China's Eurasia: the Belt and Road Initiative and the Creation of a New Eurasian Power

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative alongside the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation are the latest phase of China's return to the Eurasian landmass after the collapse of the Soviet Union. China has reshaped Eurasia in several ways, which includes the common definition of this concept, which had largely been perceived as a chiefly Russian entity. This is rooted in Halford Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History*, which depicted the Eurasian landmass as a threat to Britain's maritime hegemony with the advent of rail. While the traditional focus had been on Eurasia as the Russian empire, Mackinder also alluded to a Eurasian empire created by 'Chinese organised by Japanese' as a result of the latter's development during the Meiji Restoration. While this did not come to pass, it has become an imperative to consider the notion of an Asian power in Eurasia due to China's rise.

The purpose of this paper is to argue that China is as much a Eurasian power in the vein of Mackinder's theories as Russia is, with the BRI providing a potential opportunity to further integrate with Eurasia. In addition, the initiative is also symbolic of China's bid to create an alternative order both in Eurasia and the wider world as part of its global role to challenge the dominance of the United States, which raises the spectre of Mackinder's warning over a challenger emerging from the Eurasian Heartland.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative – Eurasia – Mackinder's Heartland Theory

1 Introduction

The “Belt and Road” Initiative (一带一路倡议) serves as the latest phase of China’s return to the Eurasian landmass. This comes as part of Beijing’s ‘push west’, which illustrates the increasing imperatives posed by the region for Chinese foreign policy in recent years.¹ The project has also been an expression of the influence of China’s experiences with Eurasia with Beijing invoking the language of the Silk Roads to justify the initiative.² It is this depiction of the BRI as a continuation of the Silk Roads that is indicative of China’s perception of its identity and its approach to global governance, rooted in China’s imperial history, which comes at a time when Beijing’s global voice has become more pronounced in the apparent void³ left by Washington’s apparent shift from globalisation to nationalism as alluded to in Donald Trump’s address to the UN General Assembly this year.

While the BRI has numerous political and economic implications as well as possibly being one of the most important developments in Chinese foreign policy and the present international order, it also has significant implications for the concept of Eurasia itself. This is in how the project illustrates the potential of a major Asian power playing a notable role in Eurasia, which challenges the common idea of Eurasia as being synonymous with Russia.⁴ Such a development is not without precedent and is likely to further influence current notions of Eurasia as a result of China’s growing role. It is likely that the BRI is a representation of China’s challenge to the old Russo-centric paradigm that had governed the concept of Eurasia throughout the 20th century.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the BRI has rendered China as a significant actor in Eurasia as Russia traditionally has been. This will explore the question through the geopolitical tradition of Eurasia stemming from Halford J. Mackinder’s *The Geographical Pivot of History*, which influenced the geopolitical strategies of the 20th century and beyond, and determines how China fits into this established paradigm.⁵ In addition, this will also examine the implications of a major Asian power playing a significant role in influencing Eurasia, with the BRI being a potential mechanism for Eurasian integration

1 Shahnwaz Muhammad Khan and Faisal Javaid, “Central Asia Region: A Hub of Chinese Interest”, *Walia Journal*, 34.1 2018, p. 158.

2 Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, 2015, p. 184.

3 Andrew Kuchins, “What is Eurasia to US (the U.S.)?” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2018, p. 126.

4 Bruno Macaes, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order*, 2018, p. 32.

5 H.J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History”, *The Geographical Journal*, 23.4, April 1904, p. 421.

as a result of recent developments in the international order, as well as being an expression of China's wider vision for global governance.

2 Discussion

As with many of China's foreign policy initiatives, the BRI has been subject to a significant degree of attention in recent years. This has resulted in a growing body of literature covering the initiative as it unfolds as well as the more established works of China's engagement with Central Asia and the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War. There have been three main perceptions regarding China's involvement in Eurasia, of which the BRI is the latest phase. These perceptions are derived from the major external actors in Eurasia and how they perceive Chinese activities in the region. It is necessary to examine these narratives to explore how China fits within the tradition of Eurasia as well as to determine any gaps in the established literature on the subject.

2.1 *Challenge from the Heartland: the Western Perception of China in Eurasia*

Traditionally, the Eurasian landmass has been treated as the source of the challenges to the established hegemon, often characterised as the conflict between a land-based Eurasian power and an Atlantic maritime hegemon. This is rooted in the works of Mackinder and later Brzezinski, both of whom identified the region as the source of the challenges to the established hegemon. While this tradition has seen Eurasia become synonymous with Russia, the BRI has led to increased interest in Chinese involvement in several ways.

An initial example of this can be seen in the works of Bruno Macaes, who claims that the concept of Eurasia has seen a revival after years of neglect in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶ Macaes assert that this has seen the idea of Eurasia become a serious political concept, which highlights the imperatives to examine this concept. Regarding China's role in Eurasia, Macaes focuses on China's renewed involvement in the region and that Chinese initiatives and the current geopolitical situation has seen Russia's leadership 'look east' towards China, which has resulted in Moscow being 'closer to Beijing than it is to Berlin'.⁷ While Macaes does not directly refer to Mackinder regarding China's role in Eurasia, the idea of Eurasia as a closer union between Beijing and Moscow can be seen as an updated version of Mackinder's depiction of the

⁶ Macaes, p. 32.

⁷ Macaes, p. 54.

challenge posed by a Russo-German alliance, with China taking on Germany's role. In addition, Macaes describes Chinese strategies to the game of Go and cites Sun Tzu's maxim of 'winning without fighting', both of which characterise China's current approach to foreign policy.⁸ While Macaes highlights the importance of the concept of Eurasia and China's renewed role in the area, it is also necessary to examine how these concepts have reshaped the traditional notions of Eurasia through the BRI.

