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Re-centering Central Asia: China's "New Great Game" in the old Eurasian Heartland

Xiangming Chen^{1,2} & Fakhmiddin Fazilov³

ABSTRACT China's President Xi Jinping's Central Asian tour in fall 2013 marked Beijing's unprecedented (re)turn to Central Asia as a lynchpin of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" of the globally ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's BRI positions Central Asia as the crucial nexus for the cross-regional long-distance loops of trade, investment, and infrastructure development. By revisiting the classical geopolitical theory about the original Eurasian Heartland and its contemporary offshoots, we extract some insights for understanding the new China-Central Asia transboundary regional nexus. In a double-pronged empirical analysis of China's development strategies regarding Central Asia, we examine: (1) the construction of oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia to transmit energy all the way to China's east coast, and (2) the launch and expansion of the Eurasian Railroad to transport goods from China's manufacturing bases in both coastal and inland regions to Europe and Central Asia. In synthesizing the findings from this coupled analysis through classical and contemporary theoretical lenses, we discuss how China's growing influence in Central Asia via the BRI can reshape the region's diverse national interests, development opportunities and constraints while fostering closer China-Central Asia bilateral cooperation across multiple national boundaries. In light of the analysis, we also offer an updated view and critique of the classical Heartland/Rimland theories and discuss how a China-centric "New Great Game" differs from its original nineteenth century antecedent while pointing to similar underpinnings.

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Introduction

Central Asia has always been important to China's imagination of and action toward its neighbors and the larger world beyond. As the vast middle section of the ancient Silk Road dating back to the Han Dynasty (207 BCE–220 CE), Central Asia connected and bridged China's long-distance overland trade with Europe and the Middle East for many centuries. Central Asia formed the inevitable path for Genghis Khan and his descendants in their advancement to and conquering of such far-flung places as Poland and Syria. Neighboring China from the west, Central Asia has been the source of periodic Turkic and Islamic influence and connections to Xinjiang, which China, regardless of its regimes, has always seen as crucial to the stability of its vast western border territory over the most recent centuries. Fast forward to the twenty-first century, Central Asia emerged as the region of new opportunities for China's ambitious "Go West" initiative to stimulate catch-up development in its lagging interior and border regions by redirecting surplus capital from the its largely saturated coastal region. More importantly and recently, Central Asia has become integral to China's "One Belt, One Road" or "Belt and Road initiative (hereafter BRI), unveiled first by President Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan in 2013, for reviving and expanding the old Silk Road through the new Silk Road Economic Belt and the twenty-first-century Maritime Silk Road.

With and via the BRI, China is potentially capable of reshaping Central Asia's economic potential through reorganizing and expanding ties with the latter. While China and Central Asia were linked through peace, war, trade, and intermarriage for centuries, these links are beginning to undergo a wide and deep metamorphosis as China has undergone a fundamental domestic economic transformation and risen powerfully on the global stage. To fully understand this combination of China's inside-out influence in Central Asia, we need to: (1) locate the sources and mechanisms that animate and transmit that influence from inside and outside of China; (2) assess the regional and local consequences of China's presence in Central Asia; and (3) identify the existing and future opportunities and barriers for developing close and equitable China-Central Asia relations. This integrated analysis not only draws from classical theories bearing on Central Asia and China but also can advance the theorizing of globalization, regional cooperation and local development, as well as their interconnections beyond the new China-Central Asia nexus.

In the next section, we review and critique the classical geopolitical theories for understanding China's current engagement with Central Asia and how its geoeconomic dynamism invites us to develop new theorization about the impact and implications of China's BRI for Central Asia. This leads to on a short section how China-led on "New Great Game" differs from the original "Great Game" between Victoria Britain and Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century. In the next three sections, we examine how two China-driven strategies, emanating from inside and outside China, have begun to exert multiple and mutually reinforcing long-distance effects on key entry points and parts of Central Asia. They are: (1) the construction of oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia to transmit energy all the way to China's east coast; and (2) the launch and expansion of the Eurasian Railroad to transport goods from China's manufacturing bases in its coastal, inland, and border regions. The final section returns to an integrated theory-policy discussion based on the preceding analysis, advancing the argument that as China widens and deepens its influence within and through Central Asia, it is effectively re-centering the latter as a new transnational regional space whose future importance is likely to exceed its long historical status and role. In other words, China's "New Great Game" via the BRI is likely to outdo the original "Great Game" in rendering Central

Asia the renewed center of the broader Eurasia region that bears stronger and more strategic global significance.

Back to the future: revisiting the Heartland theory and more

It is a somewhat ironic that while the history of Central Asia over the last century has been eventful and volatile, there is a certain consistent and enduring theoretical thread running from the turn of the twentieth century through the present, shedding some light from the long past on recent dynamics. That theoretical source originated in 1904 when British geographer Halford John Mackinder introduced a theory of the Heartland that has since shaped our subsequent understanding of Central Asia through the past century. Although Mackinder's theory helped lay a foundation for geopolitics as a field of study, its geographic focus on Eurasia illuminates the spatial boundary and parameters of any economic flows and political activities within and around the broad region.

In his original formulation, Mackinder (1904) saw the large landmass of Eurasia or the Heartland encompassing the river basins of the Volga, Yenisey, Amu Darya, Syr Darya, and the Caspian Sea as the Pivot of influence, from the planet's central location, on historical processes and geopolitical realities. The geographic structure of the Pivot, Mackinder argued, could shield it from attacks by sea powers, sustain large populations, and produce some kind of collective (East European) identity and unity. In 1919, Mackinder revised his theory in adapting to the geopolitical realities by enlarging the Pivot/Heartland area to include the Black and Baltic Sea basins or much of Eastern Europe, which remained the key to his theory about the constant importance and shifted parameters of the Heartland (see Ismailov and Papava, 2010). Mackinder's Heartland theory casts a broad geographic net capturing much of today's Central Asia that is becoming a strategic bridge between Europe and China in light of the latter's BRI.

As with all grand theorizing of the past, Mackinder was critiqued and updated at both the geographic scale and from the benefit of hindsight from his time. Nicholas Spykman, a Dutch-American geographer, accepted part of Mackinder's premise but offered alternative views. Relative to the Heartland, Spykman (1944) coined the Rimland comprising the European Coastland, Arab-Middle Eastern Desert land, and the Asiatic Monsoon Land. He argued that the power of the Heartland could be kept in check by the peripheral Rimland given the latter's advantage in the population, resources, and access to sea. Unlike Mackinder who saw the Heartland as more powerful with its location advantages over sea powers further beyond, Spykman asserted that Rimland states like Japan, Britain, and China would likely become superpowers due to their access to sea and, therefore, greater contact with the outside world.

