

## Returns to Old Eurasian Heartland: China's New Strategic Game towards Central Asia in 21st Century

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**Abstract**— The China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) position of Central Asia is in a crucial point and it is more vital as the hub of cross regional, long distance loops of trade, investment, and infrastructure development. In this research, the main objective is to find out the geopolitical nexus with Central Asia that induce China to persuade Heartland while examining the prevalence sources and mechanisms that China has used for reshaping Central Asia. Hence, China's new strategic game towards Central Asia is scrutinized by using Mackinder's Heartland theory and this new knowledge and ideas were generated and constructed by gathering qualitative secondary and primary data. The research reveals that China's influence in countries of the world-island of Heartland is becoming a trend in the recent years. By giving economic support, China tries to get patronage and loyalty from Central Asia and to challenge the maritime hegemony of the USA. In conclusion this research explores Chinese intentions in Central Asia under a specific set of conditions is likely to become the platform for a new great game. But the parameters for these conditions are unilaterally to emerge in the future. Hence China engages in a new great game as single unified land power through emerging Eurasia with railroads and transportation goods for being a unilateral power economically.

**Keywords:** *Heartland, Belt and Road Initiatives, Land Power, Geopolitics, Geopolitical Nexus*

### Introduction

Even the term of geopolitics came into the international relations arena at the end of the nineteenth century, the actual practices of geopolitics began much earlier than the aforesaid

era. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of railroads and the internal combustion engine, some theories like Alfred Mahan's 'Sea Power' were challenged by technological advances inland transportation. That means the land power assumed the dominant position in the discipline of *Geopolitics*. Therefore, Halford John Mackinder's Heartland theory played a prominent role and it was introduced from his book titled "Royal Geographical Pivot of History" in 1904.

Heartland is a region of the world situated in Eurasia and it is more vital due to its sheer size, a wealth of resources, and a high population (Sawe, 2017). From the theory, it is analyzed the political and economic success of the world's regions by geography. Somehow, today it is identified around the geographical boundaries of Central Asia.

In recent history, great natural barriers that surrounded the heartland are inspired by the German invasion of Russia during the Second World War. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is still opened for a new type of invasion due to fifty presents of resources and geographical location of itself. Following that in recent years, China's influence in countries of Central Asia has been on an upward trend, by giving economic patronage and taking loyalty from them. Otherwise, China needed to emerge as the largest economy in Asia-Europe before it eventually surpasses the US as the superpower. Therefore, China is persuading Central Asia and tries to control heartland. One Belt One Road (OBOR) development strategy which is also known as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a sort of attempt to solidify control over Mackinder's heartland. Hence, in this research, China's new strategic game towards Central Asia is scrutinized by using Mackinder's Heartland theory. In the contemporary context, the mentioned theory is used to analyze some insights for understanding the new arrival of new China due to trans-boundary regional nexus.

## Methodology

This qualitative research is based on the methodology of constructivism. By knowing the reality, new knowledge and ideas will be generated and constructed by gathering qualitative secondary data and primary data. While using speeches of political leaders such as XiJinping's, Donald Trump's, Government policy briefs and, other basic documents as primary data, the author will Focus on a single concept or phenomenon by using secondary data gathering from Journal articles, scholarly books, and periodicals by using the aforementioned

constructive methodology. In addition to that, this method brings personal values into the study, and the author studies the context, validates the accuracy of findings and interprets the data and it is done as research practices based on constructivism.'



