



**The Great Powers and the New Great Game**

**Central Asia, Kazakhstan and the Balance of Power Between China and the United States**

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## **THE GREAT POWERS AND THE NEW GREAT GAME**

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Viewed through the lens of Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism, the rise of China is perceived as a threat by the United States, a disruption to the current balance of power. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exacerbates that perception, as China moves to develop deeper economic ties across Asia, Europe and north Africa. This brief explores the strategic significance of Central Asia and Kazakhstan in particular, in relationship to China, the BRI, and other nations in that region. In addition, this brief reviews potential strategies the United States might employ in Central Asia to prevent or slow China's rise.

### **Great Power Rivalries and the Relationship Between the United States and China**

Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism posits that states have a strong incentive to seek power in order to maximize their chances for survival (Mearsheimer 2014, 21). Because there is no central authority to police the behavior of rival states and rivals can never be certain about each other's intentions, states seek to increase their power relative to their rivals; hegemony offers the best chances of survival (Mearsheimer 2014, 3).

A state's effective power is tied to the strength of its military relative to that of its rivals. (Mearsheimer 2014, 61). Even when a rival's military power is inferior, its latent power (*i.e.*, the "raw potential" of wealth, population, and technology a state can use to build its military power) is perceived as a threat (Mearsheimer 2014, 144).

According to the theory of offensive realism, a great power strives to become a regional hegemon for its own region and prevent the rise of a hegemon in other regions (Mearsheimer

2014, 141). One regional hegemon will perceive another as a threat, fearing that its rival will try to disrupt the balance of power in its own “backyard” (Mearsheimer 2014, 142).

Under this theory of offensive realism, the United States is a regional hegemon in the western hemisphere, perceiving itself threatened by the rise of China’s economic power in the east. While the United States’ military power continues to dominate, China has growing latent power – its growing wealth and its large population – that it can use to build its own military dominance in the east.

Mearsheimer identifies several strategies that a regional hegemon like the United States might use to gain power relative to a rival or to disrupt the rise of a rival. Some of these strategies, including war, blackmail and “bait and bleed.” With “bloodletting,” one great power helps to make sure that any war between its rivals is long and costly, weakening both (Mearshiemer 2014, 154). To thwart the rise of a great power, “balancing” and “buck passing” are the two principle options. When a great power uses balancing, it assumes responsibility for preventing the other great power from upsetting the balance of power. “External balancing” involves an alliance of states, including lesser powers, who assume that responsibility (Mearshiemer 2014, 156). Buck passing is an attempt to get another state to bear the burden of thwarting the rising power (Mearshiemer 2014, 158).

### *The Bricks and Road Initiative and the Implications for the United States*

While China is expanding its military capacity (Denoon 2016), its most overtly ambitious plans relate to building its economic influence. In 2013 China launched its Belt and Roads Initiative (BRI), which has been characterized as “the most ambitious geoeconomic vision in

recent history” (Hillman 2018, 2) and the biggest foreign spending program since the Marshall plan (Crabtree 2017). China is proposing to develop a network of transport and economic routes that connect Asia, Europe and north Africa. BRI would span 70 countries and more than two-thirds of the world’s population. With Chinese investments of as much as \$4 trillion, BRI would involve strengthening both “hard infrastructure,” (*e.g.*, roads and railways) and “soft infrastructure” (*e.g.*, trade agreements and cultural ties) (Hillman 2018, 2).

In a statement before the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, Jonathan Hillman notes that BRI is producing “political dividends” for China, fostering favorable relationships between China and its BRI partner countries (*e.g.*, strengthening partnership with Pakistan and causing the Philippines and Cambodia to reevaluate their military or diplomatic ties to the United States) (Hillman 2018, 7). He also warns that the success of the BRI has implications for U.S. economic interests:

Since World War II, the United States has played a leading role in creating, expanding, and defending open trade and financial systems.... U.S. economic strength flows from the dynamism of its private sector and the U.S. economy’s central position within these systems... A BRI that succeeds on China’s terms could revise these systems to reflect Chinese interests.... [T]hese changes would push the United States away from its current position in the global economy and move China toward the center (Hillman 2018, 9-10).