Whether Spykman fully anticipated the rise of China as a superpower decades later, he correctly identified the geographic logic of access to sea as critical to understanding the advantages and disadvantages of mostly landlocked countries in Central Asia that have shaped their geostrategic constraints. True to their disciplinary background, both Mackinder and Spykman made essentially geographic deterministic arguments, yet their ideas spawned the fields of geopolitical and diplomatic studies and continue to resonate with developments in Eurasia today. If we skirt around the narrow geographic determinism by situating post-WWII geopolitical developments in the region's hard spatial constraints, we see the differential opportunities for Eastern European and Central Asian nations to develop before and after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. Post-Soviet independence has allowed these countries to pursue their own

economic destinies by either reconnecting to and integrating with Western Europe through the EU, as in the case of most East European economies, or turning more to China for economic cooperation as Central Asia (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2009, 2013).

With a deeper look into the heavily geographic theories of Mackinder and Spykman in light of the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet era, we see the clearly shifted economic positions of the countries at the western and eastern end of Eurasia (Eastern Europe and China, respectively), as well as those in the intermediate region of Central Asia. This reminds us of the problematic and dated categorization of Eurasia in the global economy by other earlier theories. It is generally familiar that in the now outdated Three-World scheme, the former East European socialist countries were labeled Second World and China was part of the Third World. The World-Systems Theory tends to classify the former as belonging to the semi-peripheral zone of the tripartite world economy with the zone and periphery (Chirrot, 1986) or an extra category of “others” (see Babones, 2005). While China was solidly in the periphery before 1980 and rose to the semi-periphery in the twenty-first century, Frank (1998) contended that China had resurged to the center of gravity of the world economy that it occupied for a long time before the emergence of the capitalist world system in the sixteenth century.

Unlike classical geographic and geopolitical theories of the Heartland and/or the Rimland, Jeremy Black (2015), while staying with the geopolitical lens, sees the perception of power in its spatial constraints as equally important as the structure and execution of power. From this vantage point, there may not be any real power in Central Asia today like when it was dominated by the Timurid Empire during 1370–1405. Yet if the uneven and relatively weak economic positions of the post-Soviet Central Asian states have created some kind of vacuum for major power, China, having risen or returned to Asia’s center of economic gravity, is positioning to be that power by pushing the BRI to forge direct and close connectivity with Europe through Central Asia (Chen, 2018; Chen and Mardeusz, 2015). Unlike the times of Mackinder and Spykman, China-led transcontinental Eurasian Railway today ships goods overland to Europe through Central Asia must faster than by sea, reducing the friction of long distance over the landlocked countries in Central Asia. Having also created extensive energy links from and through Central Asia, China’s heavy inroads into the latter appears to scale up into a “New Great Game” as a strong regional power.

Change and continuity in “The Great Game”. Seeing China play a “New Great Game” in Central Asia today brings back an earlier stretch of history predating Mackinder’s Heartland theory. The original “Great Game” or what is classically known as “The Great Game”, which started around 1830, marked an era of tension and confrontation between the British Empire and the Russian Empire in today’s Central Asia and South Asia. Despite the long distance of over 3000 kms separating the two empires’ established territories, they feared each other’s incursion into the other’s comfort zones. Worrying about Russia’s intention to threaten its crown colony of India from the north, Britain attempted to control the Emirate of Afghanistan as a protectorate and then create a larger buffer zone out of the Emirates of Bukhara and Khiva, located in present-day Uzbekistan. Russia on the other hand wanted Afghanistan as a neutral zone and pushed Britain back. After several military conflicts including two Anglo-Afghan wars, “The Great Game” came to a close in 1895 when the border between the Russia Empire and Afghanistan was settled (see Hopkirk, 1992). Those seven decades represented an extended era of protracted great power rivalry in Central Asia (and South Asia)

that casts a long shadow over the current potential “New Great Game” with China being the emerging lead player.

At first sight, China appears to be the nineteenth-century Britain in opposition to Russia, which continues to hold a strong influence in Central Asia today as it did in the nineteenth century despite having lost its political domination since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. The fundamental difference between then and now, however, is that China and Russia are the two dominant power players vs. the weaker independent Central Asian states, instead of being empires relative to a group of colonies or small emirates. Yet Cooley (2014) saw a new “Great Game” emerging with the continued involvement of the United States against a newly aggressive Russia and a resource-hungry China in Central Asia. The latter’s loss of Soviet patronage and support in conjunction with its political corruption, social instability, and economic weakness (see Rumer, 2002) have created and sustained an open space for a new “Great Game” played by external powers. Nevertheless, the Central Asian leaders, as Cooley and Heathershaw (2017) show, are closely connected to global power centers through business networks, elite bank accounts, overseas courts, third-party brokers, and Western lawyers. Similar to the political and diplomatic nature of the original “Great Game,” the lingering geopolitical interests of the United States and Russia have kept that game alive in a new regional environment.

China has entered this new regional space with a primarily geoeconomic strategy for promoting trade, securing energy supplies, and building cross-border infrastructure. While trade routes were involved as part of the original “Great Game,” China’s major role in shaping regional and bilateral trade ties across Central Asia has laid the ground for a new “Great Game.” Having become the major partner, or at least one of the key trading partners of each of the Central Asian state, China is the largest trading partner with the whole region and has replaced Russia’s earlier dominance in trade with Central Asia (Krasnopolsky, 2013). By launching the BRI in 2013 in Kazakhstan, China has ramped and scaled up its geoeconomic strategy to make Central Asia the crucial region for widening and deepening overland trade and infrastructure ties to the larger Eurasia and Europe. With almost all of the references to any new “Great Game” appearing before 2013, the BRI not only has unleashed an opportunity for China to engage with Central Asia for mutual benefits but also created a timely occasion for examining whether China’s heavy involvement in Central Asia amounts to a real new “Great Game.” This analysis focuses on a pair of China-Central Asia connections that reflect the new geoeconomic realities absent in the old “Great Game” of the nineteenth century.

The “Great Game” reference to the past and present Central Asia also raises the question of how this vast region is being increasingly affected by China differently than how the latter has grown and extended its footprint and impact across the Global South. While Central Asia is not generally seen as part of the Global South, it fits the topic of this themed session quite well for two reasons. First, Central Asia, as a solid segment of the former Soviet Union, shares the political, ideological, and economic legacies of the state-socialist system and post-socialist transition societies with China. Relative to these shared features, China’s distinctive path of reform and opening and global rise now through the BRI, coupled with border contiguity and geographic proximity with Central Asia, justify the analysis of this region as an integral part of the “China and the Global South” discourse. Second, while Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan’s GDP per capita of around \$9000 is slightly higher than China’s due to their abundant energy wealth and much smaller populations, per capita GDP of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, averaging less than \$2500, is comparable to many countries of the Global

South. Given this two-tiered comparability, it makes much sense to bring these varied states and economies fully into an analysis of China's neighboring impact on them from a similar stage of development, conventionally measured, yet from a much more powerful position.

The strong China-Central Asia energy nexus

The first connection concerns the transboundary energy nexus, which is a compelling example of how China's varied global and regional development and engagement strategies are motivated by its domestic economic and political conditions. The explosive and sustained growth of China's economy over the past three decades has generated a huge need for imported energy and thus completely altered the global supply-demand equation. China's massive manufacturing machine and megacities have been running on historically unprecedented quantities of coal, oil, and natural gas. From a country with no private cars to the largest auto market in the world, China has dramatically accelerated its gas consumption. With millions of skyscrapers and lower buildings of all kinds shooting up in its hundreds of large cities that have to be cooled and heated, China has become a giant in the overall consumption of energy by the world's cities. As a result, China has become world's largest energy consumer in less than 20 years, accounting for almost 20% of the world's total energy consumption now.