This potential is alluded to by Thomas Zimmerman, who claims that the BRI is an opportunity for Beijing to reshape the established political order.⁹ Zimmerman emphasises the economic dimension of the initiative, claiming that it is a push to connect Chinese trade with markets in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, which raises the spirit of the old Silk Roads that had once served the same purpose, an image that Beijing has been keen to promote.¹⁰ Unlike the traditional images of Chinese foreign policy being little more than a mercenary pursuit of economic development, Zimmerman asserts that Beijing's commitment to the project is serious, citing China's vast investments into the initiative. This is furthered by his assertion that the project is also intended to wean China off its imports of Middle Eastern oil, which Beijing perceives as being dominated by the United States. This push is attributed to what Beijing perceives as an effort by Washington to contain China, which has been demonstrated by the policies of the Trump administration.¹¹ While Zimmerman does not focus on the implications that the BRI has for the established notion of Eurasia, a possible factor for this can be seen in how China has become the biggest investor in Eurasia since 2009, which displaces Russia from its traditional role. It is this aspect of the BRI and China's engagement in Eurasia that is likely to have further implications for the concept of Eurasia as China increasingly displaces Russia's dominant role in the region.

The potential threat posed by Eurasia seemingly furthered by the BRI is alluded to by Graham Allison, who claims that closer ties between Beijing and Moscow has been an inevitability as a result of their convergence during the post-Cold War era.¹² Allison depicts this relationship as a reversal of the policies and strategies followed by Nixon and Kissinger, with China and Russia posing a joint challenge to the US as opposed to the conflicted relationship

8 Macaes, p. 57.

9 Thomas Zimmerman, "The New Silk Roads: China, the US and the Future of Central Asia", Centre on International Cooperation, October 2015, p. 6.

10 Zimmerman, p. 7.

11 Zimmerman, p. 11.

12 Graham Allison, "China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making", National Interest, 2018.

in the midst of the Sino-Soviet Split.¹³ This ties into many of the observations made by the Russian perspectives of China's Eurasian policies, which has depicted Eurasia as a Sino-Russian entity seeking to challenge American hegemony. Never the less, Allison is sceptical of the potential to create such an entity since Moscow fears Beijing in the long term and that while Russia faces eastwards, its elites look towards the West, which can potentially hamper further Eurasian integration.¹⁴ However, while Allison depicts the potential of a Eurasian order dominated by a closer Sino-Russian relationship, the implications of these shifts for the concept of Eurasia as a geopolitical entity is largely overlooked.

This potential challenge is also furthered by Andrew Kuchins, who claims that the United States had previously overlooked Chinese moves in Eurasia, such as the establishment of the SCO.¹⁵ Kuchins asserts that the concept of Eurasia itself had become almost non-existent in the 1990s but had experienced an uptick of interest by the militarisation of the American presence in the region during the War on Terror.¹⁶ This move was viewed by both Beijing and Moscow as an American attempt to gain a foothold in their near abroad under the guise of combatting terrorism. It is strategies such as this and the Obama administration's 'Pivot to Asia', which Kuchins claims serves as one of the motivations for Chinese initiatives in Eurasia such as the BRI.¹⁷ This is utilised alongside the creation of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, which Kuchins asserts is a result of China's lack of voting rights at the IMF, with moves to gain a greater Chinese voice in these established initiatives being frequently vetoed by Washington.¹⁸ It is the creation of alternative international institutions by China such as the AIIB and the BRI that are illustrative of China's wider attempts to create an alternative international system to bypass the established international order by creating shadow institutions. It is this aspect that illustrates the wider challenge that Chinese initiatives can pose to the established international order.

2.2 *Danger or Opportunity: the Russian Perspective*

While China's involvement in Eurasia has been characterised as a threat in much of the Western literature on the topic, its implications in the Russian standpoint have been somewhat more complex. This is due to how Chinese

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kuchins, p. 126.

¹⁶ Kuchins, p. 127.

¹⁷ Kuchins, p. 128.

¹⁸ Kuchins, p. 129.

initiatives in Eurasia such as the BRI fits with several of Russia's own foreign policy objectives, most notably to counter the advances of the United States, while providing a challenge to Russia's role as the established hegemon in the region. It is these two contradicting notions that characterise the Russian perspective of China in Eurasia.

The Russian perspective on China's role in Eurasia is initially raised by Aleksandr Lukin, who depicts the closer ties between Beijing and Moscow as being a departure from the more hostile relationship of the Cold War.¹⁹ He asserts that such a relationship has been an inevitable due to the geopolitical developments in the region, something that has accelerated long after the publication of Lukin's book.²⁰ He asserts that the primary geopolitical conflict is a unified Eurasia against North America, which resembles Mackinder's hypothesis. It is Lukin's depiction of the ties between China and Russia that is suggestive of the shifts in the perception of Eurasia, which has increasingly become a Sino-Russian entity rather than a Russian one, a development that will be subject to further exploration.

The complex implications that Chinese initiatives in Eurasia have for Russia is raised by Shankal Abilov's depiction of Great Power competition in the Caspian Region. In reference to Mackinder's hypothesis, Abilov claims that the Caspian Region overlaps with the Pivot Area of Mackinder's treatise, which is also part of the route that the BRI encompasses, furthering the geopolitical significance of the region.²¹ While Abilov claims that there is an overlap between Chinese and Russian objectives, he asserts that this is primarily in security concerns and that Moscow perceives China as a potential challenge with fears over Chinese economic hegemony in Eurasia.²² This echoes Allison's assertion that China is a short term ally for Russia and a long term challenger. Never the less, Abilov asserts that China plays a crucial role in Eurasia although he does not fully explore the implications that this has for the concept of Eurasia beside the fears regarding China's economic dominance in the region.²³

The possibilities that the BRI could grant Moscow is alluded to by Antonia Habova, who cites the potential for a stronger Sino-Russian relationship due to their overlapping objectives as alluded to earlier.²⁴ Habova claims that

19 Aleksandr Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon*, 2003, p. 170.

20 Lukin, p. 224.

21 Shankhal Abilov, "The New Great Game over the Caspian Region: Russia, the USA and China in the Same Melting Pot", *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, p. 31.