Figure 2. Mackinder's Heartland/ Pivot Area  
Source: Mackinder, 1904

## Results and Findings

According to Mackinder "Every century has had its geographical perspective." Hence the problem of how to view the world from a meaningful perspective is a fundamental challenge in every time frame is pressured by every geographer. Among them, Mackinder introduced a geopolitical concern regarding Central Asia, before known as Eurasia with the special name of Heartland. He carefully defined the portion of the Eurasian interior (Heartland) as a vital position with the technical instruments of the 20th century. It consists three basic geographic regions called outlined islands, offshore islands, and world islands and also, he mentioned that Europe, Asia, and Africa would have belonged to

World Island as well (See Figure 1). Thus, Hartland could be developed and integrated into resources and manpower scale for the potential superpower of the globe. Basically from Europe, all the way to Asia is something that Mackinder calls the world island and if anyone controls this heartland of this world island which is generally situated around Russia, Central Asia (the central part of the world island) they control the world then. As an example, during the cold war period, the Soviet Union controlled heartland when the United States of America built up their hegemony by using sea power of Mahan.

However, when considering the ancient silk road during Han Dynasty (207 BCE-220 CE) Central Asia was generated as a bridge to connect China to Europe and the Middle East "Overland Trade" since many Centuries (Hoshmand, 2019). Hence Central Asia made an inevitable path for Genghis Khan and his descendants to conquer such places including Syria and Poland. Historically, on one hand, Turkic island influenced and another hand the connection of Xingjian has always disturbed the stability of Central Asia's western border territory.

Many Centuries ago China and Central Asia had historical relations in peace, war, trade, and intermarriage bonds. Otherwise, by using these historically valued ties, China has tried to arise powerfully on the global stage with the fundamental domestic economic transformation and China already can reshape the prevalence economic potentials of Central Asia as well.

When it comes to 21st century Central Asia emerge as the region which brings new opportunities to China's ambitions. That initiatives call "Go West". In that concept, China develops it's lagging interior and border regions. Following that it seems to be operating hegemonic power and China controls the heartland or even controlling the Rim Land.

However, the unprecedented return of Beijing to Central Asia has been marked with China's President Xi Jinping's tour to Central Asia in 2013. Now China accepts that the importance of the Silk Road Economic Belt which is known as globally ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Hence China's BRI position of Central Asia is in a crucial point and it is more vital as the hub of cross-regional, long-distance loops of trade,

investment, and infrastructure development. Hence they need to expand the old Silk Road through the new Silk Road economic belt and twenty-first century maritime Silk Road.

In accordance, the heartland theory helps to understand Central Asia through the past century and it deeply analyses political mobilization, some parameters of economic flow, geographical factors on Eurasia, and the importance of spatial boundary of their broad region. Hence his ideas grew seeds in the field of geopolitical and diplomatic studies and continue to give a theoretical contribution for further ideological development of Eurasia today. To better understand the development of Central Asian nations that after or before the dissolution of the former Soviet Union should be scrutinized. The post-soviet independence Central Asia pursued their economic destinies by reconnecting Western Europe through the European Union. But as in the case, most east European economies are turning more to China for economic cooperation as Central Asia because of the historical practices and now the Shanghai cooperation plays a significant role regarding previously mentioned purpose.

However, with the East Soviet era, the economic positions of the countries at the western and eastern turned into China. It is generally familiar with the now outdated third world scheme. Therefore, the former east European socialist countries were labeled as the second world and China was part of the third world. However, the world-systems theory tends to classify the former as belonging to the semi-periphery zone of the tripartite world economy with the zone and periphery (Chirot, 1986). Or an extra category of others (Baboues, 2005). While China plays a role in the periphery before 1980 and significantly rose to the semi-periphery in the 21st century. Now China has captured the world economy for the long term.

China has risen and returned to Asia's center of economic gravity. They have come in power position by pressuring on the BRI which forges direct and has close connectivity with Europe through Central Asia. However, now China leads Trans connected Eurasian railway. It is the fastest way to exchange goods rather than sea routes. Over these landlocked countries, extensive energy links from and through Central Asia has

been created. However, China practices a new great game as a strong regional power.