The rapid growth of China's demand for energy has far outstripped its domestic supply. China produced an estimated 4.3 million barrels per day (bbl/day) of oil liquids in 2011, which was expected to rise to 4.5 million bbl/day by the end of 2013. China produced an estimated 4.3 million barrels per day (bbl/day) of oil liquids in 2011, and increased this production for 220 metric tons (5093 bbl/day) in 2015, but its consumption rose by 16.4 metric tons (379.6 bbl/day) in 2014.¹ Its booming economy requires China to import more than half of the oil it needs. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), China may import about 75% of the crude oil it will consume by 2035. This has turned China into the world's largest importer of oil (16.7% of the global crude oil imports in 2015), slightly ahead of the United States at 16.5%,² from being an oil exporter in the 1990s. Looking forward, China's energy demand is expected to expand 75% by 2035. Natural gas consumption in China has also risen over the past decade. In 2011, China produced 3.6 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas, 9% more than in 2010. While natural gas accounted for 23.7% of global energy consumption in 2011, it was only 4.5% in China. China's gas import to jump from 12% of its consumption in 2010 to 22% in 2011 (Fazilov and Chen, 2013). China's growing demand for energy has expanded its sources of imports including Central Asia.

In 2011, the Middle East, including Iran, supplied 2.6 million bbl/day (51%) to China, Africa 1.2 million bbl/day (24%), the Asia-Pacific region 173,000 bbl/day (3%), and other countries 1.1 million bbl/day (22%). China has become heavily dependent on a number of countries in the Middle East and Africa with low political stability. To ameliorate this dependence, China has begun to diversify its international energy sources by sponsoring the development of China-bound pipelines in Myanmar and Central Asia. Meanwhile, the Central Asian vector of China's energy policy has become considerably more important, due to its abundance of oil and natural gas deposits and relative regional stability. Central Asia accounts for about 4% of global energy deposits. The oil reserves in Central Asia and along the Caspian Sea coast amount to 17 to 33 bbl/day with more unexploited deposits. China has turned to Central Asia for energy supply, for two main reasons. Besides accessing a more stable and closer source of abundant energy, China aims to compete aggressively

for its energy security by developing its "energy diplomacy" with the region. Secondly, developing close ties with Central Asia through an energy nexus helps China deter threats from the separatist activists in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. China has reorganized the army units in Xinjiang to safeguard its oil fields given the 3300 km western border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The root of connections between the Central Asian countries and China goes all the way back to the Silk Road times. Diplomatic relations between China and the Central Asian countries have been established since 1991. Trade between China and the five Central Asian countries rose from \$527 million in 1992 to \$40 billion in 2011.³ In Central Asia, China has sought to establish a regional free trade zone, partially as a way of tapping into the region's vast energy resources. Nowadays, the major Chinese energy players in the region are China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (SINOPEC) and Petro China. They have partnered with local companies to compete with traditional power players like Russia and multinational companies such as Chevron, ExxonMobile, and BP in the exploration and extraction of oil and natural gas (Fazilov and Chen, 2013). CNPC has brought some competitive advantages to this partnership from its domestic oil and gas exploration and development such as specialty engineering, technical support, and service teams. In one project, CNPC implemented three strategies; horizontal wells, water injection and recovery efficiency enhancement, trying to inject water of good quality and great quantity (Hu, 2014).

Two main pipelines from Central Asia to China, the Central Asia-China gas pipeline and Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, are already in operation. The Central Asia-China gas pipeline, spanning Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and crossing Xingjian at the border town of Horgos, transported 40 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas when it was first built. It is connected with China's second west-east gas pipeline, which starts from Horgos and ends in Hong Kong, stretching 8704 km. China imported about 18.4bcm of natural gas through its first cross-border pipeline the last 2 years. Given China's plan to increase gas imports from Central Asia by five times by 2015, the Central Asia-China pipeline's capacity will expand up to 55–60 billion cubic meters of gas per year.⁴ Upon the possible addition of Line D (see below), the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline will have an annual deliverability of 85 billion cubic meters, the largest gas transmission system in Central Asia.

The Sino-Kazakhstan energy ties. With its massive oil reserves, Kazakhstan is most attractive to China for energy cooperation. Kazakhstan's total proven offshore and onshore fields' reserves constitute about 37 billion barrels of oil and 3.3 trillion cubic meters (tcm) of natural gas, making Kazakhstan one of the world's major oil producers with the potential to expand the production of 2 million bbl/day in 2010 to 3.5 million bbl/day by 2015. Kazakhstan's reserves of natural gas are around 8.6 tcm.

Chinese energy companies have been operating and investing in Kazakhstan where CNPC acquired 60.3% of shares of Kazakh oil company Aktobemunaigaz in 1997. CNPC later bought the entire shares of the company and re-established CNPC-Aktobemunaigaz. In addition, CNPC acquired a 49% minority stake in Kazakhstan's AO MangistauMunaigaz Company from KazMunaiGaz. This deal gives China control over about 15% of Kazakhstan's total oil output.⁵

The discovery of Kazakhstan's giant Kashagan oil field, which was considered "the largest oil discovery anywhere in the world in the past 20 years," has prompted China to reconsider its position



Fig. 1 Central Asia-China oil and gas pipelines. This image is not covered by a CC-BY license.

regarding the feasibility of Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline. As a result, the easternmost part of the pipeline, running 988 kms from Atasu in Kazakhstan to Alataw Pass (Alashankou in Chinese Pinyin spelling) at the Chinese border (see Fig. 1), was completed at the end of 2005 and began operating in May 2006, with a total investment of \$700 million.⁶ The 962 km-long pipeline has been operating as a 50–50 joint venture between state companies CNPC and KazMunaiGaz. At the beginning, this pipeline was expected to ship one million barrels per day of crude oil into western China or 10 million tons of crude oil per year, but the pipeline is expected to increase its export capacity to 20 million tons in the future. Kazakhstan and China have considered two more opportunities. One is to prolong the existing pipeline between cities of Uzbekistan-Bukhara and Tashkent to Almaty, then through Taldikorgan to Alashankou. The other is the construction of a new gas pipeline connecting Ishim (western Siberia) and Alashankou and the one going through Astana and Karaganda.

China considers Kazakhstan a key source and link in its energy security nexus, and sees the cooperation as helping strengthen and secure its northwestern borders of a restive Xinjiang. The cooperation also provides new energy to support China's "Go West" program and helps it gain greater access to the markets of Central Asia. Some experts see the increasing Sino-Kazakh cooperation in the energy field as tied to the long-term strategic interests of the two countries, especially when faced with greater U.S. military presence in Central Asia after 11 September. For Kazakhstan, China can help diversify its energy sector by balancing against Russia's influence in its energy field (Fazilov and Chen, 2013).

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in China's energy calculus. Turkmenistan is one of the world's largest natural gas exporters.

