Towards an Asian Eurasia: Mackinder’s heartland theory and the return of China to Eurasia

How China’s policies have opened a new chapter in the struggle for Eurasia

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Original article

Article history:
Received: 16 May 2016
Accepted: 28 June 2017
Published: 25 September 2017

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Peer review:
Double blind

Publisher:
Veruscript, Unit 41, Pall Mall Deposit, 124-128 Barby Road, London, W10 6BL, UK

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Keywords:
China; Central Asia; Russian foreign policy; Mackinder; geopolitics

Citation:

Link to this article:
https://www.veruscript.com/a/CRZXUW/
Towards an Asian Eurasia: Mackinder’s heartland theory and the return of China to Eurasia

How China’s policies have opened a new chapter in the struggle for Eurasia

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Abstract

Mackinder’s theory of geopolitics pitted naval powers such as the United Kingdom and later the United States, against land-based powers such as Germany and Russia for control of the Eurasian Heartland. In the context of the Cold War, the heartland was often defined as the Soviet Union and these ideas would play a crucial role in influencing American strategies towards the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). However, all of these fell apart with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which in turn appeared to grant the United States control over Eurasia and perhaps over the fabled World Island. Despite this turn of events, it would also appear that no one power possessed control over the region. Therefore, the core argument of this essay is that it is China rather than Russia that is the land power of the 21st century. This is partially due to changes in the Post Cold War international system, primarily those in Sino-Russian relations, as well as China’s increasing centrality to the former Soviet states. Therefore, in order to explore this question, the study will attempt to utilise Mackinder’s theories outlined in “Democratic Ideals and Reality” in the context of Chinese policy towards Eurasia, in order to determine how China contributes as much to the concept of Eurasia as Russia did. By doing so, China is following a precedent in Eurasia that predates Mackinder’s theories and Russian involvement in the region by several centuries, thus posing a new source of experience from the 20th-century power politics that had dominated Eurasia for the past century.

Introduction

What is Eurasia? If such a body exists, how does one control it? These two questions have dominated the minds of scholars of geopolitics from Mackinder in the years before the First World War. This continued with the strategies followed by Germany during the Second World War, as epitomised by Haushofer, before moving to American strategies of the Cold War and afterwards, something that is reflected in Brzezinski’s The Grand Chessboard. These theorists all advocated that their respective countries should seek to control Eurasia either to challenge the dominant hegemon or to preserve their hegemony by preventing a rival from emerging from this region to challenge their largely maritime power.

Traditionally, the definition of Eurasia has largely been conflated with Russia and previously the Soviet Union.¹ This was largely due to the various incarnations of Russia straddling both Europe

and Asia. Another possible reason for this was that the primary challenges to the maritime hegemons, such as Britain and the United States, largely emerged from this region.\(^2\) Finally, as Mackinder himself noted, the nation in control of the geographical pivot controlled Eurasia and was thus able to potentially become the dominant global power.\(^3\)

However, these traditional notions of Eurasia have largely ignored the other potential contenders for the mantle of ruler of Eurasia. Control of this region was particularly crucial for the strategies of the successive incarnations of the Chinese empire, most notably in the cases of the Ming and the Manchu Qing dynasties.\(^4\) These experiences have been largely ignored in the primarily Russo-centric established discourse on the subject of Eurasia. Even in the 21st century, control of this region has lost none of its significance to China as Chinese interest in the region grows with the One Belt, One Road initiative, which follows in the footsteps of China’s predecessors.

By applying Mackinder’s theories to Chinese foreign policy in Eurasia, both past and present, this article seeks to argue that China constitutes as much to the perception of contemporary Eurasia as Russia has done. This contribution also illustrates that control or management of this region is as crucial to Chinese policies as it had been for German, Russian and American policy before. In this sense, this article also seeks to argue that in the present day, China can equally claim the mantle of the Heartland as it seeks to challenge the largely maritime American hegemony, in a contemporary revision of Mackinder’s theory. By examining this, it is possible to see another precedent in Mackinder’s theory that had largely been forgotten due to the focus on German and Russian designs for the region.\(^5\)

**Review of the literature on China in Eurasia**

In line with the previous themes and potential dimensions of Chinese engagement in Eurasia, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the established literature on the subject. The majority of the literature often subscribes to one of the dimensions outlined earlier, with the dominant theme being the potential opportunities and challenges that Chinese engagement provides for Russian interests in the region. This again serves to better determine the form that China’s increased engagement with Eurasia takes. By doing so, it will be easier to determine how Mackinder’s theories can be applied or whether these theories can be applied at all.

**The threat to the United States**

As earlier stated, one of the primary dimensions of China’s approach to Eurasia is the potential threats and challenges that it may prove to American interests and maritime power. Indeed, the challenge towards the United States is the primary focus for much of the Chinese perceptions of Chinese policy towards the region as illustrated by Lin Limin. Limin claims that the United States is currently the geopolitical centre and that Asia will become the new geopolitical centre.\(^6\) Indeed, as earlier stated, Limin appears to be largely skeptical about Mackinder’s theories by illustrating the failures of the Soviet Union as well as the assumption that land and sea powers will always be destined to conflict with each other.\(^7\)

However, there are also echoes of Mackinder in Limin’s piece despite Limin’s disdain of Mackinder’s theories. While Limin continues Deng Xiaoping’s claim that China will never seek hegemony, he also claims that the United States will always seek to challenge Chinese policy

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\(^7\) Limin and Ying, “World geopolitics,” 11.
towards Central Asia. Should a conflict between China and the United States over power and influence in Eurasia emerge, Mackinder’s theories would be appropriate to explore the dimensions of China’s engagement with Eurasia.

The potential for a Sino-United States rivalry over the Eurasian chessboard appears to be a key component of China’s engagement with Eurasia. Limin’s claims of American attempts to curb Chinese influence is continued by Shi Yinhang. Shi claims that China feared that the War on Terror would be used by the United States as a pretext to pursue wider geopolitical objectives in Central Asia aimed at curbing Chinese influence in the region.

On the other hand, Shi’s depiction of the alignment of Sino-Russian interests also illustrates the threat that China poses to the United States. Should this relationship grow closer and Sino-American competition grows stronger, Mackinder’s theories can provide a degree of utility, particularly over the control of Eurasia and the conflict between land and sea powers.

It would then appear that the American challenge outlined by Shi is aimed at preventing this from emerging.

The dimensions of a Sino-Russian relationship to challenge the United States in Eurasia are outlined by Alexei Voskressenski, who claims that the post-Cold War era has seen political strength being couched in economic rather than in military terms. As a result, Russia has become an economic partner for China against this backdrop. This relationship is presented as a potential balance to the United States, which appears to be in line with the concept of a united Eurasia against North America, one of the themes in the modern Russian perspective of Eurasia as well as echoing Mackinder’s depiction of conflicting land and sea powers. In this sense, it is the potential for a Sino-Russian alliance to balance American maritime power that demonstrates the continued utility of these theories.

In line with this, Chung Ching-peng suggests that the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) can serve as a possible means to challenge American hegemony. Chung claims that the purpose of the organisation’s interest-based cooperation is to defend against American moves in Eurasia as well as serving as a bulwark against North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO’s) eastward expansion, a goal that complements Russian objectives in the region. This serves to further illustrate how challenging American dominance is one of China’s primary aspirations in Eurasia as well as the new lease of life lent to Mackinder’s theories in the face of the potential Sino-Russian challenge that Eurasia poses for the United States.

The potential for a Sino-Russian bloc in Eurasia is raised by Bobo Lo, asserting that it can serve as a potential countermeasure to the United States. This is in keeping with the common perception of the SCO as an anti-NATO bloc, which in turn serves to counter NATO expansion into the post-Soviet sphere. At the same time, Lo claims that Russia can potentially act as a bridge between East and West and that the SCO can potentially balance Chinese and Russian objectives. Should this venture be successful, China may again be following in the footsteps of Mackinder’s theories by forming ties with Russia to dominate the Eurasian Heartland in order to challenge American maritime power.

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9 Shi Yinhang, “Great power politics in Central Asia Today,” in Islam, Oil and Geopolitics, 2007: 165.
11 Voskressenski, Russia and China, 185.
The theme of the SCO as a Sino-Russian challenge is alluded to by Shankhal Abilov, who asserts that the alliance is a means for Sino-Russian rapprochement. The alliance plays a role in the “New Great Game” in Central Asia, which Abilov claims is based on the goal of controlling the natural resources of the Caspian Basin where once the old Great Game was based on the Indian subcontinent. In reference to Mackinder, Abilov claims that the heartland overlaps with the Caspian basin, which in turn highlights the continued utility of these theories as well as how Chinese engagement can challenge the United States by cooperating with Russia.

The potential threat that the SCO poses for the United States is highlighted by Gene Germanovich, who claims that one of the purposes of the alliance is to challenge American interests in Central Asia. Germanovich also claims that there is an assumption that the SCO may intervene in a member state under threat from the region’s security challenges, an assertion that echoes the Warsaw Pact under the Brezhnev doctrine. However, he asserts that opinion is largely divided over how the SCO can pose a threat to the United States, claiming that a clash in Sino-Russian energy interests could undermine the alliance.