With the changes and continuations of the term "Great Game," China's role in Central Asia is much more significant. They play in the field of the region by stretching up Mackinder's predictions. China is a constituent of the world island as other major global powers including the EU, India, and Russia. In recent years, China's influence in countries of the world island has been an upward trend with the country using economic support to gain, patronage, and loyalty from the countries. But the term 'Great Game' has a different meaning when considering the classical and new era. Classical definition started around the 1830s. That era had more tension, and confrontation between the British Empire and the Russian Empire. They held their autocracy regarding the places that today's known as Central Asia and South Asia. There has a certain theoretical influence on their recent history and today's dynamics as well.

Now China and Russia are the two dominant power players vs. the weaker sooner independent Central Asian states. Even these countries' population is high, richest from the resources they are a group of colonies or small emirates. And also, they are largely underdeveloped. According to Cooley, he 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 (Chen, 2018). However, political corruption, social instability, and economic weaknesses have created an open space for a new great and strategic game. However Central Asian leaders are more prone to make a close connection with external global power through business networks, elite banks accounts, overseas courts, third-party brokers, and western lawyers.

China has used this new regional space with a primary geo-economics strategy by promoting trade, securing energy supplies, and building cross border infrastructure. As a part of the new great game, China reshapes regional and bilateral trade ties over the trade routes in Central Asia. Otherwise, China is the largest trading partner with the whole region and has replaced Russia's earlier dominance in trade with Central Asia. Because China needs to emerge as the largest

economy in Asia-Europe before it eventually surpasses the United States as the superpower.

## Discussion

By launching the BRI, China has created a geo-economics strategy to build up deep overland trade and infrastructure ties to the larger Eurasia and Europe. In accordance that the term of the great game after 2013, with the BRI, it brings up mutual benefit and with aforesaid heavy involvement in Central Asia, the real new great game is happening. Otherwise, with the geographic proximity, the BRI involvement justifies as a part of China and the “global south”. Therefore, there are two types of nexus can be seen in between China and Central Asia as follows.

### *A. Energy nexus between China and Central Asia*

When considering Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan GDP per capita around \$9000 is slightly higher than China's. Because of the energy wealth and a much smaller population. When considering examples, the GDP per capita of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan averaging less than \$ 2500. That reason also motivates to China's interests.

However, China and Central Asia have strong energy ties which call Trans-boundary” energy nexus”. China's motivation for global and regional development and engagement strategies can be identified as a result of them. However, China is always inspired by Central Asia's domestic, economic, and political conditions. In the past three decades, a huge need for imported energy has been generated due to the sustained growth of China's economy. Somehow this situation changed the global supply-demand equation as well.

The issue is that emerging China's megacities, as well as massive manufacturing machines, are running on a huge amount of quantities of coal, oil, and natural gas because of that China has become the world's largest energy consumer during last 20 years. They take almost 20% of the world's total energy consumption today. But the rapid growth of China's demand for energy has far challenged by its domestic supply. It is not enough. Because its' booming energy requires China to import more than half of the oil it needs. According to the United States energy

information administration (EIA) China may import about 75% of the crude oil it will consume by 2035. (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). However, even according to Mackinder ‘who rules east Europe, commands the heartland.’ In accordance that China's growing demand for energy has expanded its sources of imports including Central Asia. It helps to China for becoming a superpower in the world.

China has depended on numbers of the Middle East and African countries which are entertaining law political stability. Likewise, China has begun to dig and complete its international energy sources by sponsoring the development of China-bound pipelines in Myanmar and Central Asia. When it comes to China's energy policies it is more important due to its potentials of oil and natural gas deposits. The most important thing is that Central Asia is bearing 4% of global energy deposits in the world. The oil resources in central Asia and along the Caspian Sea coast around 17 to 33 BBI/day with more unexploited deposits (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). China has turned to Central Asia for energy consumptions for two reasons. One is that China aims to compete with its energy security. By developing its ‘Energy Diplomacy’ within the region. The second reason is that developing close ties with Central Asia through and energy nexus helps China deter threats from the separatists' activities in the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region which has oil fields near the western border of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