According to *Oil and Gas Journal*, Turkmenistan has proven natural gas reserves of approximately 265 trillion cubic feet (tcf) in 2012. The abundance of natural gas has drawn significant attention and interest from China. Diplomatic relations between two countries were established after the independence of Turkmenistan in 1992. Given the significant energy component in their bilateral relations, the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline project—as part of the Central Asia-China pipeline—came into existence. The Central Asia-China gas pipeline begins in Turkmenistan and goes through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan before connecting to a second pipeline running west to east within China (see Fig. 2). China and Turkmenistan signed an agreement in July 2007 under which the latter would supply 30 bcm of gas to China annually through pipelines for 30 years. It began supplying gas on 14 December 2009. According to CNPC, Turkmenistan has transported more than 30 bcm of natural gas to China in more than 900 days using the Central Asia-China pipeline, an amount making up a fifth of the gas China used in 2011. Of the 30 bcm, about 10.7 bcm came from the CNPC (Turkmenistan) Amu Darya River Gas Co, and Turkmenistan's Natural Gas Konzern supplied the remaining 19.3 bcm.⁷

The evolution of energy cooperation between China and Turkmenistan should benefit both sides. Turkmenistan benefits from doubling its energy supply to China and circumventing its biggest competitors—Iran and Russia. Beijing wins by securing new gas supplies and thus postpones plans to deal with Iran until the political climate of the Middle East improves. According to IEA, China's natural gas import will be around 30–40 bcm, and this amount could be covered by Turkmenistan with its 60 bcm annual export capacity. China's consumption will lie in the range of 180 bcm to 200 bcm, and production in the range of 120 bcm to 140 bcm by 2020. Based on this assumption, the gap between demand and domestic production by 2020 will amount to

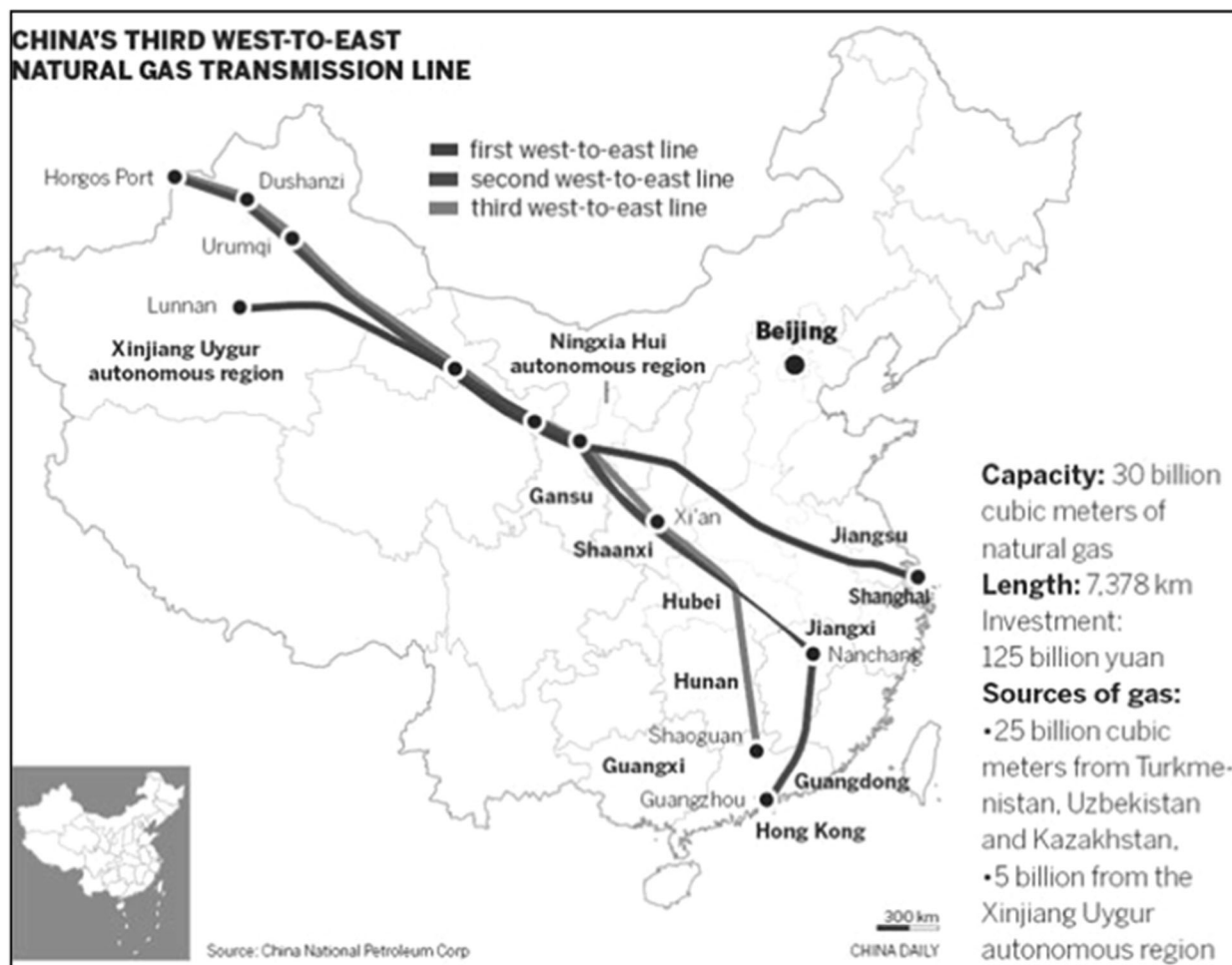


Fig. 2 China's West-to-East natural gas line. This image is not covered by a CC-BY license.

between 40 bcm and 80 bcm.⁸ This will reinforce China's interest and need to buy more gas from Turkmenistan.

Like with other Central Asian countries, China's overall relationship with Uzbekistan has developed over the last two decades, which has contributed to a deeper and more mutually beneficial cooperation in energy. According to *Oil and Gas Journal*, Uzbekistan holds an estimated 65 tcf of proven natural gas reserves as of 2012, ranking it the fourth highest in the Eurasia region and nineteenth in the world.⁹ To gain access to this rich gas reserve, China has made major economic inroads into Uzbekistan where it has set up more than 380 ventures with Chinese investment and also the representative offices of 65 large Chinese companies; among them, CITIC, CNPC, and China Machinery. The twin anchors of this cooperation are Uzbekistan's national oil and gas company Uzbekneftegaz and Chinese CNPC. In 2004, CNPC signed a contract with Uzbekneftegaz on energy cooperation. In 2006, they signed two more agreements to explore and develop prospective petroleum deposits in five onshore blocks of the Aral Sea. A joint venture on oil exploration between Uzbekneftegaz and CNPC was established in the Mingbulak field.