In this sense, the SCO illustrates China’s aspiration to challenge the United States although it is still unclear whether this challenge can manifest itself. In this sense, China’s engagement with Eurasia is one of the ways in which China poses a growing challenge to American interests and hegemony globally. This is typically shown in the apparent attempts by the United States to curb China’s presence in Eurasia. By doing so, it appears that the current system is reverting to Mackinder’s era since the primary imperative for the maritime powers is to prevent a single, unified land power from emerging in Eurasia. One of the ways that this could be achieved is by a stronger Sino-Russian relationship, which also serves as one of the other dimensions for China’s growing engagement with Eurasia.

Dangers and opportunities for Russia

In the broadest of terms, China’s engagement with Eurasia has two possible consequences for Russia. The first of these is the potential economic and strategic opportunities that China may provide for Russia, particularly in the light of both countries’ desire to challenge American hegemony as well as mutual security concerns over Islamic militancy and separatism.

On the other hand, Chinese engagement is also a potential threat to Russian interests in the region, particularly over the fears that China may eclipse Russia in its own sphere of influence. Both of these can be illustrated in Mackinder’s depiction of how a land power can gain hegemony over the heartland.

The potential for a stronger Sino-Russian relationship is often highlighted by Russian theorists such as Nikita Lomagin. Lomagin asserts that China’s model of development could be a role model for Russia and that China is viewed positively by Russia. In regard to the New Silk Road, Lomagin appears to emphasise the more geopolitical angle when he asserts that the primary goal of this initiative is to lessen China’s dependence on maritime routes such as the Malacca straits which are largely dominated by American maritime power.

17 Abilov, “The new great game over the Caspian region,” 32.
This relationship is also highlighted by Graeme Herd, who claims that Russian and Chinese values, such as collectivism, often overlap with each other.\(^{23}\) This overlap is furthered by the fact that the United States is a mutual opponent for both China and Russia. Therefore, a closer Sino-Russian relationship is required to meet the goal of challenging American hegemony, thus following in the footsteps of Mackinder. However, Head also suggests that China is a potential threat for Russia as well as the United States when he claims that the Chinese and Russian elites have a warm relationship with each other while the public have a colder relationship,\(^{24}\) which suggests that Russia fears Chinese engagement. Indeed, these fears have been reinforced by China becoming Kazakhstan’s biggest trading partner, which highlights the potential for China to challenge Russia in its own sphere of influence.

It is the potential challenge that Chinese engagement in Eurasia poses for Russian interests that highlights the continued utility of Mackinder’s theories. This can be seen in Sayragul Matikeeva’s claim that Central Asia is the true location of the Geographical Pivot although there is still some debate over this location.\(^{25}\) This debate over this has been affected by China’s development, which Matikeeva believes will move the pivot eastwards.\(^{26}\) Such a notion appears to be in line with Chinese perceptions of these theories, which make a similar argument about Asia becoming a geopolitical core.

Matikeeva also asserts that the challenge posed by Chinese engagement can be seen in Beijing’s growing ties with Kirgizstan. Here, she alludes to China’s historical attempts to incorporate the nation as well as the rest of Central Asia into China’s sphere of influence.\(^{27}\) By doing so, Matikeeva believes that China will become the heartland described by Mackinder.\(^{28}\) It is due to such a claim that China is likely to become the land power of the 21st century as well as further illustrating the continued utility of Mackinder’s theories.

While Abilov’s work largely focused on how Chinese engagement in Eurasia can challenge the United States, he also illustrates how it can be equally problematic for Russian interests in Central Asia. This can be seen in Russian fears over Chinese economic interests in Central Asia, which is viewed as a sweeping move towards Chinese economic hegemony in the region at the expense of Russia.\(^{29}\) In this sense, Chinese engagement can be seen as a potential challenge for both American and Russian interests in the region as well as illustrating a potential shift in the utility of Mackinder’s theories should China eclipse Russia in the former Soviet states.

This eclipse of Russian influence is continued by Kirill Nourzhanov, who quotes a Kazakh analyst’s prediction that China will eclipse Russia in Central Asia by 2020 as a result of economic and demographic factors.\(^{30}\) In keeping with much of the literature on Chinese foreign policy, Nourzhanov attributes China’s gains in Central Asia to Russian disinterest in the region after the fall of the Soviet Union.\(^{31}\) At the same time, Nourzhanov suggests that there will be a stronger Sino-Russian relationship since Russia considers China to be an important ally.\(^{32}\) However, unlike Lomagin, Nourzhanov suggests a different motive in that both China and Russia seek to preserve the status quo in Central Asia in regard to militancy and separatism. Thus, the Sino-Russian relationship has a defensive as well as an aspirational angle.

\(^{24}\) Herd, “Living the Chinese Dream,” 229.
\(^{27}\) Matikeeva, “Mackinder’s Legacy,” 25.
\(^{28}\) Ibid.
\(^{29}\) Abilov, “The new great game over the Caspian region,” 47.
\(^{31}\) Nourzhanov, “Central Asia’s Domestic Stability,” 151.
The possible dangers that Chinese engagement in Eurasia poses for Russia is outlined by Aleksandr Lukin, who asserts that China is often perceived as a threat in Russia’s Far Eastern border regions.\(^{33}\) This serves to underline the centrality of China’s land borders to Chinese engagement with the region, something that has a largely contentious legacy in the region, particularly in regard to the lands that the Russian Empire acquired from China in the 19th century under a series of unequal treaties.

Despite these issues, Lukin also claims that a Sino-Russian alliance in Eurasia is inevitable due to the geopolitics of the region.\(^{34}\) This again appears to tap into the theme of a unified Eurasia challenging the dominance of the United States, which again serves to echo Mackinder’s theory of the challenge the heartland posed for British naval hegemony. At the same time, Lukin appears to indicate the influence of the Chinese economic model, as codified in Stefan Halper’s *The Beijing Consensus*, when he claims that China can be an example for Russia to follow.\(^{35}\) It is this depiction of China as a threat and a role model that illustrates how Chinese engagement is both an opportunity and a threat to Russian interests in the region.

On the other hand, Russia also views China as a potential balance to American hegemony as well as an ally. This is reflected in Laruelle’s claim that Russia is looking away from the West and towards Asia.\(^{36}\) China’s model of market economics and political autocracy is also appealing towards Moscow. Another direct reference to Mackinder can be seen in Laruelle’s depiction of Panarin’s “universal state,” which advocates a union between China and Russia, which reflects the possibility of Eurasia being unified by a single land empire\(^{37}\) to counter the threats posed by the West and Islam. Indeed, this also serves to highlight the more defensive aspects of Chinese engagement in the region.

In all, the Russian dimension of China’s increasing engagement in Eurasia is often depicted as a chance for closer relations between the two in order to counter American hegemony. This serves to render Mackinder’s theory of particular utility since this will be in line with the predictions made in the *Geographical Pivot of History*. However, this is largely limited by the potential eclipse of Russia by China, which in turn makes it more difficult to unify Eurasia under a single power.

### The aspirations of Chinese engagement in Eurasia

While Chinese engagement in Eurasia can be interpreted as part of the wider challenge it poses for American hegemony and an opportunity for Russia, it can also be seen as an expression of China’s global aspirations. This is linked with the challenge to the United States since one of China’s aspirations is to challenge the dominant international system. Thus, Eurasia provides China with the means to carry out its great power ambitions.

China’s aspirations in Eurasia are initially outlined by Thomas Zimmerman, who cites the New Silk Road initiative as an example of China’s desire to reshape the political order.\(^{38}\)

Indeed, this is also furthered by the utilisation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in the $40 billion Silk Road fund, which may be seen as an attempt to eclipse the traditional American led institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF).\(^{39}\) Thus, Chinese engagement in Eurasia is an example of China’s global ambitions to challenge the present inter-
national system as well as an attempt to bypass the established American led international institutions.

These aspirations are furthered by Pan Guang’s depiction of the SCO, which he claims plays a role in the dialogue between civilisations since its membership includes several major civilisations. While Pan highlights the SCO’s role in anti-terrorism, which appears to be in line with the more defensive dimensions of Chinese engagement, he also illustrates how these concerns can be utilised to facilitate economic cooperation, which can be viewed as either an example of China’s global ambitions or simply part of China’s strategy for economic gain. It is therefore possible that Chinese engagement can extend beyond one dimension.

This claim is also continued by Stephen Blank, who claims that the SCO acts as a trading bloc as well as a military alliance. The centrality of Central Asia to Chinese policy is also highlighted by Blank’s assertion that the region reflects China’s global strategy and wider ambitions. Such an ambition can be seen in China’s desire to create a prosperous neighbourhood under Chinese auspices. This aspiration also illustrates the overlap between Chinese aspirations and the pursuit of economic development. This can also be interpreted as a potential threat since this involves the creation of a political and economic bloc that poses a possible challenge to American dominance. Should this come to pass, Mackinder’s theories would be well placed to explore this.

