

# **Mackinder, Eurasia, and China's One-Belt-One-Road**

## ***Mackinder for the Twenty-first Century***

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Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World.<sup>1</sup>

Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, 1919

**The** lines quoted above reflect Mackinder's own summary of his world view, developed since his first seminal essay in 1904, *The Geographical Pivot of History*. The relevance of his thinking and framework to the situation in the twenty-first century arises from the last paragraph of the 1904 essay. In it, he argues that, under Japanese guidance, China could also one day seek to dominate the pivot area, the term he used to describe what became, in his later writings, the Heartland.

But Mackinder did not himself elaborate on this possibility. He confined himself to what he called the Slav-Teuton confrontation as the cause of the First World War, a subject to be explored later in this essay. It is also remarkable that, though he was among the earliest to factor in the strategic significance of the Railways as the driver in reviving the Heartland, he pays scant attention to the Berlin-Baghdad Railway. The Railway contract was awarded by the Ottoman rulers to the Germans in 1903, and Mackinder wrote his first article in 1904. Yet he did not refer to it in that article. And even when he wrote the book *Democratic Ideals and Reality* in 1919, after the First World War was over, he still did not mention it, except in a throw-away fashion.

Accordingly, it would be in order to first study the principal thoughts laid out by Mackinder in his three main works – the first being the 1904 *The Geographical Pivot of History*, the second being the 1919 book *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, and the third being *The Round World and the Winning of the Peace*, published in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* in

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<sup>1</sup> All references, including page numbers, are taken from the online version of Mackinder's works published by the National Defense University Press, Washington DC, 1942

July 1943. Thereafter, the three directions he picks up can be examined in detail, with a detailed look at the Chinese One-Belt-One-Road strategy at uniting Eurasia under its dominion.

In brief, Mackinder's position is that the heart of Eurasia – he called it pivot area or the Heartland in the different works – is the driver of much of modern history. From antiquity, forces arose in this region and spread westwards, essentially through the use of force. And with each wave of such invasions, western history got a new impulse, and moved forward.

It is noteworthy that he even asserts that the sea-faring Empires of olden times like the Roman, were dependent on control of the land areas around the Mediterranean.

This process of invasions by land was interrupted by the rise of the maritime powers starting from the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Mackinder calls this the Columban period, after Christopher Columbus; Toynbee calls it the da Gama Age, after Vasco da Gama, who opened the sea route to India at about the same time, going around the Cape of Good Hope.

This period of maritime dominance, according to Mackinder, would be ended by the advent of the Railways. Whereas in olden times, the horse and camel were enough to move armies, they could not compete against the steamship; but the Railways could, and would cover the bulk of Eurasia before long – “the century will not be old”, in his descriptive phrase, before the network would be up and ready.

In the process of elaboration, Mackinder offers three lines of inquiry. The first is to describe the First World War [then called the Great War] as a clash between the Slav and the Teuton. This presumably is based on the fact that the Germans and the Austrians were on one side against the Serbs and their benefactor, the Russians. That is not wrong in terms of origins. But it fails to explain why the War dragged on for another year after the Russian Revolution in November 1917. In fact, Lenin's triumph was seen by contemporaries as a master stroke by the Germans. This proved itself to be true after the Russians pulled out of the War in early 1918, with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

The second line of inquiry he opens, but does not pursue, is represented by the Berlin-Baghdad Railway. As mentioned already, it is hard to understand why this does not figure explicitly either in his original essay of 1904, or his book, written after the end of the First World War. The issue certainly occupied much time and effort not only on the part of the British and Germans, but as much of the French and Imperial Russia.

Nonetheless, he does offer this intriguing thought:

Berlin-Bagdad, Berlin-Herat, Berlin-Pekin---not heard as mere words, but visualized on the mental relief map--involve for most Anglo-Saxons a new mode of thought, lately and imperfectly introduced among us by the rough maps of the newspapers. But your Prussian, and his father, and his grandfather have debated such concepts all their lives, pencil in hand.

--- *Democratic Ideals and Reality, 1919 [p 16]*

Even if Mackinder did not elaborate on this, others have; a persuasive case can be made that this was the real cause of the First World War, rather than the Slav-Teuton confrontation. Definitely, the way the British handled the aftermath of the War gives clear indication that they understood the deleterious effects of the Railway on their trading and security interests if it were to come to fruition. In point of fact, some kind of unstable agreement was reached between the Germans and the British by the eve of the War itself; but that reflected the realities of the power balance of the day. As soon as the War ended and Germany was defeated, the British restructured the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire – the building blocks of the Railway – with the aim of ensuring that a similar threat would never arise again. And it held good for the best part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and gave way only in the 1990's, with the destruction of Serb power.