22 Abilov, p. 47.

23 Abilov, p. 50.

24 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*, 8.1, 2015, p. 68.

the potential for a Sino-Russian alliance in Eurasia has been a concern for Washington. The shift away from the traditional interpretation of Chinese foreign policy as being primarily concerned with economic development is also alluded to by Habova when she claims that one of the goals of this initiative is to eclipse the U.S. in Eurasia as well as propelling the Renminbi to global status.²⁵ In recent years, this has seen the promotion of the 'Petro yuan' in oil rich states subjected to American sanctions as well as a somewhat diminished American presence in the region. It is these developments that illustrate the wider implications of the BRI, although Habova does not examine what these are for the concept of Eurasia itself.

The potential benefits that Chinese initiatives in Eurasia have for Russia is alluded to by Nikita Lomagin, who claims that China's model of state capitalism and development is a potential template for Moscow to follow.²⁶ This serves as part of China's challenge to the dominant paradigms, most notably to the common assumption that democracy and capitalism are interlinked, which has been one of the dominant norms of the Post Cold War era. Lomagin identifies potential support for Chinese initiatives due to it being viewed positively in Russia and that the resources of Asian Russia are of particular importance to China as a result of Beijing's attempts to wean China off its dependency on Middle Eastern oil, which is reliant on maritime routes.²⁷ From this, there again appears to be a degree of continuity between Chinese initiatives and Mackinder's depiction of the Heartland, with the BRI serving as part of China's quest for Eurasia's resources to make itself less vulnerable to a maritime blockade.

2.3 *The Return of China: the Chinese Perspective*

Unlike the Western and Russian standpoints on Chinese involvement in Eurasia, the Chinese viewpoint is derived from a largely different set of historical precedents and experiences to the common preconceptions of Eurasia. This comes in the invocation of the Silk Roads rather than the common notions of the Great Game and the Cold War, which have played a role in shaping the Western and Russian images of Eurasia. It is the nature of these experiences that is initially suggestive of how China perceives its role in Eurasia as well as how the BRI is illustrative of China's approach to global governance.

25 Habova, p. 65.

26 Nikita Lomagin, "Foreign Policy Preferences of Russia's Energy Sector: A Shift to Asia?" In *Russia, Eurasia and the New Geopolitics of Energy* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2015) p. 137.

27 Lomagin, p. 157.

An example of this can be seen in Xing Li and Wan Wang, who assert that the BRI is a Chinese 'grand strategy'.²⁸ They advocate the creation of a Eurasian strategy by Beijing, since this is necessary to connect Asia to Europe, a goal that the BRI is intended to pursue. This is furthered by their assertion that with the advent of high speed rail, land routes are more advantageous for trade than maritime ones are, a sentiment that echoes Mackinder's warnings regarding the speed of rail routes in challenging Britain's maritime hegemony.²⁹ Mackinder's vision is further referenced by Xing and Wan's claim that the route of the BRI and that of the old Silk Roads is consistent with the Heartland depicted in the Geographical Pivot of History, which underlines the continuity of Mackinder's vision for the geopolitics of the 21st century.³⁰ While they raise the possibility of Chinese initiatives seemingly continuing the precedent outlined by Mackinder, Xing and Wan do not examine the implications that these would have on the notion of Eurasia, which requires further examination.

The roots of the BRI are alluded to by Tan Wei Lim, who claims that the initiative is simply a continuation of China's previous policies in Eurasia under the 'Go West' banner during the early years of the 21st century rather than being a new project created in 2013.³¹ Lim depicts the BRI as working alongside other Chinese international institutions such as the AIIB, which further demonstrates how the BRI alongside other Chinese initiatives in Eurasia are an expression of China's vision of global governance.³² Lim also demonstrates the continuity of Mackinder's vision by claiming that China's primary target in Eurasia is Central Asia, which echoes the depiction of the Pivot Area.³³ This is further underlined by the emphasis on land corridors, which raises the spectre of Mackinder's Eurasian land power that is largely invulnerable to maritime blockades. Lim also suggests that the BRI is an example of how China perceives its' role in Eurasia and beyond by drawing links between the BRI and the Silk Road of the Tang dynasty, an image that Beijing has been keen to promote.³⁴ It is this aspect alongside the geopolitical tradition established by Mackinder that will characterise China's approach to Eurasia.

28 Xing Li and Wan Wang, "The Silk Road Economic Belt and the China Dream Relationship: A Strategy or Tactics?", *Sociology Study*, 5:3, March 2015, p. 169.

29 Xing and Wan, p. 171.

30 Xing and Wan, p. 170.

31 Tan Wei Lim, "The One Belt One Road Narratives", *China and the World*, 1.1, 2018, p. 2.

32 Lim, p. 3.

33 Lim, p. 6.

34 Lim, p. 17.

The possibility that the Chinese initiatives can serve as an example of China's approach to global governance is underlined by Jia Qingguo, who asserts that China's foreign policy goals have become increasingly political in nature.³⁵ This stands in contrast to the common depiction of Chinese foreign policy being little more than the pursuit of economic goals. Jia claims that Chinese initiatives in Eurasia have grown stronger, with security concerns being one of the mutual issues that Beijing shares with the governments of the region.³⁶ Regarding China's approach to global governance, Jia asserts that Chinese initiatives are indicative of the possible leadership role that Beijing can play, which illustrates one of the wider implications that Chinese initiatives have for the concept of Eurasia although Jia does not fully explore this outcome.

