strategic challenges posed by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and re-establish its historical prominence as a primary center of global trade, India must transition from reactive diplomacy to a proactive, institutionalized geoeconomic strategy. While current initiatives such as IMEC, INSTC, Project Mausam, and Sagarmala provide a strong framework, their long-term efficacy depends on swift execution, institutional coordination, and sustained financial commitment. A comprehensive strategic roadmap for India's trade resurgence must be anchored in four pivotal policy pillars:

Accelerated Infrastructure Execution and Financial Innovation: India must streamline the implementation of its trans-regional connectivity corridors. To match the scale of foreign infrastructure funding without incurring unsustainable sovereign debt, India should expand public-private partnerships (PPPs) and collaborate with multilateral institutions like the Quad Infrastructure Working Group, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and Western financial institutions. Creating transparent, blended-finance frameworks will ensure that projects like Chabahar Port and IMEC remain financially viable and resilient against geopolitical disruptions.

Leveraging Digital and Technical Standards: Building upon the success of its Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), India should institutionalize "Digital Diplomacy" by offering open-source digital architecture - such as unified payment interfaces, digital identity systems, and supply-chain tracking tools to developing nations across the Global South. By establishing global benchmarks for secure, transparent, and user-centric digital networks, India can build a reliable digital framework that counters proprietary digital infrastructure and safeguards data sovereignty for partner nations.

Institutionalizing Cultural Diplomacy and Civilizational Soft Power: Soft power initiatives like Project Mausam and Buddhist diplomacy must be supported by dedicated administrative structures, research grants, and sustained cultural exchanges. Establishing specialized cultural-economic corridors across South and Southeast Asia will deepen historical ties, promote heritage tourism, and foster organic diplomatic alignments that hard-power infrastructure spending cannot replicate.

Enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness and Regional Security: As a primary net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India must strengthen its maritime security apparatus under the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine. Expanding joint naval exercises, operationalizing coastal radar networks with littoral nations, and securing naval logistics agreements near strategic choke points will protect vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) and maintain open, rules-based

maritime transit. By harmonizing physical connectivity, financial transparency, digital innovation, and civilizational soft power, India can construct an independent, multi-dimensional trade network. This strategic approach will safeguard national sovereignty, foster sustainable regional development, and successfully restore the historical commercial legacy of Uttarapatha and Dakshinapatha in the modern Indo-Pacific era.

Impact on India

India is not directly a partner in the BRI project. If this project faces restrictions or bans, it can certainly alleviate India's strategic concerns because, as a part of this project, CPEC passes through Indian territory occupied by Pakistan. The restriction or banning of this project, built under China's leadership, could allow India to establish itself before the world as a manufacturing hub. China is attempting to encircle India through the BRI project. In such a scenario, if this project is restricted, its 'String of Pearls' policy toward India will suffer a severe blow. There is also a concern that if India's neighbors who have received loans from China (Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal) fail to repay their debts, China could make these countries its colonies, which will directly challenge India's strategic and geopolitical interests. To balance this unilateral dominance of China, India is currently leading several alternative global corridors:

1. India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC): This can be considered a modern version of ancient maritime and overland trade routes, connecting India to the Gulf countries and Europe.
2. International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC): Connecting India, Iran (Chabahar Port), and Russia, this route establishes India's direct access to Central Asia.
3. Ashgabat Agreement: A crucial part of India's policy to enhance trade and connectivity with Central Asian countries, etc.

In assessing the global dynamics between major Asian powers, the reliance on structural hard power- such as infrastructure financing

and commercial corridor construction - presents distinct strategic vulnerabilities that can be mitigated through civilizational soft power. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) operates predominantly as a capital-intensive, state-driven projection of economic muscle. However, this approach frequently engenders local friction, sovereign debt anxiety, and perceptions of neo-imperialism across host nations. In contrast, India possesses an enduring, organic civilizational footprint across South, Southeast, and Central Asia that predates modern state boundaries and westphalian concepts of sovereignty. Historically, trade routes like the Maritime Silk Road and ancient overland trails were not merely conduits for commodities; they served as arteries for the diffusion of Buddhist philosophy, Sanskrit literature, architectural idioms, Ayurvedic science, and artisanal crafts. The profound cultural synthesis seen in monuments like Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Borobudur in Indonesia, and the architectural systems of Thailand reflects an ancient Indian influence achieved entirely without military conquest.