The third line of thinking left behind by Mackinder concerns China. In the 1904 article, almost as a closing thought, aimed at covering all contingencies, he adds a final paragraph:

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, an advantage as yet denied to the Russian tenant of the pivot region.

--- *The Geographical Pivot of History, 1904 [p 193]*

Setting aside the unfortunate reference to the "yellow peril", the notion that China could also control the Pivot Area was far-sighted, and is certainly worth elaborating on, especially in light of the One-Belt-One-Road being promoted vigorously by China in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. There is another obvious error in the argument, and few would fail to catch it: China does not need Japan to organise itself or the strategy. With all these amendments, there can be little doubt that this is the principal geo-strategic threat to the democracies of Asia today.

Here, though, the world is in uncharted territory. Whereas the other two patterns have been tackled and blunted in the past, China has never made such a bold bid for global dominance any time in the history of Eurasia. The Silk Routes, whose heritage is frequently, and incorrectly, invoked by the Chinese leaders and their supporters around the world, were never the dominant reality either economic or military, in ancient times.

This, then, is the substance of the strategic bequest left behind by Mackinder. Straightaway, it must be said that his principal advisement has not been proven by time. Imperial Russia and later especially the Soviet Union did control East Europe and the Heartland, but failed to dominate the world. It is worth pondering over the reasons for this, because they will provide lessons for the future in challenging the attempted domination by China.

The reason is that Geography isn't all: it needs to be coupled with technology and with patterns of trade, either by design or by inadvertence, usually the former. The Soviet Union failed on both these aspects, and it may be worth considering whether the internal system of countries also plays some role. The fact that the USSR frowned on the profit motive made it an unattractive economic partner, since it offered neither investible capital, nor lucrative market. And while it was among the leaders in military and space technology, almost none of it fed into

the civilian sectors. Thus it maintained its hold on the Heartland purely by military means, and once that was weakened by the defeat in the Afghan War of the 1980's, its hold on the region also weakened. The internal system has another very important role to play: it confers legitimacy and therefore coherence on the country's external stance and acceptability abroad. This aspect is growing in significance, both in China and even the US.

### **The first direction: East Europe**

To study the first of the three directions that flow from Mackinder's world view: the issue of an alternative territorial arrangement in Central and Eastern Europe was contemplated as far back as by Napoleon early in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He did not see it through, but his memory is respected in Poland even today for making the attempt.

But the importance of having a string of middle powers between the German and Russian worlds was well understood by the time the First World War ended. Mackinder, not surprisingly, was among the proponents of the strategy. He argued for the creation of a string of middle powers separating Russia and Germany in the 1919 book:

Between the Baltic and the Mediterranean you have these seven non-German peoples, each on the scale of a European state of the second rank--the Poles, the Bohemians (Czechs and Slovaks), the Hungarians (Magyars), the South Slavs (Serbians, Croatians, and Slovenes) ... the nations are locked into a single world system, rightly see in the League of Nations the only alternative to hell on earth, concentrate their attention on the adequate subdivision of East Europe. With a Middle Tier of really independent states between Germany and Russia they will achieve their end, and without it they will not.

----- *Democratic Ideals and Reality, 1919 [p 112]*

Going over the history of these nations makes clear that not all of them are on the same footing as far as delivering on the aims of this strategy is concerned. Some have sided with the Germans in times of war and strategic choice; others have proved unable to play the role envisioned

in this strategy. The one country that has shown both the will and the capacity to fulfil that role is Poland.

Poland has the history of independent existence and of conquest in its own right. And it has an almost equal distrust of the Russians and the Germans. It also has the population base, being the most populous among the middle powers, apart from Ukraine, which is a divided society and still unstable. No wonder Molotov, in seeking the approval of the Supreme Soviet for the Non-Aggression Treaty with the Germans [the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact], described Poland as the "illegitimate child of Versailles".