The centrality of the Belt and the Road initiative to China’s aspirations in Eurasia is furthered by Li Mingjiang, who asserts that the project will be an important part of Xi Jinping’s foreign policy legacy and claims that the project has been largely overlooked in the study of Chinese foreign policy. While this project is often ignored in favour of the traditional case studies of Chinese foreign policy, such as East Asia, it nevertheless illustrates the importance of Eurasia to China in the light of the policy to “look West” which the initiative is an example of.

The strategic aspirations of the project are also highlighted by Li when he claims that the One Road One Belt initiative is the closest thing that Beijing has to a grand strategy. This stands contrary to the established views on Chinese foreign policy initiatives, which typically viewed Chinese policy as little more than a cynical attempt to pursue economic objectives. While the motivations behind the project are largely economic, there is little doubt that it also serves as an example of a Chinese grand strategy for Eurasia.

The claim that the One Road One Belt initiative is an example of China’s grand strategy is stated by Li Xing and Wang Wan. In reference to Mackinder’s theories, they claim that the Silk Road is consistent with the heartland and draw parallels between the initiative and the troubled Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP). This comparison raises the prospects of China becoming a major actor in the region, something that the American withdrawal from the TPP provides an opportunity for should Beijing decide to play an increasingly central role in the region.

In further keeping with Mackinder, Li and Wang assert that the New Silk Road and the TPP are symbolic of the clash between land and sea routes, the former of which they believe to be superior to the latter. This serves to further underline China’s imperative for an Eurasian strategy.

40 Pan Guang, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Challenges, opportunities and prospects,” in Islam, Oil and Geopolitics, 2015, 236.
44 Li Mingjiang, “China’s One Belt One Road initiative: New round of opening up?” RSIS Commentary, No. 50, March 2015.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
48 Li and Wang, “The Silk Road Economic Belt,” 171.
in order to further integrate it into the region. At the same time, they also claim that the initiative goes hand in hand with the “China Dream,” which indicates the more aspirational and exceptionalist elements of China’s recent stance as well as the desire for economic development. It is due to this that the One Road One Belt initiative illustrates China’s aspirations in Eurasia as well as how Chinese policy follows the path of Mackinder’s theories.

The implications of China’s aspirations in Eurasia are covered by Antonia Habova, who asserts that the One Road One Belt initiative has the potential to reshuffle the established order in Central Asia. In keeping with the established literature, Habova claims that the initiative is part of China’s long-term strategy in the region, which is to eclipse the United States and to reinforce the Renminbi as an international currency. Such a move also appears to be in line with the depictions of the SCO, which also is a part of this wider strategy to challenge American ambitions in the region and on the global stage.

At the same time, Habova appears to depict the initiative as an opportunity for Russian interests while being a challenge for the United States. This is due to the apparent overlap between Chinese and Russian objectives and American concerns over these mutual interests forming a coherent alliance. By doing so, it would again appear that China’s engagement with Eurasia reflects Beijing’s aspiration to challenge Washington as well as illustrating Mackinder’s theories by pursuing closer ties with Moscow.

The more aspirational elements of Chinese initiatives, such as the SCO, is further illustrated by Chung Chien Peng’s assertion that the organisation is an expression of China’s “new regionalism” (新区域主义). Such a phenomenon suggests a wider move away from the traditional models of regionalism, as symbolised by the European Union, which also suggests the wider challenge that China poses. This model is largely dependent on coordination between member states and free trade, which has become particularly notable in China’s aspiration to become the vanguard of this in the face of American protectionism. In this sense, China’s aspirations in Eurasia are to create a form of EEZ in the region rather than creating a unified empire as many other states have attempted in the past.

The theme of the SCO as an illustration of China’s ambitions in Eurasia is also highlighted by Jia Qingguo, who claims that the alliance is an example of China’s growing interest in multilateral diplomacy. This is again indicative of Beijing’s increasing willingness to forego economic goals in favour of political and strategic objectives. Jia also asserts that the SCO has grown stronger in recent years, particularly over the security concerns in the region, and as the alliance’s power rises, so too does China’s expectations for it.

Possibly the most significant aspect of Jia’s assertions is that the SCO is an example of China’s willingness to show leadership in Eurasia. Beijing has often been criticised for avoiding these responsibilities, instead pursuing a policy of non-intervention. However, the case of the SCO is indicative of a potential shift in these policies as well as indicating that leadership in Eurasia is one of China’s aspirations in the region. In this sense, the SCO is an example of China’s aspirations in Eurasia as well as indicating the continued utility of Mackinder’s theories should the alliance continue to grow in strength and coherence.

49 Li and Wang, “The Silk Road Economic Belt,” 172.
50 Antonia Habova, “Silk Road economic belt: China’s Marshall plan, pivot to Eurasia or China’s way of foreign policy,” KSI Transactions on Knowledge Society, 2015, 8 (1): 64.
51 Habova, “Silk Road economic belt,” 65.
52 Habova, “Silk Road economic belt,” 68.
Therefore, the view of Chinese engagement in Eurasia as an illustration of China’s global aspirations appears to overlap with the dimensions of Chinese policy in the region outlined earlier. This is often bound up with the challenge that China poses as well as China’s global quest for economic development. Indeed, this is particularly significant since economic and military powers are often interlinked judging by the rules of great power politics outlined in Paul Kennedy’s The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. In this sense, Chinese engagement is indicative of China’s desire to challenge the United States as well as to achieve economic growth.

The middle kingdom under Siege: The defensive angle of China in Eurasia

On the other hand, it is equally possible to interpret China’s engagement with Eurasia as simply another phase in China’s centuries long quest to manage the threats emanating from its near abroad rather than being a part of a Chinese grand strategy. In the broadest of terms, these threats come in the form of American involvement in the region as well as the potential for instability in Central Asia.

These threats are initially illustrated by Michael Clarke who depicts China’s concerns over the role of United States foreign policy during the War on Terror. One of Beijing’s fears is the potential for the United States to use Islamic militancy as a pretext to curb China’s aspirations in Central Asia. At the same time, if this was one of the fears for China’s policy in Central Asia, it appears to have largely disappeared with the apparent souring of relations between the United States and the Central Asian republics.

The SCO’s emphasis on security is highlighted by Germanovich, who asserts that this is the primary basis for the alliance. He asserts that the SCO can potentially become the “sheriff of Central Asia” in line with his previous assumption over the potential for the alliance to intervene in a threatened member state. This appears to be in line with the pressure on China to become a more proactive player internationally as illustrated by the People’s Liberation Army’s deployment to central Russia for exercises, the first time that a significant Chinese force has been deployed far from China’s boarders. It is this move that indicates China’s willingness to become a more proactive actor in a bid to face the security challenges posed by Central Asia.

The common security fears that influence Chinese engagement in Eurasia are also highlighted by Chung alongside China’s aspirations in the region. As with many of the more defensive elements of Chinese engagement, Chung depicts the SCO as a means to manage the threat of militant Islam in Central Asia. This threat has led many Central Asian states to endorse Chinese as well as Russian initiatives, such as the SCO, in order to manage their own issues with fundamentalist Islam. In the face of a potential NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, the management of this threat will be the first serious test for the overall effectiveness of the alliance.

While the desire to challenge American hegemony is often referred to as an example of China’s aspirations in Central Asia, Chung appears to suggest that this is also an example of Chinese security concerns in the region.

This was particularly apparent in Beijing’s tepid response to NATO’s intervention in the region, which was perceived as a possible cover for American ambitions in the region. This in turn

64 Chung, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,” 995.
indicates the continued centrality of the Eurasian heartland to Chinese foreign policy as well as the continuation of the power politics depicted by Mackinder despite the largely reduced American presence in the region.

At the same time, Chung also appears to indicate Beijing’s willingness to occasionally favour political over economic objectives in recent years. This can be seen in the fact that the SCO was the first organisation created by China that was not purely economic in nature. Such a move is likely to continue as China seeks to play a greater role in the region since this requires the pursuit of political and security goals over economic objectives. It is due to this that the SCO serves as an illustration of the changes in Chinese policy as well as a means to manage the challenges of China’s border lands.

The spirit of Mackinder’s theories in regard to the more defensive aspects of Chinese engagement in Eurasia are raised by Zheng Yongnian, who claims that China’s strategy is based on land rather than on maritime geopolitics. In keeping with China’s traditional priorities, Zheng continues the theme of China’s borders as an influence on Chinese engagement, which he claims have become international rather than domestic in regard to the potential threats to Xinjiang province, China’s gateway to Eurasia. This in turn requires Chinese engagement with its neighbouring states in order to manage these threats. At the same time, Zheng appears to follow John Darwin’s view that China is the only one of the previous would be masters of Eurasia to remain in the region, asserting that China’s modern borders are those of the Qing empire and asserting that China’s “internal coherence” was responsible for this, which he claims that the Western powers lacked. In this sense, it is the largely land-based focus of China’s strategies in Eurasia that indicates how these policies are reflective of China’s centuries long quest to control its borders as well as the continued utility of Mackinder’s theories.