To effectively counter China's structural encirclement, India must operationalize these deep-seated historical affinities through a modernized framework of cultural diplomacy. Project *Mausam* serves as a pivotal policy tool in this domain, aiming to re-establish connections among nations around the Indian Ocean littoral based on shared monsoon-driven trade histories and maritime heritage. By linking maritime commerce with cultural memory, India positions itself not as an extractive economic power, but as a historic custodian of shared regional heritage. Furthermore, expanding Buddhist diplomacy across South and Southeast Asia fosters soft-power alliances that China struggles to match, given its secular state framework and transactional bilateral relations. By integrating traditional knowledge systems, medical diplomacy, and cultural preservation projects into its foreign policy architecture, India offers a normative, trust-based model of regional cooperation. This soft-power orientation creates a durable layer of geopolitical influence that complements hard-infrastructure initiatives like the India-Middle

East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), ensuring that India's strategic footprint is grounded in mutual respect, shared values, and long-term civilizational synergy.

Other aspects

A critical thematic dimension required for a rigorous evaluation of the Belt and Road Initiative involves analyzing the divergent financial methodologies employed by Beijing and New Delhi in their overseas development engagements. China's BRI strategy relies heavily on state-backed commercial loans characterized by high interest rates, short grace periods, non-transparent terms, and collateralization against critical national assets. This approach has led to severe debt vulnerabilities in several developing host nations, a phenomenon widely analyzed as "debt-trap diplomacy." A prominent case study is Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, where unsustainable debt service obligations forced the government to execute a 99-year lease agreement, effectively transferring operational control of a strategically vital maritime asset to a Chinese state-owned enterprise. Similarly, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has placed immense strain on Pakistan's macroeconomic stability, creating high debt servicing burdens alongside underutilized infrastructure projects like Gwadar Port. These instances illustrate how capital allocation under the BRI often prioritizes Chinese state enterprise expansion and strategic footholds over the long-term financial health of the recipient state.

Conversely, India's approach to international development assistance - primarily channeled through the Development Partnership Administration (DPA) under the Ministry of External Affairs - presents a transparent, grant-based, and demand-driven alternative. India's concessionary Lines of Credit (LoCs) and grant assistance programs emphasize local ownership, capacity building, environmental sustainability, and fiscal alignment with the host country's economic priorities. Rather than demanding equity stakes

or sovereign assets during fiscal crises, India has consistently offered financial restructuring, emergency credit facilities, and humanitarian aid, as demonstrated during Sri Lanka's 2022 economic crisis. By comparing China's infrastructure-centric, high-liability loan framework with India's community-centric, transparent development partnership model, academic analysis demonstrates that India offers a far more sustainable blueprint for regional growth. Emphasizing this contrast highlights India's commitment to respecting national sovereignty and promoting equity-based infrastructure development across the Global South.

The strategic competition between India and China is acutely visible in the maritime domain of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), where global energy flows and trade corridors converge. China's maritime posture under the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is operationalized through the "String of Pearls" strategy - a network of commercial and dual-use military facilities surrounding the Indian subcontinent. Through key nodes such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, and Beijing's first overseas military base in Djibouti, China seeks to project naval power, secure its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and bypass its vulnerability at the Malacca Strait. This expanding presence directly challenges India's traditional role as the primary net security provider in the Indian Ocean, raising significant strategic concerns regarding maritime encirclement, intelligence gathering, and potential naval blockades during times of conflict.

In response to this strategic encirclement, India has instituted a proactive, multi-tiered maritime framework conceptualized as the "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy. This approach focuses on securing strategic access points, naval logistics agreements, and maritime domain awareness partnerships across key choke points in the Indo-Pacific. Key components include access to Oman's Duqm Port, facilitating naval logistics near the Persian Gulf; strategic cooperation at Seychelles' Assumption Island; development of Indonesia's Sabang Port near the Malacca Strait; and logistics agreements with

Singapore's Changi Naval Base. Concurrently, India's overarching Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) doctrine integrates coastal radar networks, white shipping agreements, and joint naval patrols with littoral nations like Mauritius, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. By strengthening these strategic partnerships and modernizing its naval posture, India maintains balance in the IOR, safeguarding critical maritime choke points and ensuring that freedom of navigation and sovereign rights are upheld against unilateral maritime expansionism.

To effectively counter the vast geographical reach of China's BRI, India leads and participates in alternative multi-modal trans-regional connectivity networks designed to enhance trade efficiency while respecting international law and sovereign equality. Prominent among these initiatives are the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). IMEC, unveiled on the sidelines of the G20 Summit, aims to create a streamlined transit network integrating ship-to-rail transit networks across India, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and Europe. By providing a direct trade link between Asia, the Arabian Gulf, and Europe, IMEC is projected to reduce transit times by up to 40 percent and lower logistical costs by 30 percent compared to traditional maritime routes through the Suez Canal. Additionally, IMEC integrates digital connectivity, clean hydrogen export pipelines, and electricity grids, offering a modern, sustainable alternative to BRI's traditional concrete-and-steel infrastructure.