The wider implications of the BRI in the Chinese perspective can be seen in Leung Ping Chung's view that the initiative can serve as a platform for global collaboration. This is suggestive of how Chinese policymakers view the BRI as being more than a simple mercenary venture and instead an expression of China's version of globalisation, which has gained traction as a result of the apparent vacuum left by the 'America First' approach followed by the Trump administration. While Leung does discuss the wider potential of the BRI, he largely overlooks the implications it has for the concept of Eurasia, which illustrates one of the recurring gaps in the literature regarding Chinese initiatives in Eurasia.

3 The Geopolitical Tradition of Eurasia

While the exact nature of the depictions of Eurasia has varied in character and scope, they have been unified by several common elements. One of these is how it is depicted as a primarily land-based entity, often engaged in a primordial conflict with maritime powers. The composition of Eurasia has also been characterised as being east of Germany and west of the Sea of Japan, rendering it as an entity that encompasses both China and Russia.³⁷ It is the latter that has dominated the established notions and discourses of Eurasia due to the geopolitical challenges of the 20th century where Russia became

35 Jia Qingguo, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: China's Experiment in Multilateral Leadership", *SRC Hokudai*, 16, 2015, p. 113.

36 Jia, p. 117.

37 John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (Allen Lane, London, 2007), p. 19.

FIGURE 1 *The Geographical Pivot of History*: Map of the “Heartland Theory,” as published by Mackinder in 1904. The map is in the public domain.

synonymous with the primary threats to the established hegemon of this era. The roots of the common notions of Eurasia as a geopolitical concept can be traced to the theories of Halford J. Mackinder, most notably his 1904 treatise, *The Geographical Pivot of History*.

As Figure 1 illustrates, Mackinder’s vision has been one of the primary sources of the depiction of Eurasia as a geopolitical challenger with the ‘Pivot Area’ being consistent with the later depictions of Eurasia. This encompassed Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which illustrates the consistency of these regions as being vital to the overall control of Eurasia.³⁸ It is this tradition that Chinese initiatives such as the BRI have entered by encompassing the same regions identified by Mackinder’s treatise. It is the challenge to control this region that has been the issue for the would-be masters of Eurasia and the powers that sought to prevent the emergence of such an entity.

Prior to Mackinder’s treatise, the dominant Great Powers were largely sea powers, most notably the United Kingdom, since maritime routes were the quickest and most efficient means of transportation of the time, something that enabled the European powers to carve out large, overseas empires in Africa and Asia.³⁹ The watershed moment for this came with the advent and proliferation of rail travel, which enabled the transportation of armies

³⁸ Mackinder, p. 428.

³⁹ Bruno Macaes, *Belt and Road: A Chinese World Order* (C. Hurst & Co. Ltd, 2018) p. 120.

and trade across land routes as quickly as they could be transported by sea. This development was identified by Mackinder as being instrumental in the establishment of a land-based Eurasian empire since previous Eurasian land powers such as the Mongol Khanate had trouble in connecting and consolidating their gains.⁴⁰ By utilising these routes, Mackinder believed that a land-based Eurasian empire could potentially be invulnerable to a maritime blockade by a sea power such as Britain.⁴¹ This served as part of Mackinder's warning to the British establishment regarding the challenges to the British Empire at the dawn of the 20th century.

The key to this Eurasian challenger to the British Empire came in what Mackinder termed as the 'pivot area', straddling Eastern Europe and Central Asia.⁴² This area possessed both abundant amounts of resources and was impervious to a maritime blockade. As a result, this area was central to the designs of any would be master of Eurasia, with control of this region guaranteeing control of Eurasia or the Heartland in Mackinder's terminology. By achieving this, the Eurasian empire would be in a strong position to gain further dominance over the 'world island', which would lead to an inevitable conflict with sea powers.

It is from the concepts of the pivot area and the Heartland that has seen the notion of Eurasia become entwined with Russia. Mackinder depicted the challenger to British hegemony emanating from the Heartland as either a Russo-German coalition or German suzerainty over the Russian Empire, which would grant Germany access to the Heartland's resources.⁴³ This was expressive of the primary geopolitical challenges facing Britain at the time, which came in the Anglo-Russian competition over the Indian subcontinent during the Great Game and the increasing Anglo-German rivalry in the lead up to the First World War. While Mackinder's theories appeared to predict the geopolitical course of the 20th century, his warnings largely fell on deaf ears in Britain.

Ironically, it was in Germany where Mackinder's ideas would find a receptive audience. Mackinder's works had a notable influence on the theories of Karl Haushofer and Carl Schmitt, both of whom were the leading theorists in German geopolitical strategies during the Second World War. Haushofer's advocacy of a German alliance with the Soviet Union or German domination of it to access the resources of the Eurasian landmass was reminiscent of

⁴⁰ Mackinder, p. 432.

⁴¹ Mackinder, p. 434.

⁴² Mackinder, p. 435–6.

⁴³ Ibid.

the potential challenge from the Heartland that Mackinder had identified.⁴⁴ Haushofer's theories would influence Germany's pursuit of lebensraum and the 'great push east' that would characterise German strategies during the war. This would also see the field of geopolitics and Mackinder's vision receive a somewhat unsavoury reputation as the 'handmaiden of German expansionism'. In the case of Haushofer, it was the challenge posed by Eurasia that served as a guideline for German strategies.

Mackinder's notions of Eurasia would find another lease of life with the advent of the Cold War. This saw American strategists take an interest in Mackinder's strategies to inform their attempts to counter the Soviet Union. The Cold War continued the perception of Eurasia as a Russian entity as a result of the challenge posed by the USSR as well as furthering Mackinder's hypothesis regarding the conflict between land and sea powers, with Soviet land power challenging American sea power. Mackinder's ideas had a notable influence on the Carter administration's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, which was expressed in his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard*. Brzezinski claimed that the continuation of American hegemony was reliant on its management of Eurasia to prevent a challenger from emerging in the region.⁴⁵ By doing so, the United States took up Britain's role in Mackinder's hypothesis while Russia continued to be the threat emanating from the Eurasian Heartland.