The more defensive dimensions of Chinese engagement are also highlighted by Abilov in his assertion that this is the primary motivation for China and Russia’s interest in the SCO. Abilov links Chinese engagement with its concerns over Xinjiang province. At the same time, the more defensive aspects of Chinese engagement are also connected to China’s economic concerns, particularly since Beijing’s desire to access the Caspian Basin reflects its imperative to wean China off Middle Eastern oil, which is transported by maritime routes that can be threatened by a potential blockade. It is this assertion that illustrates the continued utility of Mackinder’s theories as land powers seek to prevent blockades imposed by their maritime rivals.

The potential American threat to Chinese engagement in Eurasia is further highlighted by Ricky Yue. Utilising language reminiscent of Mackinder, Yue asserts that the largely abandoned American “Pivot to Asia” is largely influenced by these theories, particularly in regard to the attempts of a maritime blockade of a land power. This is furthered by Beijing’s imperative to prevent American attempts at containing China. Such moves continue to underline the utility of Mackinder’s theory in the face of these attempts of containment and counter containment.

In keeping with this theme, Yue also claims that Mackinder predicted the challenge that China would pose to the United States. This is not only largely in reference to the “Chinese organised by

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69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
72 Abilov, “The new great game over the Caspian region,” 34.
73 Abilov, “The new great game over the Caspian region,” 51.
75 Yue, “China in Myanmar,” 364.
Japanese” in the closing paragraph of Mackinder’s book but also claims that China will “hold the balance.” The overall utility of Mackinder is continued with the threat of a maritime blockade and how the One Belt, One Road programme could potentially alleviate this by weaning Chinese trade off maritime routes by the construction of land routes. In this sense, it is the security dimensions as well as the aspirations of Chinese policy that illustrate the continued utility of Mackinder’s theories.

The centrality of security concerns to the SCO as well as for Chinese engagement in Eurasia is highlighted by Zhao Huasheng, who asserts that the purpose of the alliance is to counter American unilateralism as well as Islamic militancy. Zhao claims that security concerns are the primary motivation for many of the SCO’s member states, as well as providing Russia with a chance to interact with Asia. This in turn means that the alliance is an opportunity for Chinese cooperation with Russia and Central Asia as well as a means to balance Chinese and Russian interests.

At the same time, Zhao also continues the theme of the security challenges emanating from China’s borderlands. This issue has motivated China’s interest in the SCO as well as guarding against what Beijing perceives to be American encroachment in Eurasia. Therefore, the SCO is indicative of China’s centuries long challenge to manage the threats from its border states.

China’s fears are also reflected in Colin McKenna’s depiction of the “three evils” of separatism, terrorism and extremism. This manifested itself in China’s initial support for the intervention in Afghanistan before Sino-American power politics overrode this. Indeed, it is due to these concerns alongside the region’s natural resources that augments the importance of Central Asia to Chinese engagement. It would appear that there is an overlap between the economic and defensive dimensions in China’s approach to Eurasia.

The Uighur dimension of Chinese engagement is raised by Gaye Christoffersen, who argues that the War on Terror has fragmented the Uighur community. Another of China’s fears is also highlighted by Christoffersen who claims that Uighur separatists seek American patronage, something that China fears that the United States is willing to do. This assertion echoes the assistance provided by the United States to Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion, a move that has haunted the region for decades.

However, it would also appear that the potential for such a move has been somewhat hampered with the apparent failure of pan Turkism alongside the diminished American presence in the region. Therefore, it would also appear that Central Asia and Xinjiang prefer to consolidate their own identities rather than embark on such an endeavour.

Therefore, the primary concerns of the more defensive angle of Chinese engagement are defined by the United States and radical Islam. With the American presence largely confined to Afghanistan, China now largely focuses on the problem of separatism and militancy, which is codified in the SCO charter. The defensive aspects are also connected to the economic dimensions in Chinese policy since China’s economic growth is partially dependent on the access to Central Asia’s natural resources. The proposed New Silk Road crosses several areas of political instability which further underlines this overlap of economic and security imperatives.

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76 Ibid.
81 Gaye Christoffersen, “Islam and Ethnic Minorities in Central Asia: The Uyghurs,” in Islam, Oil and Geopolitics, 2006, 44.
The economic dimensions of Chinese engagement in Eurasia

Since the death of Mao and later, the fall of Communism, economic development has become the central component of Beijing’s political legitimacy. This perspective advocates the claim that China’s foreign policy is largely influenced by its domestic sphere. Such a view separates the political and economic spheres in China’s foreign relations, something that has been present throughout Chinese foreign policy initiatives throughout the world. It would initially appear that Chinese engagement is largely influenced by the pursuit of economic gain rather than being a part of a grander strategy to challenge the dominant world order.

This view is initially supported by Ellen Pirro, who claims that economic engagement is the primary advantage of Chinese policy towards Central Asia. Pirro asserts that China’s primary objective is to re-orientate Eurasia to China’s sphere of influence. It is this desire to re-orientate Eurasia that also illustrates how China’s pursuit of economic growth is an expression of China’s wider aspirations. It may appear that China is seeking to create an EEZ under Chinese leadership in Eurasia rather than in an Eurasian empire.

The economic dimensions are also highlighted by Kong Wu, who asserts that China is dependent on energy exports from Russia and Central Asia to fuel Chinese economic growth. This pursuit of access to natural resources has been a recurring theme in Chinese foreign policy, which has been particularly visible in China’s relations with the African states. While Pirro alludes to the more aspirational aspects of China’s pursuit of economic growth, Wu appears to illustrate the more defensive elements in regard to access to natural resources.

However, while these chapters focus primarily on China’s pursuit of economic gain rather than on Chinese grand strategy, there are some echoes of Mackinder’s theory here. One of the primary concerns of gaining control of the heartland is to access its natural and strategic resources, something that successive German and Russian entities had attempted throughout the 20th century. Thus, by pursuing economic development, China is attempting to gain access to the heartland’s resources, thus following in the footsteps of Mackinder.

Summary

While the traditional discourse of Eurasia has largely perceived it as a largely Russian entity and continues to do so to a certain extent, this has come under increasing strain throughout the literature with the possibility of China eclipsing Russia in the region. It is the ways in which Russia should regard this that forms one of the key themes throughout the literature. This is largely divided into the potential for a Sino-Russian alliance to challenge American hegemony or the growth of Chinese influence in the region at the expense of Russia.

Therefore, the modern discourse on Eurasia will be dominated by the relationship between China and Russia, rather than simply perceiving Eurasia as a largely Russian entity.

This in turn appears to be in line with Mackinder’s theories with China replacing Germany as the potential master of Eurasia via cooperation or conquest of Russia.

At the same time, the Chinese dimension of Eurasia also illustrates China’s previous experiences in Eurasia, most notably in the potential threats that emerge from Central Asia.

By controlling Eurasia, China is following a historical precedent as well as Mackinder’s theories.

84 Ellen Pirro “Great power foreign relations in Central Asia,” in Russia, Eurasia and the New Geopolitics of Energy, 2015, 113.
85 Pirro, “Great power foreign relations,” 121.
At the same time, it is this relationship with Russia that is symbolic of the multiple dimensions of Chinese involvement in Eurasia. This can be seen in the aspirations to challenge American hegemony which ties into the more aspirational aspects of Chinese engagement as well as the threat it may pose to the United States and potentially Russia. Sino-Russian cooperation is also indicative of the more defensive aspects of this, particularly in regards to Islamic militancy. In this sense, Chinese engagement consists of several different dimensions that often coexist simultaneously.

Background

The heartland theory

The majority of the definitions of Eurasia can largely be traced back to Mackinder’s Geographical Pivot of History and Democratic Ideals and Reality. This labelled Eurasia as the “pivot area” and the “heartland,” which bridged Eastern and Western Europe. Such a definition emphasised the strategic resources of the then Russian Empire as a potential source for a global empire and a wake-up call for Britain’s traditional reliance on maritime power. Mackinder advocated that Britain should seek to prevent a potential Eurasian hegemon from emerging in this region.

Mackinder’s theory gained another lease of life in Germany, where it was ironically more influential than it had been in Mackinder’s home country. The most notable example of Mackinder’s influence in Germany was the theories of Karl Haushofer. In line with Mackinder’s theories, Haushofer advocated German suzerainty of the region via the subjugation of the Soviet Union. This fuelled the German drang nach osten or yearning for the East of the Second World War, which gained the theory some of its more negative connotations.

As well as influencing German Geopolitik, Mackinder’s concept of Eurasia was a significant influence on American Cold War strategies aimed at containing the Soviet Union. This was epitomised by Zbigniew Brzezinski’s The Grand Chessboard, which advocated a more proactive American role in Eurasia since continued American hegemony largely relied on the management of the region.

In regard to China, Mackinder’s original hypothesis described a potential united Sino-Japanese empire as a possible contender for control of the heartland. While Mackinder’s theories appeared to predict much of the processes in Russia and Eastern Europe for much of the 20th century, the same could not be said for his prognosis of Asia, with the exception of Japan’s failed attempt to conquer China and Eastern Asia, something that is reflected in the controversial Tanaka Memorial, which was claimed to be Japan’s plan for global hegemony that eerily reflected Mackinder’s own theories.

