CHAPTER 6

“Marching Westwards”: The Rebalancing of China’s Geostrategy

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Abstract

China should not confine its sights to its coast and borders, and traditional rivals and partners; instead, it should make plans to “move westwards” and establish a new international geostrategic pillar for its Western Development strategy. The “march westwards” strategy is conducive to establishment of more balanced Sino-U.S. relations and helps build Sino-U.S. strategic mutual trust. As its economic interests grow in western countries, China is facing favorable opportunities for participating in multilateral coordination and contributing to its international status. However, the strategy will also bring risks and more attention should be paid to the environment, people’s livelihood, and employment in the invested countries. Consular rules must be improved to better protect local Chinese and help them get integrated into local communities.

This article does not in any way advocate making “marching westwards” a clear written national foreign policy strategy. Rather, it uses this idea to emphasize that as the geo-economic and geo-political situation constantly changes, China needs to have new and comprehensive thinking on geostrategic “rebalancing” that does not lead to clashes between China’s land and sea power.

Keywords

Move westwards – geostrategy – strategic rebalancing – Western Development

The Obama Administration has recently proposed a rebalancing strategy, centered around the idea of a “return to Asia.” Following changes in the global economic and political structure, Russia, India, the E.U. and other major

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global powers have also adjusted their geostrategies. This new round of geopolitical and geo-economic competition between the great powers is becoming increasingly intense. Presently, the focus of U.S. strategy is “shifting eastwards,” while the E.U., India, Russia and other countries are beginning to “look eastwards.” Located at the center of the Asia-Pacific region, China should not limit its sights to its own coasts and borders, or to traditional competitors and partners, but should make strategic plans to “look westwards” and “march westwards.”

I The Western Development Strategy Needs a New International Geostrategic Pillar

The economic and political focus of ancient China has always been on inland areas. In fact, the Chinese people have almost no history of overseas territorial expansion. The Silk Road, which ran through the western part of Eurasia, was once an important bridge for communication between eastern and western civilizations, as well as for commercial activities. However, in modern times, the western powers and Japan have forced China to have contact with the outside world, both militarily and economically. As this was achieved predominantly by means of sea routes, since that time, modern industry and major cities have been concentrated in China’s coastal areas. In the early years of the reform and opening-up period, the United States, Europe, Japan, and East Asia’s “Four Asian Dragons”—Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, and Singapore—were China’s major foreign economic partners. The Special Economic Zones, which were set up in the southeast of China, widened the gap between coastal and inland areas even further. This meant that for a long time, China's western region lagged behind the rest of the country, both in terms of economic and social development, as well as in its contact with the outside world. It was not until the central government proposed the Western Development Strategy in the year 2000 that there was any great change in this situation. China does not have an international geostrategy in print, but as China’s eastern regions have traditional development advantages, threats to China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity have mainly come from the east. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), foreign policy strategy and military deployments have always focused on East Asia and the Pacific Ocean. Up to now, this has been necessary. However, following the introduction of “The 12th Five Year Plan: Western Development Strategy” and the corresponding domestic development strategies, China needs to put into practice an appropriate foreign geostrategy to support this.