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BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

**SECURITY ISSUES, INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES
AND GEOPOLITICS**



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The Belt and Road Semiotics and Its Geopolitical Pivot

by Ambrish Dhaka*

Abstract in English

The Belt and Road Initiative represents bipolarity in the Mackinderian Heartland model. This is a response by Russia and China to resist unipolar world order as sought by the US. The signification of the Chinese presence in Heartland was called a 'yellow peril' by Mackinder. China has shown the other side of coin by leading an economic initiative in heartland geopolitics that is good enough to signify its presence as 'blooming dandelions'. The role of BRI in linking Europe and Asia has both geopolitical and geoeconomics implications. Russia has been emerged as co-host to BRI geopolitics and is riding the initiative in creating its own long-term niche in European order. The pipeline geopolitics has preceded the BRI geopolitics and hence China has worked out its rules of engaging the West based on those experiences. The strategy adopted by Russia and China could be seen as defensive-offensive realism where China's economic offensive and Russian defence against NATO advances are working in tandem. The US has tried to increase the cost ratio of this alliance by doing away several arms treaty that held the cold war détente. The geoeconomics of Heartland is being calibrated by Russia and China to reduce that cost ratio so that globally coplanar equilibrium with the West is maintained and peace becomes the dividend of heartland realism.

Keywords: China, Mackinder, Russia, Belt and Road Initiative, Heartland, geopolitics, US

Abstract in Italiano

La Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) rappresenta il bipolarismo nella teoria dell'*Heartland* di Mackinder. Questa è una risposta di Russia e Cina per resistere all'ordine mondiale unipolare voluto dagli Stati Uniti. Il significato della presenza cinese nell'*Heartland* fu chiamato da Mackinder 'pericolo giallo'. La Cina ha mostrato l'altra faccia della medaglia conducendo un'iniziativa economica nella geopolitica dell'*Heartland* efficace abbastanza per giustificare la sua presenza nella regione. Il ruolo dei BRI nel collegare Europa e Asia ha implicazioni sia geopolitiche che geoeconomiche. La Russia è emersa come co-conduttrice della geopolitica della BRI e sta guidando l'iniziativa nella creazione di una propria nicchia a lungo termine nell'ordine europeo. La geopolitica del gasdotto ha

preceduto la geopolitica della BRI e quindi la Cina ha elaborato le sue regole per coinvolgere l'Occidente sulla base delle esperienze geopolitiche precedenti. La strategia adottata da Russia e Cina potrebbe essere vista come un realismo difensivo-offensivo in cui l'offensiva economica cinese e la difesa russa contro i progressi della NATO stanno lavorando in tandem. Gli Stati Uniti hanno cercato di aumentare il rapporto di costo di questa alleanza eliminando diversi trattati sulle armi che hanno caratterizzato la distensione della guerra fredda. La geoeconomia dell'*Heartland* si sta calibrando quindi rispettando le volontà di Russia e Cina che cercano di ridurre questo rapporto di costo in modo che l'equilibrio globale con l'Occidente sia mantenuto e la pace diventi il dividendo del realismo.

Parole chiave: Cina, Mackinder, Russia, Belt and Road Initiative, Heartland, geopolitica, Stati Uniti

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The Signification of 'Yellow Peril'

Sir Halford Mackinder in the hubris of British Imperial system stretching from Cape through India to East Asia speculated the possibility of China's rise and its swaying westward influence over the Heartland as the 'yellow peril' in his famous 1904 paper, *The Geographical Pivot of History* (Mackinder, 2004). He mentions in his concluding remark about the chance of Chinese dominance over the meta-power structure, the Heartland. Mackinder wrote that the railways worked great wonders as they replaced the horse and camel mobility. The geographical dispensation of China in Heartland has provided an oceanic frontage to continental transport system that would connect numerous arteries running East-West in Eurasia from the Asia-Pacific economic hub to the European economic hub. And, it is no lesser corroborated by the statistics of the state-run China Railway Corporation that has run as many as 11,000 cargo trains to Europe since 2011. There are 34 European towns in 15 countries that are connected to the 35 Chinese towns on major routes of Chongqing to Duisburg,