Specifically, Hillman warns that China’s success with the BRI has implications for the supply chains for goods, the dominance of Chinese currency, the primacy of Chinese technical

standards for infrastructure (*e.g.*, high-speed railway systems and wireless networks) and the adoption of Chinese preferences for environmental and social safeguards.<sup>1</sup>

The BRI has caused alarm and consternation among western nations and their allies. On the economic front, concern has been expressed about access to development projects by non-Chinese construction firms (Hillman 2018, 9), China's perceived strategy to capture supply chains from "Guangzhou to Greece" (Chamorro 2017), and the dilemma of whether to resist the BRI and possibly lose out, or partner with China and strengthen China's hand (*e.g.*, Laurenceson et al. 2017, which reviews the trade-offs facing Australia). On the security front, Hillman notes that the transport routes being developed under BRI may also be used for military purposes and, in the event that China emerges as a hegemon in the region, the infrastructure being developed will be both an indicator of and vehicle for influence (Hillman 2018, 10).

The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement has fed these fears. Even before BRI was launched, the Obama administration had initiated a "pivot to Asia," to develop political, military and economic alliances with Asian-Pacific countries. In 2009, the U.S. joined negotiations with 11 other countries to develop the TPP. With negotiations completed in 2015, the TPP would have united 12 countries<sup>2</sup> accounting for 40 percent of the world's gross domestic product and 25 percent of world trade (Wąsiński and Wnukowski 2017, 1). The TPP was intended to strengthen U.S. alliances in the Asia-Pacific region and contain China's growth. The TPP also would have promoted U.S. standards for trade, products, labor, and the environment (Wąsiński and Wnukowski 2017,.2). China could not

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<sup>1</sup> In the short term, the BRI also responds to, but does fully not solve, one of China's domestic challenges – it creates an outlet for China's excess capacity (Hillman 2018, 5).

<sup>2</sup> The twelve partners in the TPP included Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States, and Vietnam.

participate in the TPP without making reforms to its internal market (Wąsiński and Wnukowski 2017, 2).

The Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the TPP has left an opening for China to use the BRI to increase the region's dependence on China and increase China's influence in the region (Wąsiński and Wnukowski 2017, 2). The absence of a vision for the United States' role in the Asian-Pacific region creates uncertainty for U.S. allies as they navigate their relationship to China.

### **The BRI, Central Asia and U.S. Strategic Interests**

#### **Central Asia and Kazakhstan**

To the west of China, Central Asia has played a central role in the contest among great powers and may again in the contest between China and the United States. The name "Belt and Road Initiative" is intended to call to mind the ancient Silk Road, a network of trade routes that linked China and Europe between 130 BC until 1453 AD. The Silk Road went through Central Asia, until it was blocked by the Ottoman Empire in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The BRI is intended to revive the transport routes through Central Asia, providing China more direct access to European markets and helping to put Central Asia once again at the center of what some have called a "New Great Game."

Central Asia consists of five republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. All five of these republics became independent or quasi-independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Brill 1992, 118).

The vast majority of Central Asians are Sunni Muslims (Central Intelligence Agency 2018). At the same time, four of the five Central Asian states have authoritarian, secular leaders,

giving rise to an inherent tension between the values of the public and leadership (Denoon 2016). Central Asia is not able to completely suppress radical Islamic movements within their borders, raising concern about political instability in that part of the world (Denoon 2016).

Of the five republics in Central Asia, Kazakhstan is the largest. In fact, measured in square miles, Kazakhstan is the tenth largest country in the world. It also has the largest economy in Central Asia, primarily because of its natural resources, which include major deposits of petroleum, natural gas, coal, iron ore, manganese, chrome ore, nickel, cobalt, copper, molybdenum, lead, zinc, bauxite, gold, and uranium (Central Intelligence Agency 2018). Unlike Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan which are very mountainous, the majority of Kazakhstan's terrain is flat, and 74 percent of its land is used for agriculture (Central Intelligence Agency 2018).

The majority of people in Kazakhstan are ethnic Kazakhs (63.3 percent), descended from a mix of Turkic and Mongol nomadic tribes. Russians account for another 23 percent of Kazakhstan's population. Under the Soviet Union, collectivization and political purges had reduced the number of Kazakhs living in Kazakhstan. In addition, the Soviet government encouraged Russians to settle in Kazakhstan. As a result, at the time Kazakhstan became independent of the Soviet Union, ethnic Kazakhs had been outnumbered in Kazakhstan. However, after gaining independence, Kazakhstan experienced a large exodus of non-Muslim ethnic minorities and Kazakhstan repatriated about a million ethnic Kazakhs back to Kazakhstan (Central Intelligence Agency 2018).