As with Haushofer's adoption of Mackinder's theories, the notion of Eurasia became influential with those who sought to challenge the dominance of maritime hegemony. This came in the form of the Russian Eurasianist, Aleksandr Dugin's, 1997 work, *The Foundation of Geopolitics*. Often described as 'Putin's brain', Dugin applied the concepts of Eurasia to the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, a period that had eerily resembled the Germany where Haushofer's theories took hold.⁴⁶ Dugin advocated the creation of a Russian led Eurasian empire to challenge and ultimately overthrow American hegemony.⁴⁷ The primary nodes of this Eurasian entity were defined as an axis between Moscow, Berlin, Tehran and Tokyo, all of which would be unified by mutual anti-Americanism. Unlike Haushofer, Dugin suggests that this entity would not be built through conquest but rather through subversion carried out

44 Holger H Henning, "Geopolitik: Haushofer, Hitler and Lebensraum", In *Geopolitics: Geography and Strategy* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 220.

45 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 31.

46 Andreas Umland, "Aleksandr Dugin's Transformation from a Lunatic Fringe Figure into a Mainstream Political Publicist 1980–98", *Journal of Eurasia Studies*, 1, p. 146.

47 John Dunlop, "Aleksandr Dugin's Foundation of Geopolitics", *Demokratizatsiya*, 21.1, January 2004, p. 2.

by the Russian 'special services' and their allies, a notion that appears chilling in the context of allegations of Russian meddling in the present day. Dugin's strategies regarding subversion also appear to characterise the changes in Great Power politics in recent years as symbolised by the fabled Gerasimov Doctrine. As with Haushofer, Dugin utilised the concepts of Mackinder to create an entity that Mackinder's theories had originally been a warning about.

While these different strands emerged at differing periods and geopolitical contexts, they are unified by several common elements. This includes the depiction of Eurasia as a land based power engaged in a primordial conflict with sea powers, which the former seeks to overthrow. In addition, this also has presented Eurasia as being synonymous with Russia due to the geopolitical experiences of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is this tradition that the BRI will likely alter by presenting China as an equally important part of Eurasia, a development that has a precedent in the overlooked aspects of the established geopolitical notions of Eurasia.

3.1 *How Does China Fit into This?*

The potential for a greater Chinese role in Eurasia was originally identified by Mackinder's treatise that had given rise to the concept of Eurasia in geopolitics. While the Russo-German dynamics of the Heartland have been the subject of the greatest attention due to the political context of the 20th century, Mackinder identified another potential competitor for control of the Heartland. This came in the form of 'Chinese organised by Japanese', which could overthrow the Russian Empire to seize control of the pivot area.⁴⁸ Unlike the Russo-German powers depicted by Mackinder, which were primarily land-based entities, this Sino-Japanese empire possessed a maritime dimension, which rendered it a hybrid power.

While this Sino-Japanese power did not come to pass, it nevertheless presents an indication of the potential for China in Eurasia. This is in how China possesses the features of a hybrid power due to it being a land-based power with a maritime dimension, which has been emphasised by China's rapid naval build-up. If the depiction of Eurasia as a Russian entity charted the course for the 20th century, it is possible to claim that Mackinder's other depiction of the challenges of the Heartland will have more in common with the 21st century than it has with the depiction of Eurasia as a Russo-German entity.

The potential for China in Eurasia was also identified by Dugin in a section of the *Foundation of Geopolitics* called 'the Fall of China'. Unlike the common view of Sino-Russian relations, which is often presented as an increasingly

⁴⁸ Mackinder, p. 435.

intertwined security relationship, Dugin labels China as one of the primary threats to his proposed Eurasian empire, claiming that it will push northwards towards the Russian Far East and Central Asia.⁴⁹ To counter this threat, Dugin advocates the seizure of China's northern provinces as a 'security belt' and to compel China to instead push towards Southeast Asia as 'geopolitical compensation'.⁵⁰ It is this claim which illustrates the potential for China in Eurasia as well as suggesting that the claim of Dugin being Putin's mastermind has been somewhat overstated. On the other hand, Dugin's emphasis on the non-military means of building a Eurasian empire have been mirrored in Chinese foreign policy, which has been characterised as 'winning without fighting' based on Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. It is this dimension that is also suggestive of how Chinese projects such as the BRI are symbolic of China's foreign policy strategies.

The notion of China in Eurasia, while less pronounced than Russia, has never the less been a long-running precedent in the geopolitical tradition of Eurasia, stemming back from Mackinder's original theories. It is through these lenses that it is necessary to explore how the BRI is illustrative of the ways that China has reshaped the common notions of Eurasia and whether it is a possible mechanism for further Eurasian integration.

4 China and Eurasia

While the common notions of Eurasia tap into the geopolitics of the 19th and 20th centuries, China's involvement in Eurasia is rooted in experiences that predate the involvement of Russia and the Western powers. This is expressed by John Darwin in *After Tamerlane*, which claims that China is one of the few would be rulers of Eurasia that remains intact, citing the overlap between the borders of the Qing empire and modern China.⁵¹ It is these experiences that also show the precedent of a major Asian power shaping Eurasia in the form of the Mongol Khanate that controlled much of Eurasia in the 13th century. It is this example that sets a pattern for China to follow as well as being an early demonstration of Mackinder's hypothesis with the Khanate's growth rendering the exercise of centralised control over it increasingly difficult, which contributed to the fragmentation of the empire created by Genghis Khan and his successors.

⁴⁹ Dunlop, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Dunlop, p. 11.

⁵¹ Darwin, p. 127.

FIGURE 2 Map of the Mongol Empire, Canuckguy et al., Wikimedia Commons, CC-BY-SA 4.0. (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Great_Mongol_Empire_map.svg) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>).