Zhengzhou, Shenyang and Changsha to Hamburg, Suzhou to Warsaw, Yiwu to Madrid, Daqing to Zeebrugge, Xiamen and Nanjing to Moscow, and Tianjin to Minsk. It takes only 16 days to ship container from Shanghai to Hamburg, which took 36 days before 2010. China has been able to subsidise the infrastructure costs for freight network with the large volumes of white goods sent to the European markets (Suokas, 2018).

The transport architecture being raised under BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) would have made Mackinder a happy man on seeing his prophecy coming true. The infrastructure symbolises China's economic power that is the bedrock for funding billions of dollars in the Eurasian transport infrastructure. Mackinder had been little obsessed with the vast Eurasian space and the spatial fetishism made him overlook the fact that it was not the extension of railroads that would make China a great power in Eurasia. The economic rise of China has been a priori for China's ability to expand vast connecting network across Europe-Asia. One can surmise that it takes the economic and military might to gain a foothold in Eurasian Heartland. The Heartland is not the *in situ* economic and military power waiting for a suitable candidate to own it; as postulated by Mackinder. The centrality of land and the vast natural resources are functional only with the growth of the capable power rising to the occasion and the Sino-Russian cooperation in the post-Cold War period appears to be the measurable force of that quantum.

The East Turkestan posed enormous geographical and climatic challenge before China was able to conquer it with a relentless effort to raise infrastructure across Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia. The Soviet Turkestan was comparatively better accessible, and the economic development of Central Asian republics attracted much attention from the West as a part of geopolitical strategy to cut it off from the Russian influence. The Russian steppes were the vast marshlands which dried over a period of time allowing communication across the Eurasian lands in an efficient manner (Kropotkin, 1904). The climatic conditions affected the settlements and it did not allow for growth of cities due to lack of water resources, but the same turned into advantage for modern day Belt and Road communication, which did not have to negotiate the vast

swampy territories of 13th century Eurasia. Any attempt to cross-over such a terrain would have been economically prohibitive. The region's geo-cultural ontology is best described by S. Fredrick Starr whilst defining Greater Central Asia in terms of Eurasia. He points out to the three tier North-South arrangement of grasslands, deserts and the mountain ranges characterising Eurasian heartland giving rise to horizontally hierarchical nomads, vertically hierarchical oasis communities and the autochthonous mountainous tribes (Starr, 2008). This implies that Belt and Road runs along three different kinds of geographical terrains and three different kinds of peoples. An important geological process pointed by early 20th century geographers is the desiccation of Caspian region and Central Asia at large, which is often seen as the cause of nomads making forays into Europe (Holdich et al., 1904). If climate was the jeopardy that forced Asiatic nomads to reach out to Europe, then Belt and Road Initiative represents the contrast where it is the wealth, rich and human advancement paved foundation of a connection between two settled hemispheres. The southern mountainous tier of Eurasian Heartland bears particular relation with the phenomena of desiccation. The narrow valleys of Pamirs whilst moving from Kashgar to Tashkent could be crossed only because of reduced size of water bodies in these narrow and long stretches allowing rail and road infrastructure to be built. The semiology of vast lands has often been engaged in metaphoric binary of land and sea. Just as the ocean has no history, so do the vast Eurasian lands do not contain any epic volumes in it. But, just as the ocean beaches contain vast material telling myriad stories to the signification of vast material adrift to the shore; similarly the periphery of Eurasian lands have been the recipient of the Eurasian steppe influence and it is on that periphery the significance of peoples and cultures matter rather than dominant forms centred over the heartland.