Freedom House classifies Kazakhstan as a "consolidated authoritarian regime" (Freedom House 2016). Nursultan Nazarbayev has been president of Kazakhstan since the office was created in 1990. He received 97.5% of the vote in an April 2015 election "marked by

irregularities and [lacking] genuine political competition” (U.S. Department of State 2016, 1). Under the Kazakstan constitution, the president controls the legislature, the judiciary and regional and local governments (U.S. Department of State 2016, 1). The State Department reports that Kazakhstan limits its citizens’ ability to vote in free and fair election, as well as freedom of expression, press, religion and the right to assembly and association (U.S. Department of State 2016, 22, 1). Kazakhstan has also been characterized as a “kleptocracy” (Wilkie 2018). In the post-Soviet era, state assets were bought “for a song” by private interests, creating a small group of billionaires (Champion 2018). Still, when compared with Russia and Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan is viewed favorably: “[T]he political elite is not as interwoven with organized crime there as it is in Russia or Azerbaijan. It's more of a kleptocracy than an organized crime state" (Wilkie 2018, quoting Louise Shelley, director of the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center at George Mason University).

Unfortunately, differences among the five nations have prevented Central Asia from developing cooperative relationships or mutually beneficial security and economic alliances. Partly these differences spring from the diverse ethnic and linguistic characteristics of the peoples living in Central Asia; these populations are not necessarily contained within the arbitrary borders assigned by the Soviets (Curtis 1996, xxxv). In fact, Kazakhstan’s borders with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Russia are disputed (CIA 2018). In addition, competition for water and minerals contribute to tensions. Instead of cooperation, some see the potential for violent conflict among Central Asian states (Nourzhanov, 2009, pp. 94–95, quoted in Blank 2012, 148). The lack of cooperative relationships among Central Asia countries is perceived to facilitate great power rivalries (Blank 2012, 148).

## **Great Power Rivalries, Central Asia and Kazakhstan**

Denoon sees the simultaneous rise of militant Islamist movements and the rise of China as the primary reason for Central Asia's significance in the rivalry between the United States and China (Denoon 2016). However, as Denoon notes, and consistent with its history<sup>3</sup> Central Asia has strategic significance for many geopolitical rivalries and has been described as a "cauldron of large actors" external to the region (Blank 2012, 148, quoting S. Enders Wimbush). The following sections describe the strategic interests of Central Asia's neighbors and great power rivals.

### *Russia*

Although independent from the Soviet Union for more than a quarter century, Central Asia continues to have a strong economic relationship to Russia (Kohli 2018, 7). Russian is the designated "language of interethnic communication," with 94 percent of the Kazakhstan population understanding spoken Russian (Central Intelligence Agency 2018). Russia is the primary source of imports into Central Asia and Central Asian guestworkers working in Russia are a major source of foreign exchange in Central Asia (Kohli 2018, 7). Of the five Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan has been subject to the greatest pull from Russia. Kazakhstan is landlocked and oil destined for European markets must go through Russia (Central Intelligence Agency 2018); Russia has tried to prevent Central Asian governments from signing pipeline deals that circumvent Russia (Denoon 2018). Kazakhstan participates in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with Russia and Belarus. The economic downturn of Russia, and the decline in

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<sup>3</sup> During the nineteenth century, dominance over Central Asia was contested by Imperial Russia and Britain, as part of a rivalry known as the Great Game. Later, the Soviet Union took control of Central Asia, establishing Central Asia as five provinces under Soviet rule. During World War II, Nazi Germany identified gaining control over the farmlands and hydrocarbons in Central Asia as one of its key strategic objectives (Denoon 2016).

global commodity prices from 2014 to 2015 contributed to an economic slowdown in Kazakhstan. Russia's weakening economy has contributed to a weakening of economic ties between the two countries.

Russia sees itself as having a "key national interest" in Central Asia, which it characterizes as the "near abroad" (Spechler and Spechler 2010, 617).

### *China.*

In reviving the transport routes through Central Asia, the BRI will provide China a direct path to the wealth and technology in Europe. In addition to the BRI, Central Asia's energy resources are an important strategic priority for China, especially because they are transported directly to China (Denoon 2018). China also has an interest in balancing Russia's influence in Central Asia. More importantly, China fears the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia and its potential influence on the ongoing separatist movement in its Xinjiang conflict. China has tried to keep a low profile in Central Asia while allowing the United States to take that battle on (Denoon 2018); China is reluctant to see the United States exit too soon, fearing that a complete NATO withdrawal will contribute to instability and terrorism (Kim and Indeo 2013, 280). At the same time, China sees that U.S. presence in Central Asia as strategy for encircling China and providing a base from which the United States can work to destabilize Xinjiang province (Kim and Indeo 2013, 277).

