



Beijing's March West: Opportunities and Challenges for China's Eurasian Pivot

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By Michael Clarke

Michael Clarke is Associate Professor at the National Security College, Australian National University. He is an expert on the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia, Central Asian geopolitics, and nuclear proliferation.

Abstract: China's Eurasian frontiers have emerged as a major factor in Beijing's foreign policy through President Xi Jinping's "One Belt, One Road" strategy. The article argues that this strategy has been given impetus by the shifting geopolitical landscape in Central Asia resulting from the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's relative decline, and Beijing's quest for stability in its restive province of Xinjiang.

The People's Republic of China's Eurasian frontiers have once more emerged as major factors in Beijing's foreign policy. President Xi Jinping's recent enunciation of China's "One Belt, One Road" (strategy, comprising an initiative to enhance Eurasian economic connectivity through the construction of a Silk Road Economic Belt and a Maritime Silk Road, has placed Eurasia front and center in China's contemporary foreign policy. Some have argued that Beijing is in the process of its own "pivot" to Asia that will have far-reaching strategic consequences. Matthew Burrows and Robert Manning recently contended that this "pivot west to Eurasia seeks to turn its vulnerability—a border with fourteen nations—into a strategic asset. Together they seek to realize Mackinder's vision of a Eurasian heartland unopposed."

The success of this Eurasian pivot may well prove to be a "nightmare" for the United States as Beijing's economic and strategic heft attracts a weakened Russia into a partnership to stabilize and modernize Eurasia on the basis of "authoritarian state-centric capitalism."¹ In contrast, Jeffrey Payne contends that such fears "should be pushed aside," as Beijing will not only have to confront a region of unpredictable and uncontrollable political forces but also latent Sino-Russian mutual suspicion.²

¹ Matthew Burrows and Robert Manning, "America's Worst Nightmare: Russia and China are Getting Closer," *The National Interest*, Aug. 24, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/americas-worst-nightmare-russia-china-are-getting-closer-13661>.

Such views, however, do not provide an adequate account of either the underlying motives for Beijing's "Eurasian pivot" or the wider regional context in which Chinese policy is operating. Two factors are central in this regard. First, the One Belt, One Road strategy can be seen, in part, as China's response to the Obama Administration's "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia and to Russia's relative decline in Central Asia. Second, the One Belt, One Road (and the Silk Road Economic Belt component especially) is as much about Beijing's domestic concerns as it is about its grand strategy priorities. Of major concern here is China's hold on its important, and often restive, Eurasian frontier regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet. The relative decline of U.S. and Russian influence in Central Asia has provided Beijing with strategic opportunities to expand its reach. Yet, with the intensification of Uyghur and Tibetan opposition to ongoing Chinese rule since 2008 Beijing has seen the need to accelerate the economic development/modernization of these regions as the primary means for achieving their integration into the modern Chinese state. Geopolitics and domestic state-building imperatives are, thus, interwoven in Beijing's Eurasian pivot.

Burrows and Manning's assertion that China's Eurasian pivot could create "a new bipolarity" of "China, Russia and a handful of authoritarian regimes from Central Asia on one pole and the United States, EU and Asian allies and partners on the other" ignores the challenges to Beijing arising from the domestic imperatives of its One Belt, One Road strategy. Payne's position that the United States can afford to disengage strategically from Eurasia, while ultimately framed by the well-established argument that the "United States is naturally oriented to serve as an offshore balancer," nonetheless runs counter to the geopolitical interest that has animated U.S. grand strategy since the end of World War II: to ensure that no one power dominates the Eurasian landmass.³ Washington cannot afford to rely on views that either exaggerate Chinese geopolitical weight in Eurasia or dismiss the fact that the United States retains a strategic stake in its future. Rather, correctly identifying the motives for—and obstacles to—China's One Belt, One Road strategy provides a better guide to the likely future of Chinese power and influence in the region, as well as prospective U.S. policy responses.

Opportunity Knocks: China and Central Asia's Shifting Geopolitics

Prominent Chinese scholar Wang Jisi has argued that China's march westward is a "strategic necessity" as the "eastward shift" in strategic focus of the Obama Administration threatens to lock Sino-U.S. relations into a "zero-sum game" in East Asia. If China's "march westwards" succeeds, "the potential for U.S.-China cooperation" across a variety of fields will increase and "there will be almost no risk of military confrontation between the two." For most of its history, Wang notes, the

² Jeffrey Payne, "China Goes West (and America Shouldn't be Worried)," *The National Interest*, Aug. 28, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-goes-west-america-shouldnt-be-worried-13723>.

³ See, for example, Colin S. Gray, "In Defence of the Heartland: Sir Halford Mackinder and His Critics One Hundred Years On," *Comparative Strategy*, 23, No. 1, 2004, pp. 9-25.

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