

Mackinder Revisited: Will China Establish Eurasian Empire 3.0? China has emerged as a new contender for control over Mackinder's "Heartland."

By Artyom Lukin
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In 1904 the founder of geopolitics Sir Halford Mackinder famously pronounced the end of "the Columbian epoch" – that of the dominance of the Western sea power – and the advent of the age of land power, in which the Heartland of Eurasia, or "the pivot area," would hold the key to the world domination. The pivot area largely corresponded to the territory of the then Russian Empire – occupying central and northern Eurasia.

Mackinder's main concern was that a rapidly industrializing and expansionist Tsarist Russia could successfully challenge the West's sea-power-based primacy, taking advantage of the Heartland's geostrategic centrality and harnessing the huge potentialities of Inner Eurasia's vast landmass. In actuality, Russia was never able to pull off such a feat – neither under the Tsar, nor in its Soviet reincarnation. It seems even less capable of achieving it now, being reduced to a rump of its former imperial glory and struggling with a shaky economy.

Nevertheless, it may be a little bit too early to write off Mackinder's prophecies. For there has emerged another contender for the control over the Heartland: China. Although Beijing is making inroads in places as far away as Africa and Latin America, its main game is in Eurasia. We can only guess if Chinese leaders have read Mackinder, but the strategies they are pursuing are more or less in line with the British geographer's theory.

For one thing, Beijing is aggressively seeking to (re)create the Silk Road that is envisioned as Eurasia's superhighway – running through the Heartland and reliably linking China with other parts of the continent, such as Europe, the Middle East, Southeast and South Asia. In order to fund this grand design, new financial institutions are being created by China like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund.

In the new Silk Road, railways will play the key role. China is rapidly expanding its own railway network and has become the world's leader in building high-speed lines, while also expanding into neighboring countries. Central Asia has so far been the main target of this multi-billion dollar push to upgrade and construct rail lines, roads, pipelines and other infrastructure. Another possible trunk of the twenty-first-century Silk Road will run from China further north. One section of it, a planned high-speed railway stretching some 7,000 kilometers, will connect Moscow and Beijing, cutting the travel time between the two cities from the current six or more days to about 33 hours.

If successful in this "rail offensive," the Chinese may finally prove correct Mackinder's assertion that "trans-continental railways are...transmuting the conditions of land-power, and nowhere can they have such effect as in the closed heart-land of Euro-

Asia.” Emphasizing the advantages of rail over ship, Mackinder argued that “the continental railway truck may run direct from the exporting factory into the importing warehouse.” In contemporary economic parlance, this is called a seamless transportation system. And China obviously wants to be the designer and the principal hub of an emerging Eurasian connectivity web. Importantly, this continental Eurasian network will largely be out of reach for the United States, whose naval forces command global sea lanes, causing anxiety in Beijing over a possible blockade of China’s trade, still predominantly sea-borne.

Supplementing China-centered transcontinental rail network are planned oceanic routes emanating from Chinese ports and hugging Eurasian shores. Foremost among them is Maritime Silk Road, traversing the seas of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. The Kra Canal across an isthmus in Southern Thailand, whose construction, funded by Chinese, may begin soon, will draw the Maritime Silk Road closer to China-friendly countries, such as Cambodia, Thailand and Burma, reducing the significance of Malacca Strait controlled by the U.S. Navy. China is also eyeing the Northern Sea Route, which is passing via the Arctic areas controlled by Moscow, Beijing’s increasingly close “strategic partner.”

In China’s Eurasian vision, economic considerations are intertwined with geo-strategic. Economically, China will benefit from establishing a huge integrated area under its leadership. Strategically, this continental zone of Chinese influence will be largely impregnable to hostile U>S. interventions, should a grave crisis occur in Sino-American relations. The U.S., possessing unrivaled naval capabilities, may well inflict damage upon the maritime margins of China’s geo-economic empire, but it will hardly be able to strike at its terrestrial core centered around Eurasian Heartland.

Russia – China’s Own Canada?

China will not be able to create its Eurasian fortress without collaboration, or at least acquiescence, from the other great Eurasian power – Russia. Although a far cry from the heydays of the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union, Russia still controls much of the crucial Heartland areas – as its own territories in northern Eurasia and zones of political influence in Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

It looks increasingly likely that Moscow, despite erstwhile Eurasian ambitions of its own, will not stand in the way of Beijing’s grand designs. Locked in a bitter fight with the West over Ukraine and other issues, Russia has no choice but to move closer toward China. In particular, plunging oil prices and Western sanctions are threatening to ruin Russia’s financial system. Beijing seems ready to come to the rescue. In October 2014, the central banks of the two countries signed a currency swap agreement worth 150 billion yuan (\$25 billion), allowing Russia to draw on China’s renminbi in case of need. In December 2014, Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced that China was willing to help Russia, if needed. The question is what political and economic strings Beijing is going to attach to any assistance it might be willing to extend to a struggling Russia. The price tag will likely include privileged access to Russia’s natural resources and military technologies, as well as Moscow’s consent to China-led economic schemes in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

Even those in Russia’s China-watching community who are quite sympathetic toward Beijing, acknowledge that the new Silk Road is motivated “not only by its future

economic benefits, but also geopolitical calculations, hopes to create in Eurasia a 'growth base' for a future great Eurasian power." However, it is far from clear what long-term implications this would have for Russia and whether it would be at all possible for the two great-power Eurasian projects to co-exist peacefully.