It is also worth recalling that Napoleon had wanted to re-establish the Polish state in 1807 after he defeated the Prussians, but was dissuaded by Tsar Alexander I whose own Empire contained Polish lands. The compromise was the Duchy of Warsaw, which was itself once more absorbed into Prussia at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

Perhaps even more significant in highlighting the strategic significance of Poland was the guarantee given to Polish independence by Britain in 1939 – the proximate cause of the Second World War. This was the first time that Britain had given such a guarantee to an East European country, and even Churchill, then still in opposition, expressed his astonishment at this development. The guarantee was given by the Chamberlain government after Hitler violated the Munich agreement of the previous September, and occupied Prague. Appeasement was at an end.

This brief account of the growing significance of Poland and these very features of Poland, coupled with a close relationship with the US today, make it relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century too. It is among the few countries that have an internal consensus on the US, and have none of the supercilious disdain that many of the older NATO members have for the way the US has been conducting policy in this century. It remains sensitive to the Russian threat, but in a quiet way, also wary of German power, frequently exercised through the European Union and its institutions in Brussels.

It therefore occasions no surprise that the US has added to its military presence in Poland [along with the Baltics] and has supplied front-line military equipment to them. There is talk of reviving the V Corps, which was one of the major military components deployed in Germany during the Cold War. If that does happen, the likely host this time will be Poland.

This is where the modern rendition of Mackinder is with regard to the Eastern Europe division between the Russians and the Germans. There is a power play to be worked out in Ukraine and, more recently, Belarus. But it is extremely unlikely that Russia will let a united Ukraine pass under NATO-EU influence or control. It has already detached the Crimea; the eastern portions lying east of the River Dnieper may also be lost in that kind of power play. Unless Russia goes through another of its convulsions – not to be ruled out – it is safe to say that a united Ukraine will not be part of the western alliance system. More on this below.

### **The second direction: The Balkans**

The second direction to be examined is the Balkans and thence to Asia. Reference has already been made to the Berlin-Baghdad Railway, the strategy of Wilhelmine Germany to link up with the Ottoman Empire and thus to Baghdad, outflanking the British-controlled sea routes to India and the Persian Gulf. The Railway was not complete by the time the War broke out, and thus could not play the military or commercial role it was intended for.

And once the War was over, and Germany and Turkey defeated, the British [along with the French], ensured that the region was broken up into mutually suspicious sovereignties, so that the link-up would not be easy to establish again, though the Railway was completed just before the outbreak of the Second World War [further discussed below]. In the Balkans, this meant a strong Serbian presence under the umbrella of a Yugoslav state. The Serbs had shown their fighting mettle in the War by holding off the Austrian forces for over a year from August 1914 to October 1915. It finally took a combined offensive led by the Germans, along with their Balkan allies to subdue the Serbs.

This was why the British invested in the creation of Yugoslavia after the First World War, initially as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. With Serbia at the centre and other Slavs – of all confessional identities – it was hoped that they would remain a powerful block to future German aspirations in the Balkans.

And sure enough, the system was tested against Nazi Germany early in the Second World War.



Source:

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/9/9b/Balkan\\_boundary\\_changes\\_1938\\_to\\_1941.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/9/9b/Balkan_boundary_changes_1938_to_1941.jpg)

The maps above show how Germany reconfigured Yugoslavia after they defeated the Serbs in 1941. At the same time, the Germans were active in Turkey, Iraq and Iran as well. Syria had already come under their control after the occupation of France in 1940, through the Vichy Government. Thus it was that by 1941, the Germans had created some semblance of the geographic situation of the First World War – a fragmented Balkan region, a sympathetic Turkey [though officially neutral], and Syria under their control.

Also by this time, the Berlin-Baghdad Railway was complete, though it was fragmented under Turkish, Syrian and Iraqi rule. Of these, as described above, only Iraq was not under German influence. It was

under British influence, though the formal League of Nations mandate had ended in 1932. The last stretches of the Railway were completed by July 1940. All the ingredients were in place for a German move into the heart of West Asia: by this time, Iraq and Iran were also major oil suppliers to the world, including Germany.

In both Baghdad and, further east in Tehran, pro-German sentiment was astir. In Baghdad, it took the form of a coup against Prime Minister Nuri al-Said [who was to meet a terrible end in the revolution of 1958], who fled from Baghdad. Power was taken over by the so-called Golden Square, four pro-German Iraqi Generals, with Rashid Ali as nominal Prime Minister. Rashid Ali, who had been Prime Minister until January 1941, had been consorting with Italy and Germany from his earlier tenure as Prime Minister. Several other Arab anti-British leaders flocked to Baghdad at this time, including Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Palestinian Arab leader.