It is these issues that raise the questions of the potential utility and the continued relevance of Mackinder’s work in the 21st century. In the light of the recent concerns in Europe and Asia, Mackinder’s hypothesis can be re-appropriated with closer Sino-Russian ties and the potential Sino-American rivalry. Therefore, American sea power will again battle land power although it will be Chinese rather than Russian land power that will provide the challenge in this case.

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88 Mackinder, Democratic Ideals, 32.
At the same time, while present Chinese strategies can be viewed through the lens of Mackinder’s theories, it is equally possible to claim that China is following a tradition that precedes Mackinder by several centuries. By engaging with Eurasia, China is following the strategies of successive Chinese dynasties, the challenges to whom lay primarily in Central and Northern Asia with a relatively limited focus on maritime affairs. Therefore, in order to utilise Mackinder’s theories in a Chinese context, it is necessary to explore the context of China’s experience in Eurasia as well as Mackinder’s theories in order to reapply these theories in a way that is divorced from the traditional Russo-centric connotations that had previous discourses.

The primary theoretical lens of this examination of Eurasia is the geographical pivot of history as outlined by Mackinder. In order to create an alternative source for the present discourse on Eurasia, Mackinder’s theories will be removed from their original context and placed in one in line with China’s previous attempts to dominate Eurasia and her current efforts to achieve what her predecessors failed to do.

The heartland and the geographical pivot

One of the core components of Mackinder’s theory was the concept of the heartland and the geographical pivot of history. As Figure 1 shows, this encompassed Eastern Europe and Asia. In reference to the context of the creation of Mackinder’s theory, much of the heartland, as well as the pivot itself, was located in what was the Russian Empire. From this, it appears that Russia was in complete control of the heartland and was well placed to establish herself as the global hegemon. However, this raises the question of why Russia remained one of the weakest of the Great Powers of this era despite her geopolitical advantages.

The answer to this question lies with several factors. While Russia was one of the largest empires of the time, second only to the British Empire, it was, “inferior in virility, equipment and organisation.” Additionally, previous attempts to control the heartland were largely thwarted by the lack of infrastructure and that Russian expansion had largely been contained by Britain in Central Asia and by Japan in East Asia as shown by Russia’s defeat in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905. However, as outlined earlier, this was challenged by the development and spread of rail travel.

With the advent of rail, it was now easier for land-based empires to expand in a way that they had been hitherto unable to do. This in turn formed the crux of Mackinder’s warning about the land powers in the Geographical Pivot of History. This was due to the heartland being largely invulnerable to an attack by maritime powers since it was surrounded by mountains in the north and deserts in the south. The difficulties that a sea power has in attacking the heartland may be seen in the light of NATO’s intervention in landlocked Afghanistan, where logistics proved to be a challenge for the largely maritime-based power of the United States and much of Europe.

Since the domination of the heartland was one of the paths to potential global hegemony, it was only natural that there would be several competitors for control of this region. As outlined earlier, these were largely in the form of Germany and Russia since these powers were the primary threats to British maritime hegemony at the time. This would take the form of either a successful German conquest of Eurasia or a Russo-German alliance augmented by Germany’s growing economic and military clout. While Mackinder’s theories gained attention due to the paths followed by Germany and Russia in the 20th century, they largely ignore another potential challenger for the mantle of Eurasia.

As well as the threat posed by Germany and Russia, Mackinder also highlighted the role of “Chinese organised by the Japanese” who could potentially gain control of the heartland by overthrowing the Russian Empire. While the proposed Russo-Germanic empire was primarily a land-based power, this second Asian power had a maritime dimension in the light of growing Japanese naval power during the Meiji revolution. Unlike the threats posed by Germany and Russia, this theorised Sino-Japanese empire did not come to fruition despite Japan’s attempts to control much of Asia. Japan’s rapid territorial expansion eventually placed strain on Japanese capacities which meant that Japan was barely able to hold onto what it had annexed, let alone pursue further territory in Eurasia. Additionally, the territorially fragmented and psychologically demoralised China was also not in a position to overthrow Russian control of the region and was equally unwilling to enter a union with Japan either.

Despite the resurgence of Russia under Putin’s United Russia, the possibility of an Asian power controlling the heartland has become more relevant today than it was in Mackinder’s day, with the rise of Chinese economic and military power. While it is uncertain that China will gain hegemony over Asia as the Sino-Japanese empire was proposed to do, it is likely that China will be the strongest power in the region, albeit not the most popular one. What is also likely is that interaction with and possibly even the control of Eurasia will become a strategic imperative for China in the future.

On the other hand, it is possible to see some parallels between China’s present position and that of Germany’s position in the early 20th century. Judging by recent developments in Sino-Russian relations, China is seeking greater cooperation with Russia on energy and security matters. This in turn can be seen to reflect Mackinder’s hypothesis of a Russo-German alliance. As outlined earlier,

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97 Nicholas Spykman, America’s Strategy in World Politics (United States: Archon Books, 1970), 143.
the parallels between Germany and China have already been drawn by some scholars. Should China continue down this route into a more formal and closely binding alliance with Russia, she may be in a position to control the heartland, thus achieving what the many potential masters of Eurasia had failed to do.

The Chinese experience in Eurasia: Aspiration and isolation

Arguably, the experiences of China in Eurasia largely precede those of the West in the region by several centuries. The most notable of these was the experience of the Silk Road that connected China with the Middle East and eventually Europe along with the imposition of the tributary system on the region. This served to cement Chinese authority and prestige on areas that were deemed unsuitable for cultural assimilation or colonisation.\(^9\) In addition, this period possibly saw the most successful attempt to conquer and unify Eurasia under Genghis Khan and his successors. Such a feat was particularly impressive given that Mackinder’s criteria for a successful land empire would not be present for another four centuries.

The influence of the Eurasian Heartland on Chinese policy sets a particularly notable precedent in the last two dynasties of the Chinese empire, the Ming and the Qing. Under these dynasties, China attempted to gain control of parts of Eurasia or to prevent real and potential threats to Chinese interests from emerging in China’s border regions. These policies would end up with a series of mixed results as a consequence of the decisions made by these two dynasties, some of which would have drastic consequences for China.

While the landmass that made Eurasia had always been an integral aspect of imperial Chinese foreign policy, this became imperative under the Ming and later the Qing dynasty. Both these periods were connected by China’s shunning of the sea and turning towards her land borders. It is initially possible to see an aspect of Mackinder’s theory in a context that predated him by nearly five centuries.

Despite this common focus on land borders, there are some differences between the Ming and Qing experiences in Eurasia. In the early decades of Ming rule, China focused on maritime power, building a fleet that outmatched anything from China’s European contemporaries, thus turning Ming China into one of the major naval powers of the 15th century.\(^10\) The epitome of China’s maritime prowess came in the form of Zheng He’s treasure fleet that sailed across the globe in a demonstration of China’s power and prestige to the world. This could be seen as an ideal opportunity for China to build an overseas empire as the European powers had done, thus providing China with a potentially global legacy.

Despite this initial drive, China appeared to turn away from the sea altogether not long after the return of Zheng He’s fleet, even placing restrictions on the production of new ships. A number of reasons for China’s shunning of maritime power despite the promise of an overseas empire have been given. These include political and domestic concerns in China, partially as a result of intrigue at the Ming court. Possibly the most notable of these is given by Jakub Grygiel, who asserts that the threats to China’s boarders led to this focus on land over sea power.\(^11\) As Figure 2 shows, the primary threats to Ming China were from China’s border regions. These included the Mongols, whose dynasty had previously been overthrown by the Ming along with the Jurchens and later the Manchus, who would overthrow the Ming in 1644.

Through the lens of Mackinder, it would appear that Ming China was a maritime power that had forgone its maritime dimensions to become a land power with largely perfunctory results. By further utilising Mackinder’s theories, it is possible to interpret the threats to China as largely

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emerging from the heartland. Thus, it was imperative for China to prevent the emergence of a potential threat from emerging in this region to challenge Chinese interests in the region. Indeed, it is possible to argue that Eurasia posed as much a challenge for Chinese interests as it had for the maritime hegemons of Mackinder’s era, something that largely persists in China’s desire for stability in her border states.

Despite this renewed focus on land power, the Ming’s attempts to control China’s borders largely ended in failure. China largely avoided expansion beyond her border states despite some initial attempts to do so. This was chiefly the result of the outcome of the battle of Tu Mu in 1449 where a smaller force of Mongols from the kingdom of Oirat defeated a larger Ming force. Due to this result, China focused on a defensive rather than an offensive strategy towards the heartland, retreating behind the Great Wall. An era that had offered much potential for Chinese expansion had cumulated ultimately in disappointment.

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102 By Říše Ming.png: Michal Klajbanderivative work: Jann - This file was derived from Říše Ming.png, CC BY-SA 3.0 cz, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=34923107. This figure may only be reused under a compatible share-alike licence.

