



The Eurasian Economic Union and Silk Road Tourism: Qualifying Resources, Amplifying Messages

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Abstract

The promotion of tourism can often be a dichotomy of national and intra-regional interests, especially when countries are a part of an economic regional grouping. The vast Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which stretches from the Caspian Sea to the western borders of China, comprises five large countries all of which are situated along the ancient Silk Road. Although an ancient historical route, its modern development is still very much in its infancy, with countries in the region eager to develop their own capabilities to not only attract international visitors but also capture important a significant share of the rapidly growing tourism marketplace. This chapter uses the (Ritchie and Crouch, in *The competitive destination: a sustainable tourism perspective*, CABI, Wallingford, UK, 2003) destination competitive model to assess the travel and tourism opportunities that exist across the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The significance of this study, lies in the proposition that Eurasian

Economic Union (EEU) as a regional grouping has the potential to emerge as a dynamic tourism destination. At the heart of such a believe will be the inherent need for countries to leverage their qualifying resources and amplify in unison key developmental factors such as the safety, location, interconnectedness of the different destinations within and more broadly the competitive elements of costs and exchange rates.

Keywords

Silk road • Belt and road initiative (BRI) • Eurasian economic union • Destination competitive model • Amplify • China

1 Introduction

Emerging as a major global economic power in the twenty-first century, China is intertwining its relations with countries in Asia and westward using the historical fulcrum of trade routes known as the Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Route (see Fig. 1). First formulated in 2013, the China led Belt and Road initiative (BRI) includes some 140 countries with intra-trade volume amounting to USD10 trillion (Hettige 2022). With the inclusion of Siberia (Russia) and Xinjiang (China) with countries that stretch all the way to the Caspian Sea, the Silk Road encompasses 448 million people and a purchasing power parity of \$1702 USD per person (Devonshire-Ellis 2021). These significant figures and the prospect of countries situated along the corridor benefitting from the enormous transportation connections that exist present massive opportunities for trade, tourism, and cultural exchange.

As a regional grouping, the Eurasia Economic Union (EEU), which comprises of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia represents a significant geoeconomic axis. Together with Uzbekistan, the region is beginning to

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Fig. 1 Belt and road initiative

develop itself economically with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that is in approximately \$2.7 trillion USD (Michel 2014). While the EEU already appears to be moving more closely together economically, the BRI presents a significant opportunity to further enhance their unity with a single destination marketing approach for the region. The BRI contains two key facets, the Silk Road Economic Belt and a corresponding Maritime Silk Road Initiative. With the strategic development linking Europe in the west with Asia in the east occurring on both land and water there is enormous potential to grow the tourism sector and in doing so provide critical employment opportunities.

During the United Nations World Trade Organization's (UNWTO's) General Assembly in Indonesia in 1993, the concept of Silk Road Tourism was initially discussed. Motivated by a sense of renewed enthusiasm in the Silk Road, the UNWTO decided to revive the ancient routes as a tourism concept, uniting three continents once again in a project spread across many thousands of kilometres. The Silk Road represents an historic array of trade routes, which have played an integral role in driving not only cultural interaction but also important source economic cooperation connecting China in the east through to the Mediterranean Sea in the west (Gursoy and Altinay 2021). The rebirth of the Silk Road Network and its benefits requires the participation of all countries along the route (Schwab 2018).

After reviewing the literature on regional groupings and their marketing efforts, we outline the research questions and study approach. This chapter examines the key aspects of the tourism marketing initiatives that are being developed by the

EEU countries. More specifically, how these nations can utilize their abundant natural and socio-cultural resources to amplify their message that the Silk Road has the potential to be a leading global tourism hub in the future. Drawing on this pretext, the chapter also provides a framework that policy makers within the EEU can embrace that BRI is developed in a manner that benefits all parties involved in the tourism sector.

The rest of the study flows as follows. Section 2 examines the issues of regionalism, regional economic cooperation, and the important roles they play in growing tourism in the Eurasian region. It also provides an assessment of the literature surrounding the Eurasian Economic Union members in regard to the Silk Road and the marketing of the Tourism sector in the region. Section 3 provides a series of further analysis and discussion regarding key policy initiatives that could be implemented to further drive tourism development. Finally, Sect. 4 draws a series of relevant conclusions and details areas of research that should form key areas of focus in the future.

2 Literature Review

Since the end of the 1960s, regionalism has become one of the key theories of international relations. In the 1950s, the first wave of regionalism commenced when the dynamic momentum of European regional integration started. During the latter part of the 1980s, the world saw the proliferation of regional groupings gained momentum in different parts of

the world—from Europe to North America, Latin America and South and Southeast Asia, the second wave of theorizing on regionalism began (Wood 2017; Wood and Jang 2017).

