

[Class]: Country

China Is Determined to Reshape the Globe

[Class]: Project

Eurasia is a single continent. The Belt and Road initiative seeks to recreate it in China's image.

By Hal Brands

[Class]: Person

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[Class]: Region

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Of all the factors that shape a country's global fortunes, geography is the most immutable. A country is where it is. The advantages and disadvantages that come with its location typically shift slowly, if at all. That's what makes China's bold effort to remake the strategic landscape of Eurasia so remarkable. Beijing is placing a trillion-dollar wager that it can transform its strategic geography from a constraint into a powerful geopolitical asset.

[Class]: Intent

[Class]: Price

[Class]: Union

[Class]: Concept

This would be quite a turnaround, given all the liabilities of China's geography. On its maritime periphery, it faces U.S. treaty allies and strategic partners that provide a springboard for the projection of American power into the Western Pacific. To the north, there is an ambitious Russia, which has more often been an enemy than a friend.

[Class]: Expectation

[Class]: Country

[Class]: Country

[Class]: Expectation

[Class]: City

[Class]: Weakness

[Class]: Goods

[Class]: Weakness

On China's western and southern flanks, there are countries such as Vietnam and India, which can be expected to oppose Beijing's rise, and the Central Asian states, which have traditionally been a site of competition with Russia. If the U.S. has the advantage of being surrounded by fish and docile neighbors, China has long been ringed by rivals.

[Class]: Region

The geographical difficulties don't end there. Beijing's energy-guzzling economy is heavily dependent on oil and natural gas from the Middle East. These imports pass through maritime choke-points - the Straits of Tiran into the Red Sea, the Malacca Strait off Indonesia - that can be closed off by the U.S. Navy. Not surprisingly, Chinese leaders have realized that achieving Beijing's global potential requires changing the country's strategic geography.

[Class]: Strait

[Class]: Intent

[Class]: Project

This is the true meaning of China's Belt and Road Initiative - a collection of investment, trade and infrastructure programs spanning Eurasia and surrounding areas including the Horn of Africa, at an eventual total cost of perhaps \$1 to \$2 trillion. Belt and Road has been described as a lot of things: a financial boondoggle, a catch-phrase, a threat to the U.S.-led world order. Yet at its core, it represents an effort to build a more integrated Eurasian geopolitical space - with China at its center.

[Class]: Price

[Class]: Threat

[Class]: Intent

[Class]: Region

[Class]: Defense

Investing in energy pipelines that run through Central Asia and beyond is not simply a way of keeping China's industries humming. It is also a way of establishing overland supply routes that cannot be so easily disrupted by the U.S. Promoting deeper trade, investment and infrastructure ties with countries from Cambodia to Central Europe is a way of drawing them into China's geo-economic and geopolitical orbit - or at least making them less resistant to Beijing's power. Where China's money goes, its diplomatic and military influence will follow.

[Class]: Defense

[Class]: Region

[Class]: Future Model

[Question]: What exact projects/frameworks U.S. pursues, which bring economic development and peace to others?

[Question]: Does U.S. want to build more integrated Eurasian space? Or it will keep preventing it at any cost?

[Question]: Putin told about United Europe from Lisbon to Vladovostok. How this model interacts with Chinese one?

[Class]: Future Model

[Class]: Future Model

[Class]: Tension

[Class]: Union

[Class]: Person

[Class]: Future Model

[Class]: Threat

[Class]: Future Model

[Class]: Concept

[Class]: Threat

[Class]: Concept

[Class]: Concept

Similarly, expanding economic relations with countries — particularly authoritarian countries — throughout Eurasia offers the possibility of creating a China-centric economic and technological order, at a time when Washington and Beijing are undergoing a slow-motion divorce. And by pursuing a cooperative relationship with Russia — an initiative distinct from, but closely related to, Belt and Road — China is building an authoritarian bloc that spans much of the Eurasian landmass.

Although Chinese officials might not put it this way, the ultimate goal seems to reflect the ideas of Halford Mackinder, the British geographer who in the very early 20th century helped popularize the notion of Eurasia as a geopolitical space. Mackinder warned that the world's maritime powers must prevent any hostile state from dominating the Eurasian landmass. China is not seeking to do so militarily, in the manner of the totalitarian powers of the 20th century. Rather, Beijing is using its geo-economic leverage to seek preponderant influence across Eurasia, thus creating a strategic hub from which it can project power far and wide.

The question is whether this will actually work. Strategic geography is not easily reversed, and although China seems ascendant right now, there are many difficulties lurking.

[Class]: Project

[Class]: Person

For one thing, China's Eurasian project will work only if Russia remains a partner rather than a rival. So far, President Vladimir Putin has surprised many U.S. observers by allowing China to be the rider, and Russia the horse, in the authoritarian coalition. Moscow even gave the Chinese telecom giant Huawei Technologies Co. a leading role in developing Russian 5G networks. But Russian officials can presumably see the long-term danger in abetting the rise of an acquisitive superpower on their own frontier. Indeed, Chinese inroads in Central America, one of the fruits of Belt and Road, are surely driving home the fact that Beijing's ambitions sometimes come at Moscow's expense.

[Class]: City

[Class]: Company

[Class]: Threat

[Class]: Goods

[Class]: Project

There are also reasons to doubt Belt and Road's financial viability. Chinese banks have invested heavily in its projects, but many of these loans are already underperforming. U.S. officials tend — not wrongly — to see this as a dangerous situation for the West, because countries that cannot repay what they owe may have to surrender to Beijing control of ports and other strategic infrastructure. Yet the other edge of this sword is the potential that bad loans could destabilize China's financial system, just as that system is grappling with a huge debt bubble.

[Class]: Losses

[Class]: Threat

[Class]: Infrastructure

[Class]: Think Tank

[Class]: Threat

[Class]: Person

[Class]: War

[Class]: Concept

[Class]: Country

[Class]: Forecast

[Class]: Threat

[Class]: Intent

Additionally, as my Johns Hopkins-SAIS colleague Daniel Markey writes, Belt and Road is where grand geopolitical designs meet messy local realities. Much as America's Cold War endeavors entangled it in nasty political struggles in countries throughout the Third World, Belt and Road is enmeshing China in the corruption and instability of countries such as Uzbekistan and Pakistan. China will reap greater influence from its ambitious Eurasian plan, but it will also reap plenty of diplomatic and economic headaches.

Finally, there is the matter of how the reigning superpower will respond. The U.S. has every incentive to prevent Beijing from realizing its objectives, and many of China's

[Question]: Which exact incentives U.S. has to prevent Beijing from realizing its objectives?

[Question]: Can U.S. counteract with "Soft Power": development, prosperity, models of the future? Does it have it still?



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[Question]: What is the Model of the Future of the U.S. World Order? Looks like the outside world sees sanctions, Tomahawks, and narcotics yet.

[Question]: What is the U.S. model of influence in the Middle East? Looks like the world sees U.S. trashing one country after another there.

[Question]: What is are the countries, which really received capital, infrastructure and technology from U.S. past 20 years?

[Question]: Who currently owns ports and strategic infrastructure in those countries described?

[Question]: When it happened, that U.S. started to see any economic development abroad as a threat to U.S.? Why?