Complementing IMEC's western vector is the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7,200-kilometer multi-modal network connecting India, Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Central Asia. Through the strategic development of Iran's Chabahar Port - specifically the Shahid Beheshti terminal - India bypasses overland transit restrictions through Pakistan, establishing a direct commercial gateway to landlocked Central Asian nations and Russia. Despite geopolitical challenges, including regional conflicts and international

sanctions, INSTC remains a critical economic artery that cuts transit times between Mumbai and Moscow by nearly half. Together, IMEC and INSTC provide India with a comprehensive dual-corridor strategy. These networks link India's manufacturing hubs to European, Middle Eastern, Eurasian, and Central Asian markets, positioning New Delhi as an indispensable node in global supply chains without incurring the sovereignty risks associated with BRI funding models.

As global trade increasingly depends on digital architecture, technological connectivity has emerged as a crucial arena of geopolitical competition. China's "Digital Silk Road" (DSR) initiative seeks to export its digital ecosystem - including 5G telecommunications infrastructure, surveillance technologies, fiber-optic networks, and cloud computing platforms - to developing nations across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. While DSR offers affordable digital infrastructure, it frequently introduces severe risks regarding data privacy, state surveillance, technology lock-in, and vulnerabilities to cyber espionage, raising serious national security concerns for host governments and their international partners.

In contrast to China's proprietary and state-monitored technology exports, India has developed an alternative global model based on Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), often termed "the India Stack." This open-source, interoperable, and inclusive digital architecture encompasses secure digital identity, instant real-time payment systems, and consent-based data management frameworks. By offering these technology stacks to countries in the Global South, India enables developing nations to build their own customizable, secure digital ecosystems without relying on restrictive proprietary technologies or sacrificing data sovereignty. Exporting DPI solutions serves as a powerful instrument of digital diplomacy, fostering financial inclusion, transparent governance, and cross-border e-commerce. As global commerce shifts toward digital transactions and cross-border data flows, India's DPI model functions as an equitable "Digital Silk Route," positioning New Delhi as a trusted

technology partner and a major architect of the global digital economy.

A comprehensive academic analysis of India's contemporary economic and strategic posture requires a historical review of ancient Indian trade mechanics, specifically the structural organization of the *Uttarapatha* (Northern Route) and *Dakshinapatha* (Southern Route). As documented in ancient texts and historical analyses - such as Moti Chandra's *Sarthavaha* and Radhakumud Mookerji's work on ancient economic history - these trade networks were highly organized commercial corridors that connected the Indian subcontinent to Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Greco-Roman world. The *Uttarapatha* spanned from Taxila through the Gangetic plains to the eastern port of Tamralipti, facilitating overland trade in textiles, metals, and horses. Meanwhile, the *Dakshinapatha* traversed the central plateau to western coastal ports like Bharuch (Barygaza) and Sopara, serving as a primary conduit for maritime trade in spices, gemstones, and fine fabrics with the Roman Empire.

The operational success of these ancient routes rested on sophisticated institutional frameworks rather than mere geographic access. Merchant guilds (*Srenis* and *Nigamas*), led by caravan leaders (*Sarthavahas*), established robust systems for credit, contract enforcement, maritime insurance, and logistical security. The state played a supportive role by maintaining road infrastructure, establishing rest houses (*Sarai*), ensuring route security, and regulating customs duties without stifling private commercial enterprise. This historical model demonstrates that ancient India's economic influence was driven by decentralized commercial vigor, institutional credibility, and high-value manufacturing rather than state-enforced territorial control. By drawing inspiration from the institutional mechanics of the *Uttarapatha* and *Dakshinapatha*, modern Indian policymakers can design infrastructure and trade policies that combine physical connectivity with strong institutional frameworks, transparent financial governance, and private sector

participation, effectively restoring India's historical role as a primary center of global commerce.

Conclusion

India must give a new dimension to its relations with neighboring countries by taking inspiration from ancient Indian routes, through which China's BRI policy can be effectively countered. By integrating various aspects of ancient India into projects like Project Mausam, Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, Bharatmala, and Sagarmala, we must emphasize newer routes. In the present geopolitical landscape, India should lead a multi-dimensional and independent trade network by coordinating its ancient 'Soft Power' (Buddhism, Ayurveda, etc.) with modern strategic initiatives (IMEC, INSTC, Chabahar, etc.), so that regional stability and sovereignty remain intact. By re-establishing the ancient glory of *Uttarapatha* and *Dakshinapatha* through Akhand Bharat, we can realize this dream. Although the current government is making efforts in this direction, we will also have to incorporate novel strategic perspectives to counter China's BRI.

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