The intersection of the Uzbekistan-China gas pipeline into the Central Asia-China gas pipeline has added momentum to energy cooperation between the two countries. Uzbekistan started to supply natural gas through this gas pipeline on August 2012. As the China-Central Asia pipeline is a double-line pipeline, including Line A and line B, the construction of Line C with a length of 1840 kms to parallel Lines A and B was launched in 2012 (see Fig. 1), including a 157 km-long project undertaken by

the China Petroleum Pipeline Bureau. The 3-line gas pipeline of Uzbekistan-China is projected to have a capacity of 25 bcm gas.¹⁰ This ambitious gas project adds to the bilateral economic relations between China and Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan gains by attracting Chinese investment to its energy sector with spillovers to other sectors of its economy.

While the China-Central Asia energy nexus has broadened, it has experienced a recent setback. The fourth branch of China's far-flung pipeline (planned as Line D) system to carry gas from Turkmenistan through neighboring Uzbekistan (see Fig. 1), which was approved in 2013, has been put off indefinitely after two delays. If this largest planned link in China's supply network from Central Asia has been canceled, it reflects the declines in global energy prices and China's lower economic growth. Even though China's gas consumption grew 5.6% in 2014, 3.6% in 2015, and 8% in 2016, it pales in comparison to the double-digit growth over the 2000s. In fact, research by CNPC predicts that China could face a gas surplus of 50 billion cubic meters (bcm) a year by 2020 due to long-term contracts for imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and pipeline expansion plan.¹¹

As seen from above, China's heavy investment in Central Asia's energy has been driven by its domestic economic growth. Through geographic proximity and overland piping, China has been able to secure this energy flow over long distances to power its manufacturing and megacities all the way on the east coast. However, recent economic slowdown has posted a new challenge to the Chinese government, which had pushed CNPC to make big investments in the China-Central Asia system in light of the BRI,

but failed to devise a pricing policy that would avoid losses on gas imports. While this threatens the short-term stability and mutual benefits of the China-Central Asia energy nexus, it does not alter the fact that China has solidified Central Asia as an abundant long-term source of energy supply. As over the recent past, China's domestic economic performance and its demand for external energy will continue to shape its need for Central Asia's oil and gas. The Belt-side of the BRI further ensures this prospect.

From China to Europe through Central Asia

Besides securing a major energy supply source in Central Asia, China has through the BRI widened its engagement with and through the region as an integral strategy and broad land bridge for (re)connecting with Europe along the old Silk Road. This perceived and actually growing role for Central Asia constitutes the key geoeconomic arena where China is exerting a wide-ranging and multidirectional influence as the emerging dominant Eurasian power. This influence is both direct and indirect, through new investment projects and railroad connections. It not only touches and traverses key cities in Central Asia but also extends all the way into the periphery and core of Eastern and Western Europe. By elongating its heavy footprint from deep inside its domestic economic space to the far-flung corners of Europe via the vast in-between region of Central Asia, China presses us to re-evaluate the relative merits of the Heartland vs. the Rimland in classical geopolitical theories reviewed earlier. In addition, it elevates the specter of a new "Great Game" on the horizon.

The rise of the Trans-Eurasian railroad. In thinking about China-Europe connectivity today, transport infrastructure may not immediately rise to top importance due to the long distance between them and Europe's own well connected transport networks. China has built more highways, railroads, and bridges

than any other country over the past two decades. Armed with this engineering expertise and construction experience, China has been building an extensive transport and municipal infrastructure projects in some of its Asian neighbors and faraway African countries (Chen and Su, 2014). More recently, China has also begun to create and strengthen its long-distance railroad connections to Europe, aiming to expand the overland movement of their traded goods, under the BRI. In light of the long distance and multiple countries and borders along the way, China's effort to transport more goods to Europe by railroad is very ambitious, and critically dependent on having a smooth and linked rail passage through Central Asia. One challenge is to transfer train cargo from China at international borders of Kazakhstan and Russia efficiently by moving containers to awaiting trains that relay the cargo to European trains. While these transfers take time, they are necessary due to the different track gauges of China, the former Soviet countries, and Europe.¹²

China-Europe rail connections have multiplied rapidly over the past few years as the BRI has been further implemented. The first train along the Trans-Eurasia Railroad made all the way to Europe from China in March 2011. Leaving from the city of Chongqing in southwestern China, the train exits Alashankou between Xinjiang and Kazakhstan, and moves through Russia, Belarus, and Poland over 11,179 kms before arriving in the German city of Duisburg (see Fig. 3). In a reverse and reciprocal way as bringing oil and gas from Central Asia to China, the launch of a railroad line to Europe was strongly motivated by changing factors of production inside China. As labor and land costs in coastal cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen have gone up a lot, the Chinese government has been pushing and inducing foreign investors and domestic producers to move inland through its "Go West" policy officially unveiled in 2000. Interior megacities like Chongqing and Chengdu have been booming as major destinations for large new manufacturing projects. Having



Fig. 3 The Trans-Eurasian Railroad (The Chongqing-Duisburg Line). Source: Drawn by Mustafa Ibraheem

set up what would be Asia’s largest laptop factory in Chongqing, U.S. computer giant Hewlett Packard has already shipped more than four million notebook computers to Europe by the Chongqing-Duisburg rail line since 2011 (Chen and Mardeusz, 2015).

The Chongqing-Duisburg line has been followed by the inauguration of several other China-driven originated rail lines that now link different economic centers across China to multiple destinations in Europe and also in Russia and part of the Middle East, thus creating a more expansive Trans-Eurasian rail-based land bridge. Only 270 kms northwest of Chongqing, the megacity of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, became the second starting point China’s Europe-bound cargo trains via Central Asia. On 26 April 2013, Chengdu’s first train to Europe arrived in the central Polish city of Łódź, where the Presidents of both China and Poland met an arriving train on 20 June 2016 to give this rail route the highest-level official blessing. Like the Chongqing-Duisburg line, this train carries IT products as China’s main export to Europe as both Chongqing and Chengdu have become China’s major hubs for IT products like laptops and semiconductors (see Table 1). In 2016 alone, Chengdu ran 460 trains to Europe and 60 trains to Central Asia, carrying 73,000 tons of cargo worth \$1.56 billion.¹³ Beginning in 2017, Chengdu also sent trains to Tiburg in the Netherlands and Nuremberg in Germany, as well as to Moscow and Istanbul, which has increased the projected annual number of trains runs from Chengdu to over 1000.