Rashid Ali and the Golden Square were disposed of after a short war which deposed them in May 1941. Thus ended yet one more effort by the Germans to break through to Iraq.

But the present situation again is redolent of the past power play. Serb power has been broken again, this time by the US playing the demolition role, along with European diplomatic support. The Balkans today bear a striking resemblance to the map given above of the region after the German occupation in 1941. The odd thing here is that, while the diplomatic initiative in breaking up Yugoslavia came from Germany, backed up by its EU partners, it was the US that provided the military muscle to make it happen. Turkey is now again pushing its influence into the Arab world, so far with limited success. In Syria, it faces the combined – half-hearted and uncoordinated though it is – of the Russians and the Americans, who may fairly be regarded as the successors of the British in the strategic sense. In Syria, the Russians are today the principal backers of President Assad, and the opponent of Erdogan's ambitions in Syria. The Americans retain some loose control over the Kurdish areas, and have sanctioned Turkey for, *inter alia*, hostile activities in North-East Syria. In Iraq, the confrontation is more

like a three-way contest, between the US, Iran and a growing assertiveness on the part of Turkey.

A powerful drive for Kurdish autonomy for the Kurds would address these multiple concerns, and obviate the dangers of any kind of territorial recidivism. In a way, it would be the logical extension of the policies put in place after the First World War. At some stage, it may also be advisable to revisit the Balkan settlement of the 1990's, and work out a new arrangement less unfair to the Serbs.

Once again, the Trump Administration is addressing this issue too. Recently, the White House hosted a meeting of the Serbian President, Alexander Vucic, and the Kosovo Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti. They signed an economic cooperation, and Trump expressed the thought that the two would draw closer: In his words: "I think they're going to have a tremendous relationship. And the economic is going to bring them together. It's going to unify the two countries". For his part, Vucic happily pointed out that he had opened the doors to Washington that has been shut for thirty years.

Predictably, the Europeans and their American supporters have been critical of Trump, for injecting himself into the issue, instead of leaving it to the Europeans. The apprehension is that the US may be changing its position towards greater understanding of Serbian sentiment. This is probably true of the approach of the Trump Administration, and fits in with the narrative described in the foregoing paragraphs.

Also worth emphasising is that the Railway connectivity is no longer the nub of the matter; it is now pipelines. This is what places Turkey at the centre of the strategies, because if they can become the focus of the various pipelines carrying natural gas from Qatar and Iran, as well as from Turkmenistan and the Caspian region more generally, that would constitute a twenty-first century iteration of the old thrust into West Asia from Europe. Both Russia and the US seem to understand this, though the domestic consensus on these policies is shaky in the US and overly dependent on one man in Russia.

## The third direction: China and Eurasia

The final aspect is the most significant of the current issues flowing from Mackinder's vision. Here is how he put it in his 1904 essay:

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, an advantage as yet denied to the Russian tenant of the pivot region.

----- *Geographical Pivot of History, 1904 [p 193]*

Let us leave aside, without ignoring or condoning, the overtly racist reference to the Chinese, and focus on the substance, because the Chinese Belt-and-Road Initiative aims at something like what Mackinder imagined could one day come to pass.

It sounds highly implausible in the nuclear age, especially if one thinks in terms of overthrowing the Russian state. But that does not rule out the possibility that a 21<sup>st</sup> Century version of control, especially economic control, over the Central Asian and East European region. More or less, that is what is happening. The Chinese have made it clear that the principal axis of interest to them in Asia-Europe, as may be seen from the following excerpt from the first BRI Forum, held in May 2017:

Noting that the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (The Belt and Road Initiative) can create opportunities amidst challenges and changes, we welcome and support the Belt and Road Initiative **to enhance connectivity between Asia and Europe, which is also open to other regions** such as Africa and South America.<sup>2</sup>

[Emphasis added]

In pursuit of this strategy, China has also developed rail connections between its cities and a number, over forty, of European cities. The rise of rail traffic is quite pronounced; between 2015 and 2018, there has been an increase of about 11,000 trains to and fro between Chinese and European cities. In 2018 itself, there were some 6000 freight trains

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/15/c\\_136286378.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/15/c_136286378.htm)

between these destinations, an increase of 72% over the previous year<sup>3</sup>. There are several arguments in favour of rail freight, but there are also several drawbacks. And if the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the fact remains that shipping leaves rail freight far behind.