Sir Halford Mackinder wrote, "A repellent personality performs a valuable social function in uniting his enemies, and it was under the pressure of external barbarism that Europe achieved her civilization" (Mackinder, 2004). This cardinal point in making or unmaking of a civilization sought to characterise the enemy saddled in the fortress of Heartland. The Russian and the Chinese are two distinct civilizations, but the trans-Atlantic consensus has tried to blend them into one character as some

phantom phenomena of adversity unified by a common denominator. And, here came the vital value of democratization and human rights that could provide a common denomination against the authoritarian system of governance in Russia and China. Though, it is a different matter that when it comes to supporting the allies in the Middle East or Latin America, who need not qualify as a democratic humanitarian welfare state. One need not be surprised if the Mackinderian ghost is again raised to cultivate the fear of re-subordination of European history and future to the Asiatic history and future. However, at present the European Union is in discord with the very values of democracy and human rights whence faced with wave of migration and refugees from the Middle East that hitherto unified them in their secular struggle against the authoritarian regimes of Eurasia. Mackinder wrote in his famous 1904 paper, the geographical pivot of history, as concluding line stating that “were the Chinese...to overthrow the Russian Empire...they might constitute the yellow peril to the world’s freedom” (Mackinder, 2004). The political sociology of Chinese influence is significant on two accounts, first, the need to preserve the Russian isolation in its own Heartland so as not to allow it acquires the proportion of the nomads hammering the periphery. Secondly, the entire hubris of Western civilisation that was built over Greek and Roman past could only be comforted by preventing an Asian power from seeking dominance over the Mackinder’s Heartland; an area which he quantified as almost 21 million square kilometres. Mackinder to his disappointment should have known the strategic convergence of Russian and Chinese hemispheres as a secular response to the US-led Western undemocratic behaviour against these nations. Mackinderian Sinophobia is demolished by Repnikova and Gabuev in their article, who content that the myth of Chinese takeover is far from the reality. The fear is based on faulty premise that Chinese manpower and economic investments would complement Russian Far East and Siberia which is devoid of them. The Western media claims that by 2050 there would be 10 million Chinese in these lands. But the irony is that most of the economic opportunities are concentrated near the European periphery and most of the Chinese are living in the cities of Moscow, Saint Petersburg and not in Urals or Vladivostok (Repnikova & Gabuev, 2017).

Understanding the Mackinderian Great Game

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be deconstructed into two essential components. Firstly, the announcement of this initiative in 2013 under the acronym of One Belt and One Road (OBOR) revealed the consolidation of Chinese overseas investments that ranged from Southeast Asia, Africa to Central Asia. Secondly, the phenomena emerged as the integration of Chinese investments with its planning across Eurasia, which largely rested on increased connectivity towards its West. The twin policy of investments and connectivity created a unique scenario for development impetuous that generated plenty of awe and surprise with the rapidity and growth it happened. It would be difficult to view the Belt and Road as a hiatus from the past for the sake of establishing the novelty of idea and economic effort. The Belt and Road scheme act as a giant integrating time-space phenomenon across various Euro-Asiatic regions and most of the 17th to 20th century world politics centred over Europe and Asia. It is quite amusing to see when scholars try to see a giant scheme through the narrow lens of Great game and they fear the perception more than the reality. There are ample readings generated with a moniker, the 'New Great game' that has been used to identify rise of Great power politics and energy geopolitics in Eurasia particularly focussed on the New Central Asian States, the five 'stans'. The Great Game was a peripheral phenomenon in southernmost part of the Mackinderian Heartland located around the Hindukush region that signified the importance of the Heartland. It revealed three major dimensions of Heartland geopolitics, 1) The Anglo-Russian rivalry, 2) Europe's internal struggle for order, 3) Russian nationalism and its Asiatic roots (Edwards, 2003). These three formulations affected the peripheral regions of Heartland occupied by numerous mountainous tribes and nations such as, Iran, South Asian nations and Eastern Europe.