The China-driven Eurasian Railroad has multiplied and spun off more lines as its geographic starting points have shifted east inside China to include a growing number of cities across a more expansive territory. On 18 July 2013, a new rail line originated from the city of Zhengzhou in central China reached Germany’s largest port city of Hamburg, again through Central Asia (Kazakhstan), Russia, Belarus, and Poland. This line has since been carrying car tires, high-end clothing, stationaries, and artistic products from the provinces of Henan (where Zhengzhou is located), Shandong, Zhejiang, and Fujian, along China’s eastern seaboard. On 29 March 2013, a cargo train left the city of Suzhou near Shanghai and arrived in Warsaw through Russia and Belarus. This line has specialized in shipping products like laptops, circuit boards, liquid-crystal displays, and hard drives from the IT manufacturing hub of Suzhou and its surrounding region. On 18 November 2014, an 82-container freight train left the eastern industrial city of Yiwu, China’s largest wholesale center for small consumer goods (Chen, 2015), and pulled in Madrid after 21 days marking the longest route taken by a freight train. Given the huge demand for China-made consumer goods in Europe, the Yiwu-Madrid rail line has created a special direct link between China’s primary sourcing center for small merchandise and its many markets in Europe (see Table 1). Following the start of a train line to Tehran (see Table 2), Yiwu originated a new line on 13 August 2016 to the Russian city of Chelyabinskaya, a hub city on the Trans-Siberian Railway near the border with Kazakhstan. After 8 days through Central Asia, the train arrived with 100 standard containers filled with small merchandise, which is in high demand in Russia.¹⁴

A simple cost-benefit analysis shows the advantages of shipping goods overland from China to Europe. First, it takes a quarter to half of the time to move train cargo from China to Europe it takes to send them by sea, although the latter is cheaper. Train shipping also costs up to 65% less than shipping by air. While many industries and companies would wait for 1 to 2 months for ocean freight, a growing sector of high-tech and high-end fashion companies needs certain parts and essential equipment as fast and as cheap as possible.¹⁵ For examples, about 60% of the material inputs for laptops and 30% of the finished laptops depend on rail

Table 1 Trans-continental rail lines between China and Europe through Central Asia

Lines	Departing city	Destination city	Launch date	Distance	Travel time	Main cargo
1. Chongqing-Duisburg	Chongqing, China	Duisburg, Germany	19 March 2011	11,000 kilometers	15 days	IT products (i.e., laptops)
2. Chengdu-Lodz	Chengdu, China	Lodz, Poland	26 April 2013	9965 kilometers	14 days	IT products
3. Zhengzhou-Hamburg	Zhengzhou, China	Hamburg, Germany	18 July 2013	10,245 kilometers	15 days	Consumer products (e.g., clothing)
4. Suzhou-Warsaw	Suzhou, China	Warsaw, Poland	29 September 2013	11,200 kilometers	15 days	IT products (from near Shanghai)
5. Wuhan-The Czech Republic and Poland	Wuhan, China	Czech and Polish cities	24 October 2012	10,700 kilometers	15 days	Consumer electronics (from central China)
6. Changsha-Duisburg	Changsha, China	Duisburg, Germany	30 October 2012	11,808 kilometers	18 days	-
7. Yiwu-Madrid	Yiwu, China	Madrid, Spain	18 November 2014	13,052 kilometers	21 days	Small merchandise
8. Harbin-Moscow	Harbin, China	Moscow, Russia	-	6578 kilometers	-	Products from northeastern China
9. Harbin-Hamburg	Harbin, China	Hamburg, Germany	-	9820 kilometers	-	Products from northeastern China
10. Xining-Antwerp	Xining, China	Antwerp, Belgium	-	-	12 days	Local products from western China (Tibet)
11. Guangzhou-Moscow	Guangzhou, China	Moscow, Russia	-	11,500 kilometers	-	Consumer electronics (from southern China)

Source: Tabulated from information compiled by Yina Zhang, Fudan University, Shanghai.

Notes: Lines 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 exit Alataw Pass (Alashankou) on Xinjiang’s border with Kazakhstan and go through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, and Germany, and Line 7 moves on to France and Spain. Line 8, 9, and 11 exit China via the land port of Manzhouli in Inner Mongolia and connects to the Trans-Siberian Railway via Chita before reaching Bkkyan in central Russia

Table 2 China-Central Asia rail lines

Lines	Departing city	Destination city	Launch date	Distance	Travel time	Main cargo
1. Lianyungang-Almaty	Lianyungang, China	Almaty, Kazakhstan	25 February 2015	5600 kilometers	10 days	Electronic products
2. Xian-Almaty	Xian, China	Almaty, Kazakhstan	28 November 2013	3866 kilometers	6 days	Machinery
3. Hefei-Almaty	Hefei (Anhui), China	Almaty, Kazakhstan	26 June 2014	4954 kilometers	8 days	IT and household goods
4. Wuwei-Almaty	Wuwei (Gansu), China	Almaty, Kazakhstan	12 December 2014	2646 kilometers	5 days	Household electronics
5. Nantong-Afghanistan	Nantong (Jiangsu), China	Hairatan, Afghanistan	25 August 2016	--	--	Textiles and consumer goods
6. Xiamen-Turkmenistan	Xiamen (Fujian), China	Turkmenistan	July 2015	11,808 kilometers	5 days	Construction material
7. Xintai-Tashkent	Xintai (Hebei), China	Tashkent, Uzbekistan	--	5000 kilometers	8 days	Local products
8. Yiwu-Tehran	Yiwu, China	Tehran, Iran	--	10,399 kilometers	14 days	Small merchandise
9. Yiwu-Afghanistan	Yiwu, China	Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan	--	7500 kilometers	15 days	Small merchandise
10. Nanjing-Central Asia	Nanjing, China	Central Asian countries	--	--	12 days	--
11. Ningxia-Central Asia	Yinchuan, China	Kyrgyzstan	--	5935 kilometers	15 days	Rubber, steel

Source: Tabulated from information compiled by Yina Zhang, Fudan University, Shanghai.

Notes: Almost of these train lines go west through the border towns and outposts of Horgos or Alataw Pass (Alashankou) in Xinjiang into Central Asia. Line 5 enters Hairatan, Afghanistan from neighboring Uzbekistan over the Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Friendship Bridge built by the former Soviet Union in 1982. Line 8 enters northeastern Iran at the land port of Sarakhs bordering Turkmenistan and then runs west to Tehran. Line 9 continues on from Hairatan to Mazar-i-Sharif inside Afghanistan over a 74-kilometer-long rail line financed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and completed in 2012.

transport. Bringing them in and out from the Chinese city of Chongqing by sea is expensive and time-consuming. It requires a long train ride to Shanghai or Hong Kong from where containers are shipped to Europe (Chen and Mardeusz, 2015). Yet transcontinental rail lines can neither compete with ocean freight on price nor with air shipping on time (Chen, 2018). They are ultimately an in-between mode of long-distance transportation in terms of transit time and shipping cost.¹⁶

Destined for Central Asia and beyond. By connecting a growing number of Europe-bound cargo trains from various cities in China, Central Asia has become an increasingly important in-between regional space for transport logistics and relaying hubs. Providing the inevitable transit routes, Kazakhstan stands out as the most important Central Asian country for bringing China and Europe closer together and more linked via long-distance over-land trade. This recent re-centering of Central Asia has been enhanced further by the entire region becoming the destination for an alternative set of train lines that originate from multiple cities and regions in China. While Kazakhstan (and its former capital of Almaty) remains the most popular final destination for these trains, the rest of Central Asia and its neighboring countries like Iran and Afghanistan have begun to receive and relay them, thus widening China-Central Asian trade into an even larger region known as “inner Asia” that partially overlaps with but stretches beyond Central Asia.