Ships are slower, but the Malacca Max ships can carry 20,000 TEU's, as against a freight train that can carry a maximum of 200. And in terms of price, shipping has an advantage of 50% over rail charges. Hence it is that shipping accounts for between 75% and 90% [estimates vary] of the goods exchanges between the two destinations.

However, China's strategy is to increase the role of the overland routes, away from the vulnerabilities and potential challenges it faces along the sea routes, and which it cannot overcome in the short or medium term. The very evocation of the silk routes is an indication of the desire for overland connectivity, for there never was a maritime silk route: a spice route, yes, going back to trade between the Chola and other Empires in India and the Roman Empire.

Apart from the cost and time issue, there are some other challenges to the Chinese strategy too. The most important relates to the "choke points" that the landward strategy also faces, just as does the maritime. First among these is Xinjiang: China has no access to the heartland without crossing that area. And it should occasion no surprise that, ever since President Xi advanced his proposals, Xinjiang has been on the boil. Equally telling has been the response from the Beijing authorities, unprecedented in its harshness, even for the People's Republic. The resort to concentration camps and similar cruel and degrading methods reflect behaviour of a time that was thought to have been put away forever.

The second choke point is Russia. It is of lesser importance than Xinjiang, but as a fall-back, it has its own significance. Among the six principal corridors identified by China, one is the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor. This is the other land connection to Europe for China. At present, Russia is working closely with China, but it has well-known

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3 <https://container-xchange.com/blog/belt-and-road-initiative/>

reservations regarding the Chinese Initiative, and Chinese policies more generally, including in the western Pacific. For its part, China also wants to develop alternatives to Russia, for reasons that are the obverse of the ones on the Russian side.

The third choke point is Kazakhstan: although China has borders with other Central Asian states too – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – these are mountainous areas, and difficult of access to railways; they are also socially and politically unstable. Kazakhstan has maintained close ties with Russia, even after President Nazarbaev has stepped aside. But the new President, Kassim-Jomart Tokaev, is a former Soviet-era diplomat, a Mandarin speaker, with several years' experience of serving in the Soviet Embassy in Beijing. While he has made the right moves diplomatically with Moscow, he has also slowed down the pace of integration under the Moscow-led EurAsian Economic Union. At the same time, he has left the running on the BRI to Nazarbaev, and has not attended past summits. This triangle, Russia-Kazakhstan-China will bear watching in the coming time.

The Chinese have, in light of these issues, developed a safer alternative, by-passing Russia altogether, after the rail link enters Kazakhstan: the rail route bends towards the Caspian Sea, crosses into Azerbaijan and marches through Georgia into Turkey. The map below depicts this route, which has been developed essentially in 2020.



There is also the issue of returning empty containers: given the imbalance in trade between the two regions, something like half the TEU's have to go back empty. Alternatively, some other use has to be found for them, and the cycle maintained. Sending back empty containers is a waste of money. Buying new ones and leaving the old ones in Europe is expensive for Chinese exporters and not even possible in many cases because the containers are often leased. This problem is not as acute for shipping because they can deliver containers to other destinations along the way.

A final problem worth noting in the overland strategy is the infrastructure issue, hard and soft. The rail gauges are different between China and Europe on the one hand, and the former Soviet space on the other. The required trans-shipment adds to delays along this route. Customs arrangements are also lagging for the smooth transit of goods between Europe and China. The latter can be fixed over time, but the former does not offer any solution – this time wastage will have to be built into the system.

It is hard not to see that the land option is not going to succeed against the established maritime trade routes, not on economic terms and fair competition alone. And yet, the strategic benefits are tempting for any Chinese leader. If they can shut out the Americans from their trade links, they will have scored a historic victory, and the schema hinted at by Mackinder will become reality.

An assessment of the likelihood of success of the Chinese strategy would be in order here.

For the Chinese strategy to succeed, two requirements need to be met. The first is the more obvious one of economic and technological advancement by China. The second is some means of shutting down the maritime routes, which will probably involve some violent confrontation.

As for the first, the evidence regarding both the economy and technology is less positive than it seemed in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. Since then, in order to maintain its growth targets, China has run up large monetary debts, with the result that its

debt-to-GDP ratio today is 300%, and still rising. Worse, there is evidence of a liquidity trap, since further rounds of monetary stimulus produce ever weaker results. Equally important, trade flows are declining, as global trade itself slows. This was happening even before the Trump Administration applied the squeeze on China's exports – with limited results. However, there is clear evidence that trade – and the attendant current account surpluses – are both declining, and set to decline further as drivers of Chinese growth. Domestic demand is stagnant at best, so the recourse has been to pump up investment. But the limitations of this are now showing up in an unprecedented level of bond defaults by corporates, including SOE's. Even semiconductor manufacturers are facing difficulties, and some are defaulting.