The precedent of the Mongol Khanate as a major Asian power shaping Eurasia is illustrated by Figure 2. This shows how it encompassed a significant part of Eurasia, including much of present day China, Central Asia, Eastern Europe and European Russia. This suggests that China's present involvement in the region under the BRI follows a tradition prior to the forging of Eurasia as a largely Russian entity established in later years. It is also this case that illustrates an early example of Mackinder's hypothesis in that the Mongol empire lacked the infrastructure required to effectively connect its territorial gains, which underlines the problems of creating a land power prior to the advent of rail travel, an issue that led to the Khanate's fragmentation in its later years.⁵²

Possibly the most dominant Chinese experience of Eurasia was the legacy of the Silk Roads (丝绸之路). This was often held up as a demonstration of China's power and prosperity throughout its imperial history and has also been viewed as an early example of globalisation in its connection of Chinese trade with the Islamic world and later Europe.⁵³ As part of the shifts in China's international identity in the post-Cold War era, the Silk Roads have been invoked by Beijing as part of a wider effort to utilise China's imperial past as a source

52 Reuven Amitai and David Morgan, *The Mongol Empire and its Legacy* (Brill, London, 2000) p. 267.

53 Frankopan, p. 517.

of national pride, as symbolised by the rise of the China Dream (中国梦).⁵⁴ It is this process that the justification of the BRI is the latest chapter of as well as being the current phase of China's renewed engagement with Eurasia.

It is the legacy of the Silk Roads that has influenced China's integration in Eurasia in several ways. Firstly, the BRI can be seen as a demonstration of China's prestige and prosperity as well as being an economic initiative. As with the original Silk Roads, the BRI serves to further Beijing's domestic and international legitimacy which comes at a time where China's vision of global governance and globalisation has been articulated in recent years, which are grounded in the experiences of China's past.⁵⁵ It is the invocation of the legacy of the Silk Road that is illustrative of the changes in China's Post-Cold War identity, which has been in step with the shifts in Chinese foreign policy objectives. As with the notions of Eurasia outlined by Mackinder and Dugin, the Silk Roads demonstrate the precedent of a major Asian power shaping Eurasia, something that has been furthered by the rise of the BRI.

The second dominant set of China's experiences in Eurasia is the threats emanating from China's borderlands. Throughout Chinese history, successive dynasties had sought to secure China's border regions from the threats posed by nomadic tribes, most notably the Mongols and the Jurchens, both of which played a notable role in overthrowing Chinese dynasties.⁵⁶ It was these challenges that saw the shift in the nature of Chinese strategies, the most notable example being China largely foregoing its maritime dimension after the return of Zheng He's Treasure Fleet, which saw a renewed focus on China's near abroad. This decision has often been interpreted as China seemingly foregoing the opportunity to create an overseas empire, which would be carried out by the European empires.⁵⁷ In the vein of Brzezinski's *The Grand Chessboard*, China needed to effectively manage Eurasia to prevent a serious threat from emerging in its borderlands, with the failure to do so often leading to the collapse of a dynasty, one of the examples being the Jurchen invasion that overthrew the Ming dynasty in 1644 to create the Qing dynasty.

The Chinese experiences of Eurasia have been characterised by both the prestige of the Silk Roads and the threats emanating from China's near abroad. It is these experiences that serve as a precedent for Chinese engagement with

54 Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategy in the Post American Era* (CN Times Books, New York, 2015) p. 210.

55 Ibid.

56 Howard French, *Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push to Global Power* (Scribe Books, London, 2017) p. 100.

57 French, p. 108.

Eurasia as well as influencing the nature of China's strategy towards the region, which has been expressed through the case of the BRI.

4.1 *China's Return to Eurasia*

While China's experiences of Eurasia largely predate those of Russia and the West in the region, the BRI serves as the latest phase of China's return to Eurasia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This saw the demise of one of China's primary geopolitical rivals and one of the would-be rulers of Eurasia. The dissolution of the USSR also saw the opening up of the Central Asian republics of the Soviet Union, which possessed resources crucial for China's economic growth, which had become the primary focus of Chinese foreign policy objectives under Deng's reforms.⁵⁸ While the end of the Cold War appeared to signal the apparent irrelevance of the notion of Eurasia, it presented China with the opportunity to reshape the region that had once been jealously guarded by Moscow.

It is the resources of Eurasia that indicated the continuity of the concept of the region as established by Mackinder. Due to its natural resources as well as its geopolitical position, Central Asia has resumed its role as the pivot area, control of which is an imperative for the emergence of a major Eurasian power.⁵⁹ As a result, it is only natural that Beijing should play a greater role in the geopolitics of the region, as demonstrated by Sinopec pumping Kazakh oil and gas to China's Xinjiang province, which marked a departure from Kazakhstan's reliance on Russian firms such as Gazprom.⁶⁰ It is this development that initially demonstrates the impact that China's return has had on Eurasia.

The case of Kazakhstan also illustrates the common roots of the BRI in the form of Xi's speech at Astana announcing the project in 2013. While there has been debate over whether this initiative is the creation of a Chinese grand strategy, it is never the less a significant watershed in Chinese foreign policy, which had largely been characterised as little more than a mercenary pursuit of economic objectives.⁶¹ Alongside the promotion of the China Dream, the BRI can be seen as an integral part of China's approach to global governance under Xi. This has seen the utility of China's past as a guide for its current foreign policy strategies, in this case, the utilisation of the legacy of the Silk Roads to inform Chinese engagement with Eurasia. This serves to shape the current

58 Khan and Javaid, p. 158.

59 Colin Mackerras, *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia* (Routledge, London, 2009) p. 135.

60 Abilov, p. 41.

61 Macaes, p. 18.

FIGURE 3 The Routes of the BRI. Route of the New Silk Road, (http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2017-06/09/content_40997481.htm)

state of Eurasia just as the geopolitical paradigms of the 20th century had once done.