One Central Asia-bound train from China started from the port city of Lianyungang on the eastern seaboard on 25 February 2015. Starting out, this line would run west through the border city of Horgos in Xinjiang to reach Almaty over 10 days. After some early runs, the travel time has shrunk to about 6 days. It has carried electronic products and machine equipment made by Japanese and Korean companies in the broad region near Lianyungang and medical equipment, pottery products, and aluminum products from other manufacturers (see Table 2). On return, this train brings back non-ferrous metal from the mines in Kazakhstan. Line 6 originates from a free trade zone in Xiamen on China’s southeastern coast, exits Xinjiang, and goes through Central Asia to touch Turkmenistan. Carrying construction materials, shoes and garments, foodstuffs, and other consumer goods from Xiamen, this train line has greatly facilitated exports from one of China’s coastal manufacturing hubs under the BRI.

Besides being the end points for China’s exports, Central Asia states have begun to channel and relay the broader range of China’s trade with the West and South Asian countries bordering Central Asia. Like a number of trains heading to Europe, Line 8 originates from Yiwu going west, exits Alashankou into Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, enters Iran’s land port of Sarakhs, and then turns west to reach Tehran. It delivers a variety of consumer goods that fill the stores and bazaars throughout Iran’s capital city (Kazemi and Chen, 2014). Line 9 follows the same route all the way through Kazakhstan where it heads south into Uzbekistan and then reaches Hairatan before arriving in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, one of the country’s most populated and developed northern cities.

Located at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, between India in the South and Russia in the North, Afghanistan is potentially a critical part of China’s westward trade and investment network under the BRI. While Afghanistan’s great need for infrastructure is a new opportunity for China’s outward investment, its vast natural resources appeal to China. In fact, China has begun to find ways to involve Afghanistan in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a lynchpin of the BRI (see Chen, Joseph, and Tariq, 2018). However, China is concerned about the Taliban and other Islamist militant groups

in Afghanistan due to their possible links with the Muslim population in Xinjiang. The deadly Taliban attack on an Afghan army base in Mazar-e-Sharif in April 2017, which killed over 100 soldiers, only reminds of the danger for China to conduct business in Afghanistan. Through an anti-terrorism alliance with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan to tackle the threat of terrorism, China has recently announced \$70 million of military aid to support the Afghan government's anti-terrorism efforts (Stanzel, 2017). In light of these security concerns in Afghanistan, sending a train all the way there marks China's bold and far-reaching attempt to revive the old Silk Road through creating broader trade and infrastructure links beyond and from Central Asia. This reminds us of Afghanistan's central geopolitical importance in the original "Great Game" (Hopkirk, 1992).

The geographic focal point for facilitating China-Central Asia trade and train links is an emerging cross-border economic zone anchored jointly to the land port of Horgos on the Chinese (Xinjiang) and the Kazakh border city of Khorgos on the opposite side. A transit point on the ancient Silk Road in the Tang Dynasty, Horgos marked a closed border after the Russian Revolution in 1917 until 1983 when it reopened for very limited trade. The establishment of a free trade zone in 2012 ushered in a new era for Horgos, as a railroad port for restricted operation and as the location for the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to pass through into China (see earlier). Following China's launch of the BRI in 2013, Horgos was upgraded to a city that now covers an area of about 1900 square kilometers, with a population of about 85,000. In 2016, the Chinese government fully opened the Horgos railway port and invested \$289 million in completing the first stage of the 90,000-square-meter port station. Formally called the International Center for Boundary Cooperation (ICBC), the five square kilometer free trade zone covering both sides of the border hosts, on the Chinese side, a several giant, four-story, wholesale markets containing hundreds of small shops and booths rented by individual vendors (Chen, 2018). Kazakh buyers from Almaty roam these booths to comparatively shop consumer goods like toys or specialized items like hair wigs among many almost identical vendors.¹⁷ This scene is quite similar to the large number of international buyers, especially from the Middle East roaming the gigantic hall of small merchandise vendors in Yiwu (Chen, 2015), only on a much smaller scale. On the Kazakh side of the border is a 5740 hectare special economic zone that is modeled off of the Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone in Dubai. It, however, has not yet taken the intended scale and form, paling in comparison to its counterpart in Horgos. By scaling up cross-border economic transactions over outstretched borderlands, small border cities like Horgos have emerged as a new kind of in-between space that brings together previously unconnected actors and pushes out longer and wider mobilities of capital, goods, and labor (Chen and Stone, 2017).

As Horgos has grown into a small border trade outpost and a critical transshipment hub for more Eurasian train lines, it has also begun to attract growing manufacturing and warehousing industries, a few of which all the way from China's dominant manufacturing coast. Based in Shenzhen, Boshihao Electronics has moved a portion of its production to Horgos where it plans to produce 10,000 industrial robots per year, which will be destined for export to Silk Road countries in Central Asia, Russia, and the Middle East. Costing between \$700 and \$150,000 each, these industrial robots are high-value merchandise that can be shipped fast by train to Europe in roughly 10 days at a fraction of the cost of air as their weight also makes air shipping prohibitively expensive.¹⁸ In addition, as rising costs continue to drive manufacturing activities to the deep interior and even remote border locations like Horgos, it makes less sense to move products overland east just to load them onto ships to ultimately go west. If a remote city like Horgos can combine the functions of some local

manufacturing and strong logistics for cross-border trains, it has a high potential to become a new overland gateway for China's west-oriented BRI despite its landlocked position (Chen, 2018).

Geoeconomic re-centering for a "New Great Game"?

With the theoretical point of departure being Mackinder's Heartland thesis for this paper, the empirical analysis of China's important economic and physical influence through and into Central Asia leads us to rethink and rebalance the assumption and orientation of classical geopolitical theorizing about the status and role of the vast region between Europe and Asia. While Mackinder and Spykman differed in how broadly they saw as the geographic scope of the Eurasian landmass' importance (Heartland vs. Rimland) to Britain's and America's diplomatic interests, they shared a similar geopolitical orientation and approach to the region. Having built several energy pipelines from Central Asia and many train lines to Europe, China has almost unilaterally shifted the understanding of Central Asia away from the geopolitical end to the geoeconomic side. Moreover, the cumulative force of these transboundary pipelines and train lines has begun to re-center Central Asia as the crucial middle or in-between regional space for China to push forward the new Belt-half of the BRI in reaching more parts and points of Europe and the Middle East. The extension of China's overland influence over larger territories to its west also gives more credence to Spykman's alternative conception of the Rimland including China as a partial sea power. To enrich the continued debate about the theoretical legacy of Mackinder one century later (Megoran, 2004), China's key role in re-centering Central Asia injects a bevy of timely evidence and insight for understanding the complex realities surrounding an ancient land today. It sensitizes us to re-evaluate both the connected and blurred boundaries between: (a) geopolitical and geoeconomic imperatives; (b) the rise of and pivot to China and the relative decline of old Eurasian powers like Britain and Russia (Hopkirk, 1992); (c) domestic economic growth and external development strategy; and (d) the uneven autonomous role of key cities vs. the general weakening of the nation-state (Chen, 2005; Chen and Stone, 2017).