This leads to the other aspect, technology. It is true that China has made impressive progress in this sector. But there is a weakness at the heart of the industry: semiconductors. All the leading Chinese companies depend on technology and software developed in the US, and most of it then manufactured in North Asia, Taiwan in the main, but also in South Korea and Japan. China's efforts have so far not delivered results. In fact, in recent weeks, the state-backed Tsinghua Unigroup has defaulted on a \$200 million bond payment – this was one of the leading companies seeking to produce cutting edge semiconductors. But while it is making heavy weather of progress in the sector, it needs to be borne in mind that China has one advantage; it controls some 80% of the world's rare earths, many of them vital for hi-tech industries.

In fact, it would be advisable to weigh the countervailing forces arrayed against the de-coupling of the US-China relationship. Hi-tech industry has several connections with China, both as market and as supplier. Not all of this information is even in the public domain. Some, like Apple and Amazon are clearly tied to China as major supplier. Others, such as the social media giants are also sympathetic to China, even though most are banned in that country. Some have invested in rival companies operating in China, such as Google. There are, finally, unseen financial investments that also bind Silicon Valley to China. This would explain their overt hostility to the Trump Administration policies on China.

And yet, the economic data show a definite decoupling since 2018, both in trade and investment. This pre-dates the pandemic of 2020, but that has had its own negative effect on the relationship as well. Obviously, the situation is fluid and changeable; the outcome will be known only once the dust settles – in medical and political terms.

As far as the second issue is concerned, to wit, the possibility of some violent event that could disrupt the sea lanes, the picture here is of greater concern. History says that the medieval land routes were disrupted for the last time [they only worked intermittently] by political upheavals, book-ended by the collapse of the Mongol dynasty in China in 1369 and the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks, who blocked the land-based trade exchanges between east and west. This, in turn, led to the search for sea routes to India, which culminated in the arrival of the first European ships – Portuguese ships under the command of Vasco da Gama - in India in 1498.

Could something similar happen to disrupt the maritime routes at some point of time in the future? After all, the Chinese are building up their Naval capabilities at a rapid pace. They have also established their first avowed military base in Djibouti, where other Powers also have their presence. Djibouti is well located to disrupt traffic from Asia to Europe through the Suez Canal, as it dominates the Bab-el-Mandab, a major choke-point along the maritime route. There is frequent talk of the Chinese “Malacca Dilemma”, and the power of the West to pressure China through this choke-point. But in such an event, Djibouti would then allow China to put counter pressure on its adversaries.

### **Responding to the Chinese Eurasian strategy**

The conclusion must be that the world faces a serious challenge from the Chinese attempt to control Eurasia. This control is far from complete, and faces many challenges, economic, technological and military too. But the evidence indicates that the effort is under way.

That brings in another angle worth mentioning: Russia. For China to control the pivot area, it must at least control Central Asia. And for the broader strategy to succeed, Russia must at least acquiesce in China’s

domination of the supercontinent. At the moment, both conditions are being met – Russia is not opposing China’s economic penetration of Central Asia, but is certainly keeping watch on developments. Kazakhstan, especially after Nazarbaev’s departure from active politics, would be a cause for special concern. It is also watching China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea, where even Russian hydrocarbon companies, like Rosneft, have felt the pressure of unfounded Chinese territorial claims.

But for now, Russia is going along with Chinese strategies; it has tried some rearguard salvaging through linking the OBOR with its own project, the Eurasian Economic Union, but it is little more than an idea at present. A large part of the reason that Russia is accepting this state of affairs is the diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions placed on Russia by the west. Some policy planners in Russia have begun proposing a policy of non-alignment between the West and China. But this is not a viable option at this point of time. President Trump did try and ameliorate the situation, but was blocked by the establishment throughout his tenure. It makes sense to bring Russia into the calculus from the point of view of the strategic interests of India and the West – and several of the East and South-East Asian countries. Japan’s former Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe was among the most active in trying to patch things up with Russia.

