

“Marco! Polo!” Have you heard noisy children call that out in a swimming pool as part of a popular game of tag? “Marco! Polo!” But the backstory is that the real, flesh-and-blood Marco Polo was one of the most famous travelers and merchants in world history. About a thousand years ago, Marco Polo learned experientially from his successful merchant family in Venice about a famous trade route—the Silk Road!

Ah, *the Silk Road*, capturing the imagination of many a town-bound youth for centuries! The very name brings with it a sense of exotic, exciting adventures across more than four thousand miles stretching from Europe to China. From well before the time of Christ when the Chinese Han Dynasty started venturing forth and lasting until the Ottoman Empire sacked Constantinople, many people, many goods, and many ideas traversed the various routes that comprised the full entirety of the Silk Road.

So, ancient consumerism supplied by the East...2,000 years ago? Silk, of course, but also perfumes, porcelain, and tea! Trade from the West? Horses, camels, gold and more. Yeah, gold exchanged for silk, supply and demand, in action! And the understanding of gunpowder crossed over between peoples, as did Buddhism and Christianity, each moving in opposite directions on the compass. Diseases traveled, too, you know, like COVID. And, yes, diplomats like Marco Polo traversed the Silk Road, trafficking in both politics and merchant goods. Ah, *that* Silk Road, a road effective at transporting many facets of life!

But, of course, this was way more than a simple road—it was a complex set of routes. But neither was it like a modern interstate highway system with smooth off-ramps with gas stations and snacks. Instead, marauding bandits and highwaymen abounded, so protection and middlemen were often needed. And the Silk Road was no version of an in-and-out, duty-free airport store! Yet, the human desire and drive for trade was relentless, trade that worked to become more and more *free* trade over the centuries. You see, for those many centuries, the Silk Road was a type of super-regional infrastructure for the supply chain for goods and for knowledge. But by the end of the 15th century, the Silk Road phenomenon had waned. ‘Course, there were several complex reasons for that. Some say it was primarily the fracturing of the Mongol Empire. Others say it was the sacking of Constantinople and defeat of the Byzantine Empire by the Turkish Ottoman Empire that then worked to shut down bustling activity between East and West.

But during the tenure of the Silk Road, oceans were themselves quite busy with the maritime trade that had been chugging right along—like the Roman Empire’s immense trading for spices from India and Arabia. That type of activity stretched for centuries too. Yes, another set of super-regional supply chains!

Mostly, what interrupts or disrupts such super-regional supply chains are control-seeking empires, socialist governments, and big wars...you know, sin activated on a mega- or macro-scale. But supply chains have persistently kept forming and re-forming, being activated to serve masses of people connecting with other masses of people...and all that was facilitated with the advent of extraordinary infrastructure. Like the Suez Canal in the Middle East and Panama Canal in Latin America. Deeper and greater ports. Megaships. Intermodal transfer. Storage and logistics infrastructure advancements. Wow!

Two of the more recent developments in such super-regional and global supply chains deserve our key attention. In 2013, the President of mainland China announced the “Belt and Road Initiative,” essentially a modern manifestation and re-building of that long-standing Silk Road of times past—but also including the maritime versions. Dozens of countries have signed on with China’s Initiative.

But many observers are quite wary that the Chinese Communist Party and Government is merely building a super-regional *empire*, and that many nations signing on are signing up for commercial and debt arrangements with the Chinese that are onerous enough to set a course for those nations to be subordinated throughout the Belt and Road Initiative super-region—you know, vassal states. But now, with China’s recent pullback in the early 2020s from its version of capitalism, just what is the true future of this super-regional Belt and Road Initiative where most of the world’s people live?

Next, let's look at the Digital World and its impact on supply chains and, really, life in general! You talk about radicalization in the fullest sense of the word! Manifesting well beyond any particular phrases like "the Web" or "software," "technological advances" or "Big Tech," the Digital World serves all other parts of the supply chain even while it has come to be a manifestation of this chain in and of itself.

Take one good example, Elon Musk's Starlink, the satellite internet arm of Elon Musk's company SpaceX. Incredibly, Musk stepped in to provide internet services to Ukraine when Russia was working to effectively destroy Ukraine's IT infrastructure. Hmm. Interesting. Hey, what government or consortium would step up to provide that? Well, *that* didn't happen. So, was that due to lack of satellites? Lack of will? Bureaucracy? The iconoclastic Musk stepped up to the plate while millions of Ukrainians were in dire need as the bullies from Russia destroyed lives and all types of supply chain infrastructure that are necessary for the basics of living. No matter what else Elon Musk may or may not do—bravo to Starlink!

Then take Apple, a company clearly connected with the Chinese government. Apple's high profitability from its iPhones is significantly due to those phones being reliably made in China. And when some Chinese rose up recently to protest China's long, severe, zero-tolerance policy for COVID, the reports were stunning—Apple actually turned off the protestors' ability to use Apple's AirDrop, that is, killing their ability to continue to privately communicate without government eavesdropping on every word communicated among protestors. This new AirDrop restriction was apparently limited by Apple to China, which was already the only nation Apple was allowing to store their citizens' communications.

And so it goes, with this Apple example and elsewhere. Make no mistake. The Digital World—the supply chain of information and opinions—is not so free around the world. And that can have and does have and will continue to have very serious consequences for billions of people. Yes, the limiting of freedom.

Still, the physical world represented by the Silk Road of past ages as well as the Digital World represented by Starlink and Apple today are now meshed together in astoundingly impactful ways. Take a typical consumer experience with Amazon in America—it's an amazing Silk Road of many millions of products arriving tomorrow or even today, delivered wherever the consumer wants. And that's undergirded by an amazing Digital World of using Amazon's website to search, order, set up delivery, pay, track, and even return millions of products. Yes, Amazon is a "Silk Road" and "Digital World" hybrid!

Yeah, the Silk Road (that is, physical trade) and the Digital World are now routinely intertwined as infrastructure in many countries. And that's truly marvelous! But how about those clouds on the horizon? Will they bring soothing rain and gentle moisture to parched earth and thirsty people? Are those in power in governments and key companies focused like a laser on the freedom and well-being of both the princes and the paupers alike? Just as Marco Polo's time saw the rich benefits but also the dangerous trek of the Silk Road, citizens *today* are seeing important implications of the Digital World.

A final word or two about the Silk Road and Digital World. The supply chain for the Kingdom of God was defined and established a couple of millennia back with Jesus Christ Himself commissioning us all to do our part: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20 ESV) Hey, that's way beyond just one country or a super-regional infrastructure. Yes, that's a global mandate that has seen growth in numbers of Christians worldwide to the tune of 500 million new believers the past hundred years, many of those in the so-called "10/40 window" for missions strategy that overlays much of the Silk Road super-region.

Two big questions loom. While Jesus told us that the laborers in global missions are few, are those workers themselves fully deploying both Silk Road *and* Digital World strategies? Even while we rightly dine with unbelievers in humble environs worldwide, are we effectively "Starlinking" our way forward, too? Yes, we must craft an ever-fruitful Silk Road plus Digital World hybrid! Wow...what a privilege!