103 Grygiel, Great Powers, 123.
A possible answer to this may lie in a subversion of Mackinder’s theory. Since the infrastructure for a strong land empire was largely unavailable for the Ming, it would seem like a folly to attempt to become a land empire in this era. Instead, the failure of the Ming can be seen in the shunning of maritime expansion that had been one of China’s strengths in this period. Therefore, China’s success instead lay on finding the fulcrum between land and sea power. Thus, China would be served better as a hybrid power rather than a land power, something which can still be seen to this day with China’s pursuit of a blue water navy.

Ultimately, the upsetting of this balance would spell doom for the Ming. The costs of the Great Wall and the repelling of Hideyoshi’s invasion of Korea resulted in higher taxes that bankrupted the Ming and lead to discontent and rebellion which, along with the Manchu invasion, led to the demise of the Ming dynasty.\textsuperscript{104} Ironically, despite China’s attempts to manage Eurasia, it was the heartland that ended up in control of China rather than China controlling Eurasia.

If the Ming had largely failed in their bid to control Eurasia, it is possible to argue that the Qing had more success in this venture than their predecessors did. Due to the Manchu’s understanding of the border regions, China’s boundaries grew to their greatest extent, with Outer Mongolia acting as a buffer zone for an enlarged Qing China\textsuperscript{105} In this sense, the Qing were more successful as a land power than the Ming had been.

Unlike the Ming, the Qing were more rigorous in their pursuit of expansion in Eurasia, even settling Han colonists in the further flung regions of this new Chinese empire to gain a degree of cultural homogeneity. This renewed pursuit of territory, as with many empires, was partially a result of a surplus population as well as early modern exploration techniques.\textsuperscript{106} Qing colonial ventures were largely internal to better assimilate minority cultures.\textsuperscript{107} These cultural ties played a significant role in the Qing gaining further territory in Inner Asia.\textsuperscript{108}

As Figure 3 shows, the Qing ended up in control of more of Eurasia than the Ming had before them. The territories of the Qing appear to correlate with parts of Mackinder’s depiction of the pivot land, which in turn further illustrate how, under the Qing dynasty, China came close to controlling the heartland. Similar to the experience of the Ming, many of the threats to China in this period continued to emerge from China’s borderer regions, and the balance between land and sea power still remained largely unaddressed.\textsuperscript{109}

It was the Qing’s negligence of sea power that would eventually prove to be China’s undoing. When China’s outdated fleet of junks were destroyed by the more advanced Royal Navy during the Opium War, China was faced with a series of wars and rebellions in the perception that the Qing had lost the Mandate of Heaven. During the Century of Humiliation, China lost territory to the European powers and later to Japan as well as to Russia.\textsuperscript{110} This would eventually cumulate in the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the end of the centuries old Chinese empire.

The primary lesson from the Chinese experience in Eurasia was that China was at her most successful when she balanced both land and sea power and failed when she focused solely on the threats on her boarders. In this sense, China would be best served in Eurasia if she became a land power with a maritime dimension, as Mackinder’s proposed Sino-Japanese empire had. As stated earlier, from present Chinese policies, it would appear that China is attempting to regain this balance to secure her future status.

\textsuperscript{104} John Darwin, \textit{After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire} (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 91.
\textsuperscript{105} Darwin, \textit{After Tamerlane}, 92–93.
\textsuperscript{106} Laura Hostelier, \textit{Qing Colonial Enterprise} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 33.
\textsuperscript{107} Hostelier, \textit{Qing Colonial Enterprise}, 97.
\textsuperscript{108} Hostelier, \textit{Qing Colonial Enterprise}, 35.
\textsuperscript{110} Immanuel Hsu, \textit{The Rise of Modern China} (Oxford: Oxford University Press Inc, 1990), 118.
While China’s experiences in Eurasia show that Chinese attempts to manage the heartland were not always successful, it nevertheless contributed as much to the perception of Eurasia as Russia has done. The consequences of these experiences can still be seen in the present political borders of the region, most notably in the currently dormant issue of the Sino-Russian border, which was one of the sources for the Sino-Soviet split in 1963 and contributed to the tensions between China and the USSR for much of the Cold War. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and many of the would-be masters of Eurasia now disappeared into the pages of history, there is again potential for an opening for China, now augmented with modern technology, in Eurasia.

Cases of Chinese engagement in Eurasia

While Chinese involvement can be drawn back from the history of the Silk Road and China’s previous attempts to manage Eurasia, its present incarnation is largely rooted in the post-Cold War era with the break-up of the USSR. With the demise of Communism and the apparent triumph of Western values, China’s leadership needed an alternative goal to the pursuit of communist revolution. Thus, China continued the pursuit of economic development initiated by Deng Xiaoping. This required China to form relations with economically crucial states, which included many of the former republics of the Soviet Union.112

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In the midst of the collapse of the USSR, the danger posed to China by the Soviet Union had become an opportunity. China was no longer faced with a single, unified threat from Eurasia, which, with the inability of any of the major powers of the region to challenge China, opened the door for the growth of Chinese influence in Eurasia. A number of former Soviet states also view China as a potential balance for Russian influence while being wary of China’s own ambitions for the region.

In the broadest of terms, China’s policy concerns in Eurasia can be classified as development and security. Both these concerns require China to form relations with the states that form Eurasia in order to access the region’s natural resources as well as to secure China’s border regions. As China’s history has shown, the primary threats to Chinese interests have emerged from states close to China’s boarders, which require proactive Chinese management in order to prevent these threats from emerging.

To paraphrase Brzezinski, management of Eurasia is paramount to China’s economic development and security. In order to achieve this, China needs to gain control of this region via cooperation or suzerainty as the previous land empires had attempted to do. To achieve this, China has used a series of policy initiatives, two of which are particularly notable for the perception of Eurasia, both of which can be interpreted through the lens of Mackinder’s theories. To do so, it is equally important to bear in mind the possible dimensions of Chinese engagement outlined earlier.

The first of these is China’s relationship with Russia and the former Soviet republics. This is particularly crucial for China and Russia’s bid to challenge the established American hegemony, which is epitomised in the potential of the SCO. However, while a Sino-Russian union is possible, particularly as Russia is shunned by the Western World, this requires the maintenance of a delicate balance that may be upset by China’s growing influence in the region. In addition, this relationship can also be seen as a reflection of China’s aspirational and defensive ambitions in the regions.

The second imperative is the rise of the One Belt, One Road initiative and the creation of a New Silk Road. While a number of states have attempted similar initiatives, this carries a historical significance for China’s place in the world as well as in Eurasia. While this initiative is largely economic in nature, there is an overlap with China’s security concerns as the proposed route goes through the less stable regions of Eurasia. Also, the utilisation of land links may also illustrate the centrality of rail for the land powers as outlined in the Geographical Pivot of History.

Dangers and opportunities for the United States and Russia on the New Silk Road

Possibly the greatest challenge that the One Belt, One Road initiative poses to the United States is the fact that it is a largely land-based trading route. By forsaking the traditional maritime routes, Chinese trade will be able to access an alternative route which avoids the sea lanes dominated by the United States. It is the land infrastructure that echoes Mackinder’s theories in the Geographical Pivot of History.

This reflection of Mackinder’s theory can be initially seen in the proposed infrastructure projects entails in the initiative. This proposes a land route for trade between China and Europe via the construction of rail routes. As Figure 4 illustrates, there is a degree of overlap between the proposed route and the heartland of Mackinder’s theories. Indeed, it was the rise of rail travel that gave credence to Mackinder’s hypothesis, and judging by the One Belt, One Road initiative, it is likely to gain even more credibility in the 21st century.

While the One Belt, One Road initiative is largely commercial in nature, there is a strategic dimension to it. By utilising land rather than sea routes, it will become harder for the United States to disrupt Chinese trade, thus weakening the naval trump card that it has served as a cornerstone of American hegemony. It is also through this perspective that it is again possible to see the reflection of Mackinder’s theories in regard to the conflict between land and sea power. Thus, by following this initiative, China’s land power seeks to challenge the naval power of the United States.

At the same time, it is also possible to view the One Belt, One Road initiative as part of China’s global challenge to the United States, with Eurasia being one of the more important aspects of this challenge. This is largely connected with the more aspirational elements of Chinese foreign policy is to challenge the current international system. Indeed, it was this challenge to the established hegemony that also underpinned Mackinder’s theories, thus the challenge posed by China is the latest example of what Mackinder illustrated.

In this sense, the New Silk Road illustrates how Chinese engagement in Eurasia poses a potential threat to the United States. This is particularly apparent in the initiative’s attempt to wean Chinese trade off the maritime routes dominated by the United States.118 By utilising these routes, China’s engagement with Eurasia can be viewed through Mackinder’s theories, particularly as land powers seek to establish the means to combat the dominance of maritime hegemons such as Britain and

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117 MERICS China Mapping.
the United States. By viewing the One Belt, One Road initiative as a threat to the United States, it is possible to view the continued utility of Mackinder’s theories in the present context. This initiative does not only challenge the established dominance of the United States.