These points of renewed research and debate have updated the view of early Heartland scholars that China was a mere geoeconomic rice and cereal grain producer. Far beyond its limited historical position and role, China has been driving a new set of economic and infrastructure connections in both directions across Central Asia. In the eastern direction, China has secured the flow of oil and gas through several long-distance pipelines from as far as Turkmenistan in the west all the way to its eastern seaboard. Relative to its largest source of oil in the Middle East that has to be shipped by sea, China has won a large share of the energy prize in Central Asia through shorter overland pipelines. In fact, China has relegated the United States to a second-tier energy players in Central Asia where its private oil companies, large as they are like ExxonMobil, do not match up against China's powerful state-owned oil giants such as CNPC (Fazilov and Chen, 2013). Besides oil and gas from Central Asia, China also benefits from the region's uranium reserves, renewable energy, and quartz sand deposits that are essential to the Chinese solar cell industry. Relative to the more limited spatial scopes of Britain vs. Russia's diplomatic and military maneuvering during the original "Great Game," China's impact within and through Central Asia has reached the scale and depth that may trigger a new "Great Game" with receding but still strong powers like Russia and the United States. This is a more likely scenario if Central Asia ends up being a new buffer zone between China and Russia, especially when most Central Asian residents still prefer Russia to China (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2009).

While the original “Great Game” carried a negative connotation regarding the territories controlled by both the British and Russian Empires, can a new “Great Game” featuring China as the key player produce a different set of outcomes for all parties concerned? In the western direction, China’s many Europe and Central Asia-bound trains have created a wide opening and channel for extending and accelerating its trade. They have also facilitated China’s “Go West” development strategy by inducing more manufacturing companies to relocate production from the coastal region to cheaper interior cities, which in turn can foster more balanced regional development. At the same time, cargo trains originating from cities like Yiwu and Xiamen in the coastal region have benefited Central and South Asian and Middle Eastern economies more directly as the latter’s large orders for China-made consumer goods can be shipped faster and cheaper by land. In addition, the more frequent runs of these trains, which lower the average freight cost, make it possible for smaller manufacturers and logistics companies, especially those clustered around Yiwu (Chen, 2015) to move partially full containers instead of waiting to fill them completely. In another overland connection beyond China and Central Asia, the ongoing project of CPEC from Gwadar Port on the Indian Ocean to the border city of Kashgar in Xinjiang, if successfully completed and operational, will add the fastest access to sea for China’s landlocked northwestern region and its Central Asian neighbors (Chen, Joseph, and Tariq, 2018).

While the China-Central Asia nexus brings about mutual benefits for both sides and beyond, it confronts various economic, political, and spatial constraints. China’s recent slower economic growth has produced uncertainty and less revenue for the oil and gas rich and dependent Central Asia as exemplified by the recent cancellation of a planned gas pipeline (Line D, see earlier) from Turkmenistan. While the growing number of Europe-bound trains has boosted China’s overland exports, some of these trains only bring partially full cargo back to China, thus introducing and sustaining an imbalance to the bi-directional flow of China-Europe freight. Some of the Chinese cities originating these trains have had to subsidize the operation. As the income and purchasing power of large interior Chinese cities like Chongqing and Chengdu rise, it has begun to create a market for European wine, cheese, chocolates, and luxury cars carried by the trains from Europe returning to and passing by these cities. Despite and because of its vase size, Central Asia has a relatively small number of large cities (except for the few capital cities like Almaty and Tashkent) that can function as regional hubs relative to the heavy concentration and clustering of large cities in both western Europe and East Asia, at the two ends of the old and new Silk Road.

Within Central Asia, “Sinophobia” may inhibit the further expansion of China’s trade and investment in the region. Evidence includes isolated riots in Kyrgyzstan against Chinese workers who allegedly had more privileged working conditions over domestic workers and a fight between Kazakh and Chinese workers of Aktogay copper mine in Kazakhstan on 8 July 2015 involving 145 people, 65 of whom were injured and hospitalized.¹⁹ On the other hand, the Central Asian states suffer from some corruption, nepotism, and a lack of transparency, contributing to their slow economic development that characterized the old Heartland (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2013). Given their declined oil and gas revenues, the Central Asian governments may be less capable of keeping up the maintenance of the through rail lines, most of which were built by and dependent on Soviet-era capital investment. A common challenge for both China and Central Asia is to maintain the long-distance cross-border oil and gas pipelines in severely continental climate zones as sections of these pipelines were built during the Soviet era and with less advanced construction technologies such as welding. Another risk

to China’s cooperation with Central Asia including Afghanistan and Pakistan is the terrorist element that is potentially linked to Xinjiang. In opening up and widening more lines of cooperation in Central Asia, China is always concerned about its border security, which in turn assures stable economic relations with its western neighbors (Scott and Alcenat, 2008).

The Central Asian states, on the other hand, are uncomfortably varied and even divergent in how to deal with the growing Chinese migration and potential formation of Chinese enclaves in their capital cities. More specifically, Chinese migrants work with Chinese and Kazakh construction companies as engineers and technicians, not necessarily competing with locals, while Chinese retailers in Kyrgyzstan compete with local petty trader. Therefore, Central Asia finds itself in a paradoxical situation since it has both labor surpluses and shortages, yet its own population is emigrating to look for better working opportunities in Russia (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2009: p. 60). If Chinese migration into Central Asia accelerates under the BRI, which is highly likely, it challenges the Central Asian governments to more carefully weigh the costs and benefits of involving Chinese workers given their respective demographic and economic conditions and then adapt their immigration and border control policies accordingly.

Given the co-existence and tension between these new opportunities and barriers for China-Central Asia cooperation, China appears to be in the driver’s seat to shape how the relative balance between opportunities and obstacles will play out for both sides and their bordering states and regions. The scale and scope of China’s economic and infrastructure activities in Central Asia and its neighbors is too broad not to affect a large swath of the region. The large number of train lines destined for Europe through Central Asia and also the latter constitutes a powerful geoeconomic force pulling the gravity of the Chinese economy westward inside China and then pushing its influence out to existing and new market destinations. The closer intertwining between China’s changing domestic economy and global strategy under the BRI is complicated further by its shared interests and problems with Central Asia, which could turn the China-Central Asia nexus into a vassal relationship characterized by cross-border investment by China for border security and political stability (Swanström, 2005). This scenario could fall back to the unequal relationship between the British and Russian Empires and their controlled territories during the original “Great Game.”

Regardless of the prospect, China through the BRI is deep in playing a “New Great Game” in Central Asia that differs considerably from its historical precedent about 150 years ago when Britain and Russia jostled with each other on the Eurasian steppes. If Russia was able to bring the Kazakh(stan) steppe zone in the north under its control during the 1800s, China’s geoeconomically oriented BRI in the twenty-first century is played out from the Kazakh steppe to the “Eurasian desert zone” further south and East-Central Europe further west. The long-term outcome can only reflect how the still rising China will and can handle the new opportunities vs. the existing obstacles across the vast Eurasian landmass on which a China-pushed, re-centered Central Asia may (re)emerge sooner than later


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Notes

1 Data calculated from <http://www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/KeyOilTrends.pdf>, p. 6.

2 Data from <http://www.worldstopexports.com/crude-oil-imports-by-country/>.

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- Data availability**
- All data analysed in this study are presented in the paper.
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- Additional information**
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