The hurdle is the Crimea. Just as the Kuriles proved to be a structural block to Russia-Japan ties and thwarted Abe’s efforts, the Crimea has now become a similar block in ties between the West and Russia. The latter is not going to compromise on this issue; however, it could be persuaded to do so on the rest of Ukraine, under a more federal arrangement. Probably, in return, there could be some agreement on closer ties between Ukraine and the western institutions, but the details would have to be worked out in tough negotiations. That seems to be as far as Russia under President Putin will go.

It would appear that things will need to get a lot worse before minds will be sufficiently focused in order to make the compromises. This has happened in the past, of course. Britain signed an agreement in 1907

with the Russian Empire, settling its differences over Afghanistan, Iran and Tibet, in order to prepare for the looming confrontation with Germany. The same happened in 1941, after Germany attacked the Soviet Union. In both cases, the bigger danger eclipsed the relatively minor ones. Hopefully, it will not take an outbreak of hostilities for an appropriate coalition to take form.

An observation from Mackinder is relevant here:

Democracy refuses to think strategically unless and until compelled to do so for purposes of defense. That, of course, does not prevent democracy from declaring war for an ideal, as was seen during the French Revolution.

---- *Democratic Ideals and Reality, 1919 [p 17]*

Not a very encouraging thought – that democracies do not think strategically unless compelled by imminent danger, but there is evidence a-plenty for this. Actually, one could argue that the 1907 Anglo-Russian Convention was an exception to this observation. But it is true that since then, this has been the rule, probably something to do with the horrors of the First World War.

As mentioned above, one other territory is key here – Xinjiang. Geography dictates that this is the real choke-point of the land routes, and hence no Chinese Eurasian strategy can work without that region. This explains why it is so much in focus today. It also is the reason for the extremely harsh Chinese response to the challenge it represents. It would not be an exaggeration to compare Chinese actions to those of Nazi Germany, a metaphor that is frequently over-used, but is apt here. The pressure needs to be kept up on China, though the trends are not very encouraging. Even Muslim-majority countries are increasingly reluctant to raise this issue. Nonetheless, the fact is that the Chinese strategy will succeed or fail in the extent to which it can keep this area under its control.

The bigger question, however, is that of identifying the country that will take the lead in forming the coalition that can prevent China from taking over the Eurasian space. The obvious choice would be the US. But that country is more divided today than at any time since the Civil War, and

China is one of the issues that underlie that cleavage, notwithstanding formal claims of bipartisanship on this issue. And there does not seem to be any prospect of an early end to that division. Also, there is a very powerful set of forces in the US that favours some kind of *modus vivendi* with China. This covers business in the first place, but also the corporate media and political forces. Kissinger has recently advised Biden not to allow a confrontation with China, as it could lead to consequences as catastrophic as the First World War. And at the same time, the idea of withdrawing from the world's problems retains its appeal for many.

Ideally, a coalition of the US, India, Japan, France and Russia would be the core group to stabilise the potential global confrontation. But should the US be unwilling to lead – relevant here to remember Obama's concept of "leading from behind" – or unable to lead for domestic reasons, it would still be possible to form an effective core around the remaining countries. Three of them, India, France and Russia have good relations among themselves, and have a common interest in preventing the domination of Eurasia by any single Power. But this is the real quadrilateral grouping – or trilateral if it comes to that - that can deliver on a strategy to contain the Eurasia challenge. Ideally, Japan would also be part of such a core grouping; what complicates the calculation is that its territorial problems with Russia are proving intractable. But it is vital to keep Japan in the mix, as no maritime strategy is workable without Japan.

If India and China can work together in bodies like the Russia-India-China group, or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or in BRICS, there is no reason that prevents Russia and Japan from doing the same.

France is worth focusing on because it is an anchor at the western end of Eurasia, and stable. President Macron has made clear his hesitations regarding OBOR: during his visit to Beijing in 2018, he spoke to an audience of scholars and policy-makers and declared that, "These roads cannot be those of a new hegemony, which would transform those that they cross into vassals". For good measure, he added an important

corrective to the dominant narrative on OBOR – the ancient Silk Routes were never exclusively Chinese.<sup>4</sup>

France is also moving into closer strategic partnership – a much abused term, but fitting here – with India. A compelling example was provided by the speech of the French Defence Minister, Florence Parly, at the wind-swept ceremony of the handing over of the first batch of Rafale fighters to the Indian Air Force. After indicating the France fully understood the Indian search for strategic autonomy, and emphasising the shared values of democracy and a rules-based order, she added that the supply of the Rafales meant more: “In strategic terms, it means India will have an edge over the entire region to defend itself...” No Defence Minister has spoken in this vein since the days of Marshal Dmitry Ustinov of the Soviet Union.