Scholars (i.e., Beeson and Stubbs 2012; Wunderlich 2007; Sridharan 2007) have provided ample definitions on the construct of regionalism (Chheang 2013). For Beeson and Stubbs (2012) and Sridharan (2007), regionalism is a state-led development initiatives in collaboration with countries of common geographic or interests. Often, in such regional organisations, we can expect a strong state actor and their institutional cooperatives to design and implement the common interests of the grouping (Wunderlich 2007). While regionalism attempts to neutralise individual state nationalism to give way to a stronger regional unity, challenges to a collective identity and collaborative initiative is where much more efforts have to be placed (Fawcett 2004).

Regionalism is an enabler of tourism (Thirumaran et al. 2022). Regional cooperation and integration was found to form a favourable condition for the development of the tourism industry when viewed as a cooperative magnet can contribute to mutual benefits generated from the industry. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in the establishment of the five new countries in Central Asia. Since their independence, these countries have faced several challenges. However, the disintegration of the Soviet Union paved the way for new relations in Central Asia with other neighbouring countries such as China and Iran. Chheang (2013) noted that regional cooperation efforts in terms of tourism development and promotion is gaining more political and economic attention, specifically in the context of globalization and regionalization. For example, Kostopoulou et al. (2021), the classification of the Silk Road cultural heritage assets is considered a useful tool for strategic planning in tourism and regional planning, addressed to local authorities and tourism stakeholders.

As regards to transforming Central Asia from a “land-locked” to a land-linked” region, Gussarova et al. (2017) noted that the EEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt have been the most discussed undertakings. The same scholars compared the two major initiatives and two regional powers – Russia and China, with the EEU and the BRI, which directly influences the interests of Central Asia (Nurseit 2020). Meanwhile, in their studies on the Silk Road and the service industries, Gursoy and Altinay (2021) concluded that the Silk Road project offers significant opportunities to develop an open-minded, all-encompassing, well-balanced, and inclusive regional economic cooperation framework that can benefit service industries and improve the quality of life of citizens of countries within the Silk Road.

Du and Zhang (2018) found that China’s outward foreign direct investments (OFDIs) had a huge increase in countries participating in the BRI. Li et al. (2019) corroborate that

BRI-related subsidies incentivize exporting to BRI markets, while cultural friction and ethnicity differences of owners create complications in capitalizing the policy benefits. Similarly, Quer (2021) presents the positive effects of BRI in the tourism industry, as Chinese tourists seem to prefer the countries on the BRI list. While Wilson (2016) conducted a study assessing the Russian and Chinese perspectives on the EEU. His study also aimed to ascertain the developmental mechanisms that were associated with the extended foreign policy goals of Russia and China and their impact on the strategic Russian-Chinese alliance. The author concluded that the initiatives represent a rivalry between the powerful neighbours which are largely a consequence of the growing power disparities that exist between the two countries.

Central Asia, as one of the most underserved tourist destinations in the world, faces several challenges such as security, economic development, infrastructure, and transportation to develop tourism (Koh and Kwok 2017). Barriers to accessing the China tourism market include “shortage of tourism infrastructures, unprofessional tourism workers, and low service level” in Central Asia (Li 2016, p128). However, China’s motivation to develop the new Silk Road represents a broader developmental aim, however, there is no doubt that the tourism industry will be affected by the significant infrastructural developments that are proposed and regional integration that will occur as a consequence (Koh and Kwok 2017).

Most Silk Road studies have focused on trade (Du et al. 2021), infrastructure development (Sikder et al. 2022a), cleaner forms of economic development (Wang et al. 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Sikder et al. 2022b), and China’s motivations behind the project (Ye 2021). However, despite this focus, more Silk Road related research is needed within the tourism context (Liu and Suck 2021), with a recent research tourism research trends study by Thirumaran et al. (2022) revealing very little has been done with a belt and road focus.

Due to the rich history of the Silk Road countries, there is great potential to develop cultural heritage tourism in the region. In this regard, China plans to invest \$500–700 million USD in Lanzhou for the Silk Road Cultural Heritage Expo City (Shephard 2016) and the XinJiang Yughur Autonomous region, which will act as an important new tourism hub within the new Silk Road. The New Silk Road initiative will increase cultural engagement, and provide new opportunities for event marketing (Kuchumov and Testina 2020).