As Russia's leading analysts point out, China's Silk Road initiatives may consume Moscow's own cherished project of Eurasian Union. According to Dmitri Trenin, "What might be expected . . . is an energy, investment and industrial-technological partnership between China and Russia which will reshape and rebalance Eurasia, whose center of gravity will now move from Moscow to Beijing."

If Russia is lucky it may eventually become China's own "Canada" – a vast storehouse of natural resources catering for a powerful southern neighbor, while retaining a degree of sovereignty. However, in the worst-case scenario, Russia will end up as a vassal within a Chinese empire. It is striking that, back in 1904 Mackinder anticipated the possible incorporation of Russia into the Chinese domain and the danger that could pose to the West: "Were the Chinese, for instance, organized by the Japanese, to overthrow the Russian Empire and conquer its territory, they might constitute the yellow peril to the world's freedom just because they would add an oceanic frontage to the resources of the great continent..." He was only mistaken about the Japanese. Rather than "organizing" a China-led empire in Eurasia, Tokyo is now trying to prevent an entente between Moscow and Beijing for fear of facing a powerful hostile bloc.

Three Eurasian Empires

Historically, there have been two attempts to create an empire that would span Eurasian landmass from the Pacific to the Atlantic. The first empire was established by Mongol conquests in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, extending from the Sea of Japan and South China Sea to the Mediterranean. The largest land empire in history, it did not last very long as a unified entity, stumbling on factors such as internal strife over succession. Both China and Russia were part of this nomadic empire, which was ruled from the capital Karakorum on the steppes of inner Mongolia. Importantly, China's and Russia's further evolution as states and their geopolitical thinking were, and still are, influenced by that experience of Mongol dominion.

It is often said that Russia shares equally in the heritage of the Byzantine emperors and Genghis Khan. So it was the Russian Tsars who tried to build another Euro-Asian empire stretching from the Baltic and the Bosphorus to Manchuria and the shores of the Pacific Ocean. They were only partly successful, as they never came close to being the dominant force on the continent – resisted by European powers to the west, Turkey to the south, and Japan to the east. The Soviet Union that succeeded the Russian Empire, though geographically a Eurasian country, had, due to its universalist ideology, global rather than Eurasian aspirations. Moscow has now returned to the concept of Russia-centric Eurasianism, but clearly lacks resources to turn this vision into reality.

It is now China's turn to try and create its own version of "Eurasian empire." Unlike Mongol and Russian dominions, which were primarily based on military force and coercion, the Chinese are deploying economic power. At present, it is simply

impossible to know what kind of empire this one is going to be. It could be a benevolent China-centric economic integration zone similar to the German-led EU or Brazil-led Mercosur. But one cannot rule out an attempt by Beijing to assert political hegemony in Eurasia in a more traditional imperial sense.

Beijing's endeavors to integrate Eurasia under Chinese aegis are seen as a serious challenge by many in Washington – a threat even. As Mackinder's Britain viewed with alarm Russia's growing clout in the continental heartland, today American policymakers are concerned that much of Eurasia will come under the sway of an Asian power whose ways are starkly different from the West's and whose future strategic intentions are at best uncertain.

The U.S. attempts to provide alternatives to the China-led economic order in Eurasia have thus far proved underwhelming. The much vaunted Trans-Pacific Partnership has not yet gotten off the ground, mired in seemingly endless negotiations. The U.S.-sponsored "New Silk Road," which aimed to link Central and South Asia through Afghanistan, has led nowhere. On the strategic front, efforts to enlist India as Asia's main counterweight to China have also been less than successful, with New Delhi reluctant to make any alignment with Washington that could be interpreted as a containment of Beijing.

Yet, despite the seemingly inexorable rise of Chinese power, it would be premature to proclaim the advent of a new Eurasian empire. The lessons from Mackinder's epoch are perhaps useful here again. In the early 20th century Imperial Russia seemed to many, both at home and abroad, on track to become the world's preeminent power – along with the United States. In 1907, Russia's reformist prime minister Pyotr Stolypin famously said that all Russia needed to achieve greatness was "twenty years of internal and external tranquility." In 1911, Stolypin was assassinated by a radical socialist. In 1914, Russia entered a Balkan conflict which became World War I. In 1917, the Russian Empire collapsed.

China is facing similar risks of internal and external tribulations that could disastrously end its spectacular rise. For Beijing, in the next fifteen to twenty years, maintaining domestic stability while avoiding dangerous external crises may well prove to be a far more daunting task than constructing a Eurasian dominion.

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