As part of the BRI, China and Kazakhstan have entered into a major joint infrastructure project, a dry port called the Khorgos Gateway currently under development in Kazakhstan, on the border with China. The Khorgos Gateway is positioned on the Western Europe – Western China highway (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2010), a new highway that will

ultimately connect the Yellow Sea coast of China with the Baltic Sea coast of St. Petersburg (Shepherd 2016). China holds a 49 percent share of the Khorgos Gateway (Shepherd 2017). The Gateway is located in close proximity to the Eurasian Polo of Inaccessibility (Shepherd 2017), bringing an economic crossroads to the place on land furthest from an ocean.

Russia and China have both a cooperative and competitive relationship in Central Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has been characterized as primarily regulating competition between China and Russia in Central Asia (Blank 2012, 148). It also serves as a platform for Russia and China to organize support in Central Asia for the ouster of American bases in Central Asia (Blank 2012, 150). At the same time, Russia competes with China for loyalty from its former soviet republics, often with Central Asia reaping the benefits: concerned that China's investment in infrastructure will help it to gain influence in the region, Russia may find itself compelled to make its own investments.

### *The European Union*

The EU has close economic ties to Kazakhstan, accepts the highest level of imports from Central Asia and is its largest source of foreign direct investments (Kohli 2018). Strategically, the EU has a strong interest in seeing Central Asia exploit its energy resources, to keep energy costs in line (Spechler and Spechler 2010, 628). While the EU may see how it could benefit from the BRI, it also is likely to feel threatened by the idea of China's influence extending further west.

### *India*

India has a strong interest in Central Asia. It wants access to the hydrocarbons from that area and it wants to prevent Pakistan from creating a broad Islamic coalition against India

(Denoon 2018). China, on the other hand, has an interest in developing a strong relationship with Pakistan and other states surrounding India, as it works to balance against India (Denoon, 2018).

### *The United States.*

The United States established diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan in 1991, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union (U.S. Department of State 2018). To the south of Central Asia sit several states of significant strategic interest to the United States including Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan and Iraq. Kazakhstan has served as a “backdoor” to Afghanistan, reducing U.S. dependence on an unstable relationship with Pakistan. The Northern Distribution Network channels supplies to Afghanistan through Central Asia; Central Asia reaps financial benefits from allowing the United States to use roads, railways and airports (Denoon 2018).

While Russia is unhappy with the United States’ presence in Central Asia, some speculate that some Central Asian countries will want the United States to stay in the region, to balance against the growing influence of Russia and China (Denoon 2016). In recent years, Kazakhstan has found itself in the “unenviable” position of serving as mediator between Russia and the United States (Wilkie 2018).

To date, China and the US have not clashed in Central Asia, because they have different objectives that are not at odds with each other (Denoon 2016).

### **Strategies for Containment**

As a descriptive theory offensive realism can explain how great powers have behaved in the past, how they are likely to behave in the future and how they should behave (Mearsheimer 2014, 11). However, Mearsheimer acknowledges that offensive realism does not take into

account individual leaders or ideology. In the case of the United States, ideological disagreements about foreign policy objectives have limited the United States' ability to maneuver and the idiosyncrasies of Donald Trump have led to policy choices that appear inconsistent with offensive realism theory. For example, the United States participation in the TPP illustrates an attempt to balance an economic alliance against China, and is consistent with offensive realism. Conversely, withdrawal from the TPP, without substituting another strategy, appears to be an abdication of power, ceding ground to a rival.

Depending on political will and leadership, offensive realism offers a number of strategic opportunities for the United States in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. In the current context, war and coercion are unwise on their face: the United States has more to lose than to gain by directly confronting China. Mearsheimer indicates that baiting and bleeding, *i.e.*, luring two countries to fight each other), is rarely successful. Other strategies are more applicable. It is possible the United States is already employing a "blood letting" strategy in Xinjiang (while China watches the United States weakened by war in Afghanistan and Iraq). Balancing is the primary strategy used in Central Asia and the United States has some opportunities for counterbalancing China. For example, it might partner with India to help thwart China's attempt to encircle India. The United States might also attempt to pass the buck to Russia, maneuvering to have Russia check China. Although Russia's is not a match militarily, it has the relationships in Central Asia that could impede the progress of the BRI. Within Central Asia, the United States could continue to pursue stronger relationships with individual Central Asian countries, to maintain and expand its influence in that region. However, the United States does not have the same footing as China or Russia in that part of the world, so this strategy by itself would not be sufficient.

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