As to the substance of the policies to be followed, no more can usefully be said than two broad lines of approach. The first is the economy. China’s economy has been built on the basis of large amounts of foreign investment, and market access in the main consumption centres – the US, the EU and, on a smaller scale, but growing rapidly, India. In a time of deficient demand world-wide, this is a potentially effective policy option for these countries. The second is the lack of legitimacy of the Communist Party in the country. This is another effective pressure point that will pay dividends over time, with sustained application.

### **To sum up:**

Mackinder opened a very productive line of inquiry with his 1904 essay, and subsequent works; the notion that the advent of railways brought the heartland into play in a way that had not been the case for some four centuries, since the sea voyages of discovery. However, he overestimated the importance of geography. To argue, as he did, that whoever controlled East Europe controlled the Heartland, and thus world power was conclusively disproved by the USSR. It did control these regions for five decades, but never controlled the world.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-france-idUSKBN1EX0FU>

The missing element in the Mackinder schema was the role of Economics and technology. The USSR never acquired these two aspects of power. Germany did in the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and posed a serious threat to the dominant sea-power of the day, Britain. It took the First World War, and the extensive territorial rearrangement that followed, in order to defeat this challenge.

Mackinder's almost throw-away lines in the 1904 essay about China becoming the global power by commanding the heartland, was an inspired insight. The fact that he felt it would be led by Japan was a little puzzling, because Japan is a classic maritime power, and would have scant interest in consolidating a land power like China.

China has the additional attributes needed for the success of the strategy. It has a fast-growing economy [even if not as fast as it claims], it is well-placed in technological terms, it has built up a powerful military – and is heading for dominance in the pivot area. This last is happening in economic terms, without a formal assertion of primacy out of deference to Russian sensitivities. A word of caution on the Chinese economy would be worth repeating: it is running out of the surpluses needed for its vaulting ambitions. Not only have there been unprecedented bond defaults, the squeeze is showing in the drop in its outbound investments. These have halved from the 2017 peak, and are likely to remain stagnant at best going forward.

In purely economic terms, the overland connectivity – rail, road and pipelines – cannot compete with maritime trade routes. Even the claim that rail links are faster turns out to be incorrect on closer inspection: a container ship does take twice as long, but the new Malacca Max ships deliver over 20,000 TEU's in one sailing; the maximum load a freight train carries is 200 TEU's. Thus, one shipload requires a hundred to-and-fro journeys by rail to deliver the same amount of cargo.

But, just as war and political upheavals upset the last land routes in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> Century, war could also now disrupt the sea lines of communication. This is why the much-talked about Malacca threat to Chinese shipping does not offer quite the answer to the challenge. That

answer, instead, is to be found in the choke-points of the land connection.

There are three principal choke-points – Xinjiang, Kazakhstan, and Russia. All three are vital links in the land routes to Europe, especially the first two. Russia is important because not just of strategic consideration [important as they are], but also because of geography; the links to East Europe and beyond to the West run through Russian territory. All three bear watching closely, with Kazakhstan being the most uncertain link at this time.

As the country transits into the post-Nazarbaev era, it is possible that complications could arise. The current leader, President Tokaev, is a former Soviet diplomat, who spent many years in Beijing. He has also made some moves to weaken the hold of Nazarbaev in the system, by removing his daughter from the post of Chair of the Upper House, a little over a year after appointing her to the post. In the Kazakh system, the Chair of the Senate is the first in the line of succession should the President be removed from office for any reason.

Kazakhstan was the venue for the launch of the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt by President Xi in 2013, emphasising its importance as one of the key links in the land route. But it is noteworthy that President Tokaev did not attend the Second Belt and Road Forum; instead, it was Nazarbaev again, who was also awarded the Medal of Freedom by the President Xi. It would appear that President Tokaev is walking a fine line on relations with China. He, along with all the other Central Asian leaders, has also held back from signing letters at the UN supporting China's policies in Xinjiang.

In closing, one should also take note of the overall volatility in global affairs. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that these are pre-revolutionary times. Governing consensus in many of the major countries is under strain, and this applies as much to China as to the more visible bitterness in the US. This applies as much to the major economies as to their socio-political structures. In turn, this induces a

degree of unpredictability in international affairs, which bears close monitoring.