As with many Chinese initiatives in Eurasia, the New Silk Road poses potential benefits and challenges for Russia’s own ambitions in the region. The Russian role in this initiative can be interpreted as another example of the closer ties between China and Russia. Indeed, this angle also serves to illustrate the potential utility of Mackinder’s theory as much as the challenge to the United States shows.

At first, it appears that the One Belt, One Road initiative provides a number of opportunities for closer Sino-Russian co-operation. There has already been discussion over the integration of Russia’s existing initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union, into the New Silk Road project. This comes alongside the closer economic ties between the two, with Russia becoming China’s primary supplier of oil and gas. In this sense, the One Belt, One Road initiative can be seen as an opportunity for increased Sino-Russian ties. Such a relationship is also interlinked with the potential challenge to the United States since the mutual aspiration of both China and Russia is to challenge American hegemony. By further cementing these ties, China is again following the theories of Mackinder, albeit in a more economic than strategic context. In this sense, it is Mackinder’s assertion that the heartland will be unified by cooperation with Russia. Thus, the New Silk Road provides the grounding for this increased relationship.

At the same time, this initiative also serves as a potential challenge for Russian interests as well. If China’s presence in Eurasia has the potential to remove Russia’s regional ambitions, the New Silk Road can also eclipse Russia’s economic initiatives as well. As stated earlier, it has often been predicted that China will have greater influence in Central Asia than Russia will have in the near future. Therefore, Chinese engagement presents both an opportunity and a challenge for Russia’s economic and regional ambitions.

By perceiving Chinese engagement in Eurasia as a threat, it is again possible to deploy Mackinder’s theories to the case of the New Silk Road. In the Geographical Pivot of History, one of the ways in which the heartland could be unified was by German domination of Russia. In this case, China would replace Germany as the potential unifier of the heartland. Therefore, it is the dimension of China as a threat to Russia and the United States in Eurasia that illustrates the continued utility of Mackinder’s theories for explaining Chinese engagement in Eurasia.

**Defensive vs aspirations**

As well as the common perspectives of whom the One Belt, One Road initiative benefits or threatens, it is also necessary to consider another potential dimension of these policies. This is the question over whether Chinese engagement is symbolic of China’s global aspirations or if it is a continuation of China’s desire for regional security which has been a persistent theme in Chinese history regarding the region.

At first, it is the very scale of this initiative that indicates how it is an expression of China’s global aspirations. As Figure 4 illustrates, the size of this programme is rather aspirational with rail links from China to Europe, crossing much of Eurasia. Indeed, it is the very layout of this route that mimics the path of the original Silk Road, which in turn can be interpreted as part of China’s aspiration to return to the position that it once held before the advent of the European empires into Asia.

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As stated earlier, China’s aspirations in Eurasia appear to be largely interlinked with the challenge that it poses to the United States. This again is reflected in China’s desire to challenge American hegemony. On the other hand, China’s aspirations can also be interpreted as an attempt to bypass the traditional American-led international institutions. By focusing on land rather than on sea routes, China is bypassing the traditional trade routes dominated by the United States. Indeed, this is also indicative of Mackinder’s theories since land powers will seek to bypass the dimensions dominated by the maritime hegemons.

However, there is another more defensive angle to the New Silk Road, rooted in the darker chapters of China’s past. While the focus on land routes can be interpreted as an attempt to circumvent maritime trade routes, it also reflects China’s concerns over potential attempts to blockade these routes. In this sense, Mackinder’s theories again retain a degree of utility since land-based powers seek such routes to prevent a blockade from maritime powers. This also appears to be connected with the “String of Pearls” in order to secure China’s other trade routes in Asia.

Additionally, it is also the location of the New Silk Road that raises security concerns for Chinese engagement. As Figure 4 shows, the proposed route crosses through the “crescent of instability” which includes Afghanistan and Pakistan. This appears to be in line with the traditional threats that emanated from China’s near abroad, the management of which is key to China’s continued security. Indeed, this also reflects the commonly held view that China is under increasing pressure to take a more proactive stance when its economic interests come under threat. It appears that Chinese policy is as much governed by Brzezinski’s view of the management of Eurasia as Mackinder’s theories.

In all, the New Silk Road initiative illustrates how Chinese engagement in Eurasia is contradicted by its aspirational and conservative factors. These are again largely connected to the previous dimensions of Chinese engagement, particularly in the relation between China’s aspirations and the challenge it poses to the United States since this challenge is reflective of China’s wider global ambitions. However, there is another dimension to Chinese engagement in Eurasia that largely dismisses the idea of a grand Chinese strategy to control Eurasia.

Only for the money: The economic dimensions of Chinese engagement in Eurasia

As with many aspects of Chinese foreign policy, Chinese engagement in Eurasia can simply be reduced to being little more than a money-making exercise. This has been particularly notable in states rich in natural resources crucial to Chinese economic growth. One may even claim that China is seeking to create a Chinese-led EEZ in Eurasia rather than the land empire of the previous would-be conquerors of Eurasia. This in turn raises potential problems over the continued utility of Mackinder’s theories.

Despite the grand scale of the initiative, its overall goal is rather simple. It is to move Chinese goods to European markets and to facilitate access to these markets. This again appears to reflect China’s desire to separate its political and economic interests, which has been one of the major features of Chinese foreign policy since the Deng era. This is particularly notable in that the One Belt, One Road initiative is largely couched in economic rather than in strategic terms.

Since the New Silk Road appears to be largely economic in nature, it is perhaps more difficult to apply Mackinder’s theory to the case of Chinese engagement in Eurasia. While the primary objectives are largely economic in nature, its methodology, in this case the development of rail infrastructure, appears to be more in line with Mackinder’s theories that China’s objectives are. Despite the economic motivations for Chinese engagement in Eurasia, there is also a more strategic element to this. As with many areas of Chinese foreign policy, there is a need for political interests to override economic gain in the face of security threats. This appears to be related to the
security dimensions of Chinese engagement, particularly as this initiative goes through regions of political instability.

Therefore, while the motivations behind the One Belt, One Road initiative are largely economic in nature, it is perhaps likely that China will be required to take a more strategic approach towards Eurasia should its economic interests come under threat. In all, this initiative illustrates the multiple and contradictory dimensions of Chinese engagement with Eurasia. While economic gain may be the primary goal for Chinese engagement in the region, it also serves as an expression of China’s global ambitions, which includes the desire to challenge American hegemony. It is due to this challenge alongside the utilisation of land routes that render Mackinder’s theories of continued utility here.

The rise of the SCO

Possibly one of the biggest developments of Chinese policy towards Eurasia in recent years has been the creation of the SCO. Containing a number of the former Soviet republics as well as China and Russia, the importance of the SCO has often been connected with China’s renewed relationship with Russia. At the same time, this rather loose alliance is potentially fractured by the division between the more democratic and autocratic members of this organisation. As with the case of the New Silk Road, the SCO also serves to illustrate the multiple dimensions of China’s approach to Eurasia, some of which can be viewed through the prism of Mackinder’s theory.

With the SCO covering China’s pursuit of security in Eurasia, it is now necessary to examine China’s desire for natural resources in the region. These objectives are best represented in the rise of the New Silk Road under the One Belt, One Road initiative pursued by China in Eurasia.

The SCO’s challenge to the West

As with many of China’s international institutions, the SCO has received a degree of attention from Western observers, a number of whom interpret it as the latest in China’s attempts to create an anti-Western political bloc. It is this interpretation that has led it to be simultaneously named as the “NATO of the East” and the new Warsaw Pact. The memories of the latter suggest the potential challenge that this bloc could pose, should it develop further, as well as invoking the spirit of the last land power to attempt unification of Eurasia. In relation to this potential challenge, the SCO again highlights the more aspirational nature of modern Chinese policy since one of China’s aspirations is to challenge the United States as well as potentially illustrating the utility of Mackinder’s theory for the present day.

On the surface, it would initially appear that the SCO embodies the predictions that Mackinder made in the Geographical Pivot. With much of Central Asia and the former Soviet Union as members alongside China, it would appear that China has made an initial attempt to unify Eurasia under its leadership alongside Russia. At the same time, this can also be seen as an example of Mackinder’s hypothesis that land powers will largely forego maritime routes in order to prevent a potential blockade by the maritime powers. Therefore, the SCO can potentially pose a challenge to American hegemony by limiting the effectiveness of its sea power.

Additionally, this also appears to be in line with China’s own strategies which seek to deny the United States the use of its strongest assets. Indeed, this is most notably reflected by the emphasis on the DF-21 missile which can potentially hamper American naval assets. Thus, the emphasis on land power as outlined by Mackinder also appears to be reflected in present Chinese strategy.

In a similar vein, it would also appear that the SCO resembles much of the challenges that can emerge from the Eurasian landmass to challenge the hegemony of maritime powers. The most notable of these is Mackinder’s depiction of a unified Eurasian Heartland to challenge the dominance of the maritime hegemon. In the footsteps of Mackinder, it would appear that China is attempting to unify Eurasia via cooperation with the Eurasian states, most notably Russia, in a bid
to challenge the dominance of the United States. In this sense, it would appear that the main challenge to American dominance emanating from Eurasia is a Chinese led bloc which in turn reflects Mackinder’s depiction of the Eurasian land power.