Under the New Silk Road Initiative, the tourism industry between Azerbaijan and China has developed rapidly (Liu and Suck 2021). After signing a Memorandum of Understanding between Azerbaijan and China on March 1, 2019, for the Tourism Implementation Plan, Azerbaijan has actively developed a series of marketing strategies that promote their development of electronic visas, tourism

exhibitions, and direct flights with Beijing to attract Chinese tourists. Using a SWOT analysis, Liu and Suck (2021) explored the development strategy of tourism cooperation between the two countries. From this they found that the countries share a strong foundation and interests in deploying resources that nurture the development of tourism infrastructure that benefits both China and Azerbaijan. Though Azerbaijan may be lagging behind China in terms of its economic development, a strong Chinese tourist flow into the country might augur well for both partner countries and neighbouring BRI countries (Liu and Suck 2021).

Furthermore, in order to facilitate tourism development that is sustainable over the long term, it is important to investigate the attitudes of local stakeholders (Daye et al. 2020). If tourism development projects lead to economic and social benefits, residents will support the projects (Lundberg 2017; Zuo et al. 2017). Daye et al. (2020) investigated the attitudes that local stakeholders in Kazakhstan have towards the New Silk Road initiative and developments to the tourism sector in particular. When compared to other Central Asian countries along the Silk Road, Kazakhstan has relatively higher levels of economic performance (Daye et al. 2020). For other countries along the BRI, tourists in places like Kazakhstan are divided into two groups, namely European and Asian tourists. While European tourists are interested in culture and ecotourism, horse riding, and steppe safari, Asian travellers are interested in gambling, sightseeing, and shopping (Daye et al. 2020). The result of this study shows that although some stakeholders back tourism development under New Silk Road initiative, there are still some uncertainties due to the soft power diplomacy tactics often used by China.

In other empirical works Pechnaler et al. (2019) explored the tourism development work that had occurred in Georgia. In this context, the BRI initiative is proving to be a key conduit for tourism development, helping to not only grow the country into a regional tourism hub but also drive new employment opportunities and innovation among local businesses, such as small hotels. As part of this, rural tourism has continued to flourish. However, to achieve all of tourism development plans, Georgia should do more to cooperate and work with other competitors in the region, such as the Baku.

Finally, Kuchumov and Testina (2020) studied how participation in the New Silk Road initiative influences tourism flows. Their research highlighted the impact that increases in the flow of Chinese tourists will have on the development of higher quality Russian tourism offerings. However, development across the EEU does not occur without some degree of political tension, with Russia dominating the economic relationships that exist (Togt 2020). It is important to remember that all the EEU states were once part of the former Soviet Union and as such the Russian

Federation has a strong desire to rekindle old ties, something that is sadly all too evident with the Russian invasion and war in Ukraine. In other countries, the Russia has played a highly influential role in Georgia's and Chechnya's domestic politics, Kazakhstan's and Belarus' civil unrest, and territorial disputes between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In all of these geo-political situations, China has erred on the Russian side of diplomacy.

3 Analysis and Discussion

In this section we discuss how the Silk Road has affected the tourism sectors of Central Asian economies. Additionally, it identifies some of the divergent resources that link the EEU and can serve as an opportunity for the region. We also document the political implications that are involved with marketing the BRI tourism sector as a single entity.

As emerging economies, much has been said about the potential for the tourism sector to drive economic growth and prosperity. Khan et al. (2020) stated that for emerging economies, tourism has recently been strongly supported by the local governments. At the heart of this support has been the sector's ability to generate employment, alleviate poverty, increase national gross domestic product, and drive development across the rural communities (e.g., Jianping et al. 2014; Deloitte 2019). In its contemporary perspective, the revival of the Silk Road heritage is expected to encompass and encourage the creation of new tourist flows, ranging from independent travelers looking forward to experience diverse cultures and alternative forms of tourism through to the corporate business traveler. However, in order to realize this potential more needs to be developed and then launch effective strategies that cater to this diverse market opportunities.

Kazakhstan, as the EEU member that is nearest to China, its rich oil and mineral deposits in uranium, copper, lead, zinc and chromium have allowed it to develop at a faster rate than other member nations from Central Asia (Jianping et al. 2014). It is also more economically competitive, with Schwab (2018) noting that Kazakhstan placed 59th out of 140 in the 2018 Global Competitiveness Report. From a tourism perspective, the World Travel and Tourism Council (2019a) noted that the tourism sector contributed 5.7% to Kazakhstan's total GDP output. In other EEU nations, the tourism sector is also growing with Tajikistan experiencing 0.4% growth in the sector in 2018 (World Travel and Tourism Council 2019b).