While the BRI has often been viewed as primarily an economic initiative, it is the invocation of the Silk Roads that is suggestive of how the initiative can be seen as an expression of Beijing's perception of China's global role and identity. This has seen the invocation of the experiences of the Silk Roads to justify the initiative, which is in line with the current Chinese perception of China's role alongside the promotion of the China Dream. It is this aspect that is suggestive of one of the wider implications of the BRI for Eurasia in that the development of the initiative is an example of how China's experiences in Eurasia can play a notable role in reshaping the concept of Eurasia.

As Figure 3 shows, the proposed land corridors of the BRI covers much of Eurasia, including both the Pivot Area and the Heartland identified by Mackinder and the geopolitically crucial Caspian Basin identified by Abilov.⁶² The emphasis on rail routes is suggestive of how Beijing seems to share Xing and Wan's view on the superiority of land routes over maritime ones.⁶³ This has provided Beijing with an opportunity to better connect its position in Eurasia, a task that had largely been impossible for the previous Great Powers in the region. It is the overlap of these regions as well as the nature of the BRI

62 Abilov, p. 31.

63 Xing and Wan, p. 171.

that illustrates how China's impact on Eurasia is illustrative of both continuity and change regarding the emergence of a land-based power emerging from the region.

As well as having potential implications for the concept of Eurasia as a whole, the BRI also has implications for the traditional external powers in Eurasia. As the literature has demonstrated, this has come in how the initiative has been viewed as a potential challenge to American hegemony as well as being both an opportunity and a challenge for Russia in its traditional sphere of influence. These are among several of the possible issues for Eurasia that the BRI and China's wider engagement poses for the region as well as beyond it.

4.2 *Implications*

One of the immediate implications of the BRI for the other external actors present in Eurasia is as a potential challenge, a sentiment that has often been expressed throughout the Western perspectives on the subject as well as a few of the Russian views of it. This is most notable in the case of American interests in the region, with Washington viewing China's moves as a strategic as well as an economic challenge.⁶⁴ It is this challenge that raises the spectre of Mackinder's depictions of Eurasia with the BRI's land corridors being a means to bypass maritime routes, which would adversely affect one of Washington's primary strategic advantages in the form of its navy. With the increasingly contentious state of Sino-American relations, the BRI can be seen as a case of Chinese land power conflicting with American sea power, opening another chapter in Mackinder's treatise. This illustrates both the changes and the continuity that the BRI brings to Eurasia in that while China may play a greater role in Eurasia, the challenge that it poses remains largely consistent.

Throughout the literature, the image of Eurasia has shifted from being a largely Russian entity to a Sino-Russian partnership, which has been one of the primary influences that China has had on the region. The potential of the BRI as a mechanism for further Eurasian integration has been furthered by developments in Europe and the Middle East, which has seen the convergence of Chinese and Russian interests identified by Lo and Allison move at a faster pace. This development has been furthered by the conflicting relationship between Moscow and Washington, which has seen Russia move further into China's geopolitical orbit. Such a development appears to go against the characterisation of American foreign policy under Trump as a 'reverse Nixon' that attempts to create a closer Russo-American relationship to counter

64 Zimmerman, p. 14.

China's rise.⁶⁵ Instead, it is likely that the current tensions can provide further opportunities for the BRI with Beijing and Moscow seemingly sharing the common goal of challenging American dominance, furthering the revised idea of the concept of Eurasia.

It is the BRI that has also been symbolic of China's wider challenge to the established international order since it plays a role in shaping China as an alternative to this system. While this has often come in the presentation, the BRI is an expression of China's vision for an alternative world order alongside existing Chinese international institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a loose military alliance which has often been interpreted as a 'second Warsaw Pact' as well as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, known as the 'Chinese IMF'. By following this pattern, the BRI alongside these organisations can serve as a means for the Chinese integration of Eurasia, which is in line with the recent perceptions of Eurasia as a Sino-Russian entity that challenges American foreign policy objectives.

In keeping with the Russian depiction of Chinese initiatives in Eurasia, the initiative's primary nodes can be seen as the result of the present geopolitical conditions, which further renders it as a challenge to American dominance. This is in how China has been able to fill the economic void created by American sanctions on Russia and Iran to further its foreign policy objectives, as illustrated by China's position in the latter after the American withdrawal from the JCPOA deal. This has granted China a near monopoly on Iranian oil as many European firms sought to leave the country over the fears of American sanctions. It is this development that has the potential to see both Moscow and Tehran become major nodes for a Eurasia integrated under the BRI, which furthers the continuity of Mackinder's warnings over the challenges emanating from the Eurasian landmass.⁶⁶ Thus, one of the implications of the BRI for the idea of Eurasia is that it will further the perception of it as a Sino-Russian land based entity that seeks to challenge American maritime power just as the land powers of the previous century had once sought to challenge Britain's hegemony.

On the other hand, the BRI has implications for Russia, the region's traditional hegemon. Recent years have seen the post-Cold War convergence of Chinese and Russian foreign policy objectives grow at a greater rate than previously, as a result of geopolitical developments in Ukraine and Syria as well as both being labelled as 'revisionist powers' by Washington seeking to challenge

65 Allison.

66 Habova, p. 68.

American geopolitical primacy.⁶⁷ This has seen greater cooperation between Beijing and Moscow within Eurasia and outside of it, with Chinese initiatives seemingly moving in step with their more established Russian counterparts. It is this cooperation that illustrates how the BRI can serve as a potential means for further Eurasian integration by cooperating with or co-opting established organisations and projects, which furthers Beijing's attempts to depict its' projects as being based on mutuality, a concept that has been of frequent recurrence in China's foreign policy discourse.⁶⁸

China's engagement with Eurasia via projects such as the BRI has also been an expression of China's approach to global governance. This has been previously demonstrated in the literature on the subject, where some observers such as Lukin, have cited China's model of development for other nations to follow. While Beijing has been somewhat hesitant to promote this model in recent years, it has become increasingly influential with the elites within the nations of Eurasia as well as for the developing world as a whole.⁶⁹ It is this development that has been the most controversial dimensions of Chinese foreign policy with the common accusation that the Chinese model and Chinese initiatives promote the rise of authoritarian political norms under the guise of economic development.⁷⁰ It is this fear that is in line with the image of an emerging 'authoritarian internationale' under the guidance of Beijing and Moscow, which further ties into the fears of a Sino-Russian alliance aimed at challenging American hegemony.⁷¹ In this case, the BRI can be interpreted as the further spread of China's model to a greater scale as well as seemingly continuing the common Western fears over the challenge it can potentially pose.