The implications for Russia

Arguably, China’s relationship with Russia is one of the most important elements in present Chinese foreign policy. This has only gained in significance due to Russia’s increasing drift towards China as a result of American and European foreign policies in recent years. The relations between China and Russia have gone through several phases that alternated between cooperation and conflict. Traditionally, China and Russia have been hostile states, primarily over the boarders between the two states, as shown by the Sino-Soviet split of 1963 and the 1968 boarder war.

However, the phase of reconciliation came in the years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Initially, Russia, under the Western orientated Yeltsin presidency, was still largely distrustful of China, particularly over the concerns and threats voiced by the governors of Russia’s Far East regions over Chinese infiltration or to align with China over Moscow’s apparent negligence of the region. It appeared that Russia was more interested in pursuing relations with the West rather than with the East.

Despite this, the two powers gradually moved to a stronger relationship at the close of the 20th century. Throughout the 21st century, China has found a degree of consensus with Russia in a number of areas. This has largely been grounded in their mutual opposition to American hegemony as well as in energy and security interests, which reflects China’s primary concerns in Eurasia. By pursuing a strong relationship with Russia, China hopes achieve these objectives whilst posing a challenge to the largely maritime American hegemony. This in turn will require China and Russia to become the land power to unify Eurasia that Mackinder had once warned Britain about as well as illustrating how China’s challenge to American hegemony also illustrates China’s wider ambitions.

This new founded cooperation can be epitomised in the rise of the SCO. This loose alliance binds China with Russia and much of Central Asia in what has been phrases as the “NATO of the East” or a new Warsaw Pact. This can also be interpreted as China’s attempt to build a Eurasian security space or alternatively as part of China’s global construction of an anti-American bloc. The rise of the SCO in Eurasia also appears to embody many of China’s policy concerns in Eurasia. This can be seen in the goal of the security of the SCO’s Central Asian member states. By utilising this alliance, China will be able to manage any potential threats from China’s boarder regions that have plagued China throughout her history. At the same time, this can also be interpreted as an attempt to bypass the traditional international institutions with one of China’s making, thus further illustrating China’s ambitions.

In addition, the SCO also reflects China’s desire for economic development. This can be seen in the alliance’s desire to create parallel institutions to American-dominated bodies such as the IMF and the World Bank. This also suggests a degree of Chinese control as shown by China’s loan of United States $10 billion to SCO member states, thus potentially cementing greater Chinese influence in Eurasia.

Therefore, should the SCO grow in strength, China may be able to unify Eurasia into a single entity as Mackinder warned that Germany or Russia would do. Should this come to pass, China will be able to not only manage Eurasia effectively but also pose a potentially serious challenge to American hegemony.

However, as established in the previous literature, there are some issues with this, particularly in regard to the Sino-Russian strategic balance. The rise of the largely Chinese led SCO comes at the expense of similar Russian led institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union. While this illustrates the importance of China to Eurasia, it also corresponds with the decline of Russian influence, which Russia is loath to accept.

In this sense, while China is a potential ally for Russia in the global sphere, it is equally a potential threat in Eurasia. This can be seen in the fears of losing Russian territory to China, particularly Russia’s sparsely populated Far East. Indeed, it is these tensions that can potentially upset the balance of Sino-Russian relations with Russia’s own ambitions as a Great Power. Therefore, while there is potential for a Sino-Russian unification of Eurasia, it is equally possible that there will be a Sino-Russian rivalry for control of Eurasia. Indeed, it is the rise of Chinese influence and the decline of Russia’s that may render a long-term rivalry for control of the region a possible reality.

In all, China’s relationship with Russia is crucial for Chinese management of Eurasia as well as for achieving China’s policy goals in the region. Should China be able to achieve these, Beijing will be able to not only achieve Chinese goals but also unify Eurasia under Chinese control, thus fulfilling Mackinder’s warning. However, it is equally possible that China’s influence in the region may derail this should Russia view China as more of a threat than a potential ally to challenge American hegemony.

Expansion or defence?

As with the case of the New Silk Road, the SCO can also be seen as either an example of China’s global aspirations or as an attempt to manage the security of China’s boarder regions. Unlike the One Belt, One Road initiative, there is a greater focus on the more strategic elements of China’s engagement with Eurasia. In the case of China’s global aspirations, the SCO can be seen as one of China’s attempts to challenge the present American led international order. The SCO is one of a number of international institutions set up by China alongside the AIIB, which has been interpreted as China’s effort to bypass the more established international institutions such as the IMF. These institutions also reflect China’s desire to reshape the international system into its own image, something that can be partially achieved by the increasing irrelevance of the established institutions.

By returning to the theories of Mackinder, it is again possible to perceive the SCO as an outcome of China’s desire to unite the Eurasian Heartland. While the SCO is a rather broad and vague institution, its membership contains much of Eurasia, something that illustrates the potential to unify Eurasia into a single bloc. However, the diversity of member states, while promoting a “dialogue of civilisations” may provide some problems between the more democratic and autocratic members of this bloc. Thus, the unification of the heartland is symbolic of China’s wider ambitions.

However, it is also the strategic elements of the SCO that illustrates the defensive elements of Chinese engagement as well as reflecting the primary Chinese concerns in the region. The focus of the SCO is to combat the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism and militancy, problems that plague this particular region. The issue of counter terrorism has become one of the unifying factors of the SCO’s membership. This will likely grow in importance in the light of the scaling back of the NATO intervention in Afghanistan, which will leave a void that the SCO and China may be required to fill. It is the management of this issue that will determine the security of the region.

In this sense, as with the New Silk Road, it is the more aspirational aspects of Chinese engagement that are more fitting with the theories of Mackinder rather than the more defensive elements of these policies. This is mainly due to the possibility that the SCO can create the unified land power as outlined in the Geographical Pivot of History. On the other hand, the security concerns again reflect China’s long standing goal to manage the security threats from its border regions. Thus, the SCO is a tool to achieve these goals as well as being a potential means to unify the heartland.
China’s economic grand strategy

As outlined earlier, economic development has been one of the key imperatives for Chinese policy since the Deng era. Much of the communist regime’s legitimacy rests on continued economic prosperity, which compels them to pursue ties with states crucial for the continuation of this, particularly those with abundant sources of natural resources. One such policy is the One Belt, One Road initiative. This is intended to explore the possibility for trade opportunities in Eurasia, thus connecting Asia to Europe and Africa. As Figure 4 illustrates, this route covers much of the old Silk Road that connected China with Europe and the Arab world for centuries, which is often invoked to justify this initiative.

If the SCO is a reflection of China’s desire for security in Central Asia, the New Silk Road is a reflection of China’s desire for economic security. This initiative will become increasingly crucial to China’s economic development since continued prosperity will largely rely on markets for Chinese goods as well as the infrastructure required for efficient trade. Such a precedent can also be seen in Chinese infrastructure projects throughout much of Africa.

Conclusion: A Asian Eurasia and the future of Mackinder

In all, China is likely to be more fitting for the mantle of the title of the land power in the 21st century than Russia is. With largely no major rival to challenge this, China has the potential to gain hegemony over Eurasia, thus succeeding where many other states had failed. At the same time, the relationship between China and Russia will become increasingly central to the discourse on Eurasia. By allying with Russia, China will be following in the footsteps of Germany, as outlined by Mackinder. This in turn relies on the maintenance of Sino Russian relations with Russia’s Great Power Status, which will become increasingly difficult to maintain in the long term.

From this, it is necessary to draw two main points. The first of these is that the primary threat to American maritime hegemony will come from a Sino-Russian union or a Chinese led Eurasia. This in turn raises the second point over this perception of Eurasia. China has been subject to experiences that differed from the 20th-century European power politics that dictated the traditional discourse on Eurasia. Therefore, in order to potentially understand Eurasia’s future, it is necessary to move away from the experience of the Cold War and instead placing Mackinder’s theories in a new context. What is undoubtedly important is China’s management of Eurasia, which will have consequences for China as well as the rest of the world, should China succeed where many before had failed.

At the same time, Chinese engagement in Eurasia consists of several, often contradictory elements, which serve as an expression of Chinese global aspirations yet also illustrating China’s insecurity over the region, whether it be the past threat of American manoeuvres during the War on Terror or the political instability of the region. While the motivations behind these policies are often depicted as being little more than money-making exercises for China, they nevertheless indicate the genesis of a Chinese grand strategy. Such a move will become an imperative for Beijing should the viability of maritime routes be threatened in the face of potentially greater American hostility to China under the Trump administration. By pursuing such a strategy, Beijing is following the path drawn up by Mackinder, in this case, utilising Chinese land power to challenge American sea power, a move that serves to illustrate the continued utility of Mackinder’s theories in the present day.

Funding sources

None.

Competing interests

Tom Harper has no conflict of interest.