In Central Asia, China has built up a regional trade zone to search for energy resources. Nowadays the major Chinese energy players in the region are China National Petroleum Cooperation, China National Offshore Oil Cooperation, and Petro China. These companies have comparative advantages from the partnership with Central Asia for the oil needs they grant technological support, service teams, and engineers. However, two main gas lines that can be identified as the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline and Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline. (See figure 2)





Figure 2. Central Asia-China oil and gas pipelines  
 Source: Chen & Fazilov, 2018

However, because of the massive oil reserves, Kazakhstan is most attractive to China for energy cooperation. Kazakhstan proven offshore and onshore fields' reserves constitute about 37 billion barrels of oil and 3.3 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. Therefore Chinese energy companies are investigating the oil reserves in Kazakhstan and they expect to expand its export capacity by 20 million barrels in the future. There is cooperation for helping strengthen and secure its natural western borders from the separatists. And also this cooperation provides new energy resources to support China's 'Go West' program and helps it gain greater access to resource basins of Central Asia.

Otherwise, Turkmenistan is one of the world's largest natural gas exporters. According to the oil and gas journal Turkmenistan has proven natural gas reserves of approximately 265 trillion cubic feet in 2012. That natural gas reserves have drawn significant attention and influence from China. Otherwise, the evolution of energy ties between China and Turkmenistan brings more benefits to both sides. Even their biggest competitors Russia and Iran still in the competition and Beijing has won the challenge by securing new gas supplies. However, China's heavy investment in Central Asia's energy has been driven by its domestic economic growth, 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.

*B. Rail road's nexus between China and Central Asia*

The reconnect with Europe along with the old Silk Road China has built up an integral strategy and broad land bridge by referring to the BRI project. This railroad projects are more important to the multidirectional influence of Beijing towards Central Asia (See figure 3).



Figure 3. The Trans-Eurasian Railroad (The Chongqing-Duisburg Line)  
 Source: Ibraheem, 2018

In accordance that China presses to reevaluate the relative merits of the heartland by a new great game. China has also begun to create and strengthen its long-distance railroad connections to Europe by expanding the overland connectivity via their trade goods under BRI. The China-driven Eurasian railroad has multiplied and spun off more lines as its geographic starting points. It has shifted from East to inside China to include a growing number of cities across a more expensive territory. These railroads are executed for transport logistics and relaying hubs.

According to Mackinder, he saw the geographic scope of the Eurasian landmass importance to Britain's and America's diplomatic interests. They shared a similar geopolitical organization and approach to the region. But China has almost unilaterally shifted the understanding of Central Asia away from the geopolitical end to the geo-economics side. However, these energy nexus Trans bounding pipelines, train lines have begun to re-center Central Asia as an important hub of BRI. But with the influence of China 'Sinophobia' may arise within Central Asian countries. But China still is in the driver's seat to reshape the relative balance between opportunities and obstacles in Central Asia. However Mackinder's heartland theory still relevant in Central Asia and this research proved that the theory indications

are strategically used by China to become the world's largest economy and full fill their energy security.

### Conclusion

According to Mackinder's heartland theory, 'what a dominant world power has to control heartland to be a global power. In history, the Soviet Union controls heartland to become hegemonic power and their strategic behavior was differ from the new great game. However, when considering new great games China seems to be controlling the heartland or even controlling rimland by using BRI. However not likewise the USA China is growing in strength from land base power and largely challenges the maritime American hegemony in a contemporary revision of Mackinder theory. Hence his theory is more appropriate to explore the dimensions of China's engagement with Eurasia/Central Asia. Because China's position towards Central Asia is characterized by a long term consistent and geographically motivated foreign and security policy. Hence China is likely to become the most important long-term power and referring point in and for Central Asia. Finally, when concluding this research author explores her intentions by saying Central Asia would only under a specific set of conditions become the platform for a new great game but the parameters for these conditions are unilaterally to emerge in the force able future.

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