While the BRI and other Chinese initiatives have often been viewed as the possible beneficiaries of the convergence of Chinese and Russian objectives, there is the potential for these initiatives to eclipse Russian influence in the region. As outlined in the literature, it is this threat that has seen China be perceived by Russia as both a collaborator and a challenger.⁷² This relies on the maintenance of the balance of Moscow's relationship with Beijing and its' own Great Power ambitions, a task that is likely to become more difficult with the development of the BRI. Should this come to pass, it is equally possible

67 Graham Allison, *Destined for War* (Scribe, London, 2016) p. 150.

68 Tom Miller, *China's Asian Dream* (Scribe, London, 2017) p. 98.

69 Stefan Halper, *The Beijing Consensus* (Basic Books, New York, 2010) p. 139.

70 Ibid.

71 Gene Germanovich, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: A Threat to American Interests in Central Asia?" *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 6.1, 2008, p. 28.

72 Tom Harper, "Towards an Asian Eurasia? Mackinder's Heartland Theory and China's Return to Eurasia", *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1.1, September 2017, p. 27.

that Moscow will view Chinese initiatives as a challenge to its objectives just as Dugin had once advocated. Never the less, these issues have been overlooked in pursuit of a common goal for the time being, which illustrates that the BRI can see either a Sino-Russian partnership or greater competition between the two as equal outcomes.

Regarding the concept of Eurasia, the BRI can also be interpreted as a continuation of the precedent that had been set by the Silk Roads where a major Asian power plays a significant role in shaping Eurasia. The proposed routes will see the regions' economies become increasingly integrated with Beijing's should its ambitions to connect Chinese trade with European markets, a move that is in line with China becoming the largest investor in the region.⁷³ It is this precedent that demonstrates how the experiences of the past have been utilised by Beijing as both a guide to its foreign relations and the image that it seeks to portray, with the experiences of the Silk Road playing as much a role in shaping Eurasia as the geopolitical struggles of the previous century had done. This in turn will likely alter the traditional paradigm of Eurasia as a primarily Russian entity, with China playing a notable role in Eurasia alongside Russia as well as being one of the primary geopolitical challenges for the established system. It is this aspect that serves as part of the many implications that the initiative has for Eurasia and beyond.

5 Wider Issues

With the advent of the BRI as the latest chapter of China's engagement with Eurasia, future conceptions of Eurasia as a geopolitical concept will likely consider China to be as integral a part of Eurasia as Russia has traditionally been. This follows the established precedent of an Asian power playing a significant role in shaping Eurasia as established by the Silk Roads and Mackinder's depiction of a Eurasia controlled by 'Chinese organised by Japanese'. China's experiences of Eurasia will also play a role in shaping its approach to the region which comes at a time where it is seemingly following a path largely different from the idea of the 'Great Convergence'.⁷⁴ In this sense, the BRI serves to illustrate the path that Chinese foreign policy is following as well as how it will reshape Eurasia.

73 Kirill Nourzhanov, "Central Asia's Domestic Stability in Official Russian Security Thinking under Yeltsin and Putin", In *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia* (Routledge, London, 2009) p. 168.

74 Liu, p. 58.

As well as reshaping the common notions of Eurasia, the BRI provides both an alternative platform for Eurasian integration as well as the framework for China's vision of global governance. While this again serves to reshape the dominant paradigm of Eurasia as being synonymous with Russia, it is also expressive of China's challenge beyond Eurasia in that Beijing seeks to create an alternative international order via institutions such as the BRI to bypass the established international institutions. Regarding global governance, this comes in the form of the Confucian inspired model promoted by China's development against the democratic model promoted by the Western world, which serves as part of the wider challenge China poses, a notion that will be furthered in the vacuum created by the Trump administration.⁷⁵ Thus, the BRI is an expression of the Chinese approach to global governance as well as being part of China's wider challenge.

While the BRI has seen Chinese engagement alter the notion of Eurasia as a geopolitical concept, it also illustrates the continuity of the challenge posed by the Eurasian landmass to the established hegemon. This is due to the initiative's proposed land routes, which serves to connect Eurasia and to bypass maritime routes as well as to further integrate the region. In keeping with the warnings of Mackinder and Brzezinski, this will challenge the hegemony of the United States due to the lack of a significant American presence in the region outside of Afghanistan as well as its potential invulnerability to a maritime blockade. It is this aspect that illustrates the continuity and the changes of the BRI for the Eurasian landmass.

The BRI, along with other Chinese initiatives in Eurasia demonstrate not only how China is as integral to the region as Russia is, but is an expression of China's wider aspirations as well as China's approach to global governance. While the potential for a major Asian power playing a significant role in Eurasia appears to be a break with the traditional notions of Eurasia, such a development, as claimed by Frankopan, is not unusual, with China seemingly returning to a role it had once forfeited. Never the less, there is still a degree of continuity with Mackinder's vision of Eurasia, with Chinese moves in the region echoing the challenge of land based entities seeking to undermine the dominance of a maritime power. As these visions of Eurasia have demonstrated, the concept of Eurasia has remained an integral part of the geopolitics of the present system, which renders China's reshaping of it of particular importance to the current geopolitical developments.

75 Peter Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads* (Bloomsbury, London, 2018) p. 152.