From a destination management perspective, every country in the region is remarkably similar (Usmanova 2018) and there is significant growth opportunities right across the tourism sector. Currently, the area is only focusing on promoting four key tourism products, namely: medical

tourism, sports tourism, ecological-based tourism and lastly, archaeological-based tourism (Xu 2020). In fact, even though political instability has undoubtedly had a negative impact on the way these destinations are perceived by international tourists, these EEU economies can do much to realign their marketing objectives and develop marketing campaigns that focus on the region's unique advantages, using culture and geo-physical landscapes (Ibragimov et al. 2021).

In terms of resources, the EEU countries possess not only unique and natural landscapes with intricate ecosystems, but they are also well-known for some of the most diverse cultural heritage, as evidenced by the number of historical sites that have been recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Xu 2020). According to Kostopoulou et al. (2021), in the broader Silk Road region, some 138 of these cultural assets are identified as being tangible, of which, 76 are part of the Built Heritage category.

As mentioned earlier, the EEU region, the tourism sector has failed to reach its full potential (Xu 2020). This is despite the fact that there is an abundance in tourism resources and a large number of distinctive tourism assets that can cater for the demands of tourists worldwide (Usmanova 2018). In the case of Kyrgyzstan, while it has also been impacted by the pandemic, there potential remains largely untapped, Jenish (2018) noting that only 20 percent of their tourism potential has been realized.

In other works, Himaz (2021) explored the challenges of driving tourism development across the EEU. As part of their research, they highlight the significant problems that have been caused by poor Chinese backed infrastructure investments increasing corporate debt, and high levels of political corruption. They also highlight the risks of contagion, and how a prolonged economic downturn in China may have wider implications for countries such as Russia and the EEU. Development of the tourism sector, like any form of growth brings with it clear winners and losers, with many studies highlighting the inequitable role that development can bring (Heshmati et al. 2019; Kim and Wood 2020; Rhee et al. 2022). As such, it is imperative that any gains achieved are appropriately redistributed across an economy. A failure to do so, can result in increased inequality, poverty, and structural unemployment. Finally, the BRI may have a detrimental impact on the environment unless effective policy regulations are implemented.

In other works, Himaz (2021) noted that external factors such as substantial changes in regulatory frameworks, institutional fragility, trade patterns, and competition may hinder the ability for BRI countries to drive development across the tourism sector. Likewise, in the absence of appropriate institutional frameworks macroeconomic change

may exacerbate problems related to poverty, unemployment, and fiscal issues. Nonetheless, these shifts may also pave way for opportunities and in particular to grow foreign exchange reserves and in doing so address concerns around national debt. Finally, further research on the creation of a sustainable, responsible tourism sector across the BRI that acts with a 'moral conscience', might also be helpful (Gursoy and Altinay 2021).

4 Conclusion and Future Directions

While the BRI concept immediately conjures an economic and historical link that goes back several millennia, the modern opportunities that exist for the EEU are existing. While the Chinese economy has continued to flourish in recent years, its investments in the region have also helped many other countries to thrive. The EEU, while historically linked to Russia has opportunities through the BRI to tap into the enormous potential that China offers in driving the tourism sector.

The West, in particular the US, has cautioned many countries about the perils of engaging with China around the development of infrastructure projects that ultimately end up being so-called debt traps. Nonetheless, if the EEU countries are careful in how they manage their contractual agreements for the tourism infrastructure projects they can help to ensure that they do not fall victim to such traps and in doing so remain independent and sovereign decision makers. However, it is important that, at the same time, they do not turn their back on China and give themselves ever chance of fostering a successful and mutually beneficial relationship with China.

Despite similarities amongst them in tourism products, the EEU has an advantage of shared heritage and complementarity and in some instances, attractions of interests to Chinese tourists. In a recent 2019 document celebrating the fifth anniversary of the EEU, Tigran Sargsyan, the Chairman of the Eurasian Economic Council (EEC) highlighted the importance of people to people exchange

This entails cooperation in education, sports, tourism, and healthcare. We understand that nowadays these key spheres not only have economic significance, but are also important for our citizens. (Eurasian Economic Union 2019, p 51)

Though the remark is targeted to citizens within the EEU grouping, it is an important statement that the leaders are conscious of leveraging on their economic union to maximize benefits for the people. This same spirit of engaging China instead of peripheral to the region but as a member of the region itself, more intricate and deeper economic ties can meaningfully spill over to higher decibels of tourism activities.

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