

First 'Silk Road' train from Britain leaves for China

STANFORD-LE-HOPE, England: The first-ever freight train from Britain to China started its mammoth journey on Monday along a modern-day "Silk Road" trade route as Britain eyes new opportunities after it leaves the European Union.



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The 32-container train, around 600 metres (656 yards) long, left the vast London Gateway container port laden with whisky, soft drinks and baby products, bound for Yiwu on the east coast of China.

It was seen off on its 18-day, 12,000-kilometre (7,500-mile) journey with a string quartet, British and Chinese flags, and speeches voicing hope that it will cement a new golden age of trade between the two countries as Brexit negotiations loom.

The first train from China to Britain arrived on 18 January 2017, filled with clothes and other retail goods, and Monday's departure was the first journey in the other direction.

Cheaper than air freight

The rail route is cheaper than air freight and faster than sea freight, offering logistics companies a new middle option.

After the last three containers were lifted onto the wagons, the driver gave a thumbs-up and tooted his horn as he got the train rolling at the port in Stanford-le-Hope, east of London.

"Restoring the ancient Silk Road as a means by which China, north Europe and now the UK can exchange goods is an important and exciting initiative," said Xubin Feng, the chairman of Yiwu Timex Industrial Investment, which is co-running the service.

"We have great faith in the UK as an export nation and rail provides an excellent alternative for moving large volumes of goods over long distances faster."

The train will go through the Channel Tunnel before travelling across France, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan before heading into China.

The containers, which also contain vitamins and pharmaceutical products, will be taken off and put on different wagons as they leave Poland, as the former Soviet Union countries use a wider rail gauge.

The containers switch back to standard gauge wagons at the Chinese border, an operation that typically takes around two hours.

Boosting trade with China - top priority

Boosting trade with China is a top priority for Britain as it leaves the EU and becomes free to strike its own trade deals.

London was hailing the first export train as part of its "global Britain" plan, recalibrating its post-EU trading outlook.

Rupert Soames, prime minister Theresa May's business ambassador for infrastructure and transport, told AFP that the new route was "positive and timely".

"I genuinely think that this is quite a historic day," said Soames, a grandson of World War II prime minister Winston Churchill.

"In some quarters now, globalisation is seen as a bad word. But here you see trade in all its glory and possibilities."

Annual growth rate

China was Britain's seventh-biggest export market last year, behind the United States, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Ireland, and Switzerland.

Some 13.5 billion of trade headed to China, according to UK government statistics, with an average annual growth rate of 12.9% since 2006.

In terms of imports, China is Britain's third-biggest market after Germany and the United States, with trade worth 35.8 billion last year.

The freight train is part of China's "One Belt, One Road" programme announced in 2013, reviving the ancient Silk Road trading routes to Europe.

Source: AFP