Russia has a long history of suffering from its western neighbours who blocked its access to the English and Dutch commercial and cultural contacts since the 16th century. The Dutch established a trading company after receiving a charter from Philip II to trade with Russia. The Danes were against the English and Dutch trading with

Russia. The Dutch traders did not prioritise political relations with Russia, unlike the English traders, who were interested not only in political relations but also the vast far Eastern lands of Russia. The English traders were able to secure political privileges with Ivan, the Terrible, but they had a limited capacity. One of the important differences in the Dutch and English trade was that the Dutch traded in multiple small companies or as individuals, whereas the English preferred to trade under a joint stock Company with a monopoly. One such single joint stock company was the Muscovy Company, which was given the monopoly of trade with Russia. One can conclude that the latter half of the 16th century was rife with intense competition between the Dutch and the English over the monopoly of trade with Russia. This could be seen as the sort of predecessor to the Great Game that was bound to descend over Eurasian land centuries later (Lubimenko & Lettres, 1924). The English discovered Russia from the North when a flotilla of three ships sailed towards the coast of Lapland. English were the first to explore new routes towards Russia in the second half of the 16th century. This was an imperative forced by the fact that South America was a Spanish monopoly and West Africa was under Portuguese influence, and India and China were far away then. Therefore, the Far North of Russia offered greater possibilities to the Englishmen. The Englishmen were complimenting the efforts of Moscow to reach out the West, hitherto prevented by the Baltic States and its Central European neighbours. In fact, the geographical embargo dated back to 1548 when 123 German craftsmen were stopped from reaching Russia, who went to join the service of the Tsar. Russia was truly living in isolation and cut off by the Central European powers and it was the White Sea which was a God-sent opportunity explored by the English to circumnavigate these barbed fences for the benefit of the English and the Dutch traders (Wretts-Smith, 1920).

The birth of Anglo-Russian rivalry in the latter half of 18th century could be attributed to the expansion of British East India Company's control over India. The East India Company had already won two significant wars of Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764) that allowed it to penetrate deep into South Asian heartland. This had given a great prestige and resources to the British who would no longer be keen look into trade

priority with the Muscovy. The Russia had started annexing Caucasus under Tsar Peter I during Russo-Persian war (1722-1723) and under Catherine II when for the first time it was looking towards Asia after the annexation of Crimea from the Ottoman Empire in 1774. The collapse of Ottoman Empire in latter half of 18th century paved for the permanent rivalry between Russia and Great Britain. The focus of geopolitical order shifted from MittleEuropa to Russian Heartland. Russia became the twin inheritor of the geopolitical theatres. It commanded a significant influence over the continental order as shown by the crisis in 19th century Europe and at the same time also projected itself as the mentor of the large-scale geopolitical order across Europe-Asia after the conquest of Central Asian Khanates. Russia has played Great Game with a sense of defensive realism. They chose not to disturb the balance of power in Europe that would chance them to unite them against Russia. The Ottomans were weak but served as a buffer against the possible alliance by Britain, France and the Turks. The geopolitical fine balancing by Russia in 19th century paved for its successful advancement to Far East and Central Asia. Russia's ownership of Eurasian Heartland is the success of defensive realism it practiced in Europe (Rendall, 2006).

The pipeline geopolitics is a misnomer for defensive realism that Russia has mastered during the last two centuries. It knows that to operate like a hegemon in European order would isolate her. Therefore, a simple urge to provide oil and gas supplies to the energy scarce Europe through pipelines creates an indignant reaction in the Western capitals seeing it as a Russian trap. Russia offers from the position of strength which the EU states could not bargain individually. Hence, the collective approach to energy needs is proving to be a daunting task given the diversity of geopolitical conditions as one can see the contradictions of France and Germany over the Nord Stream 2 project. The Nord Stream 2 is a classic case of European chaos against the Russian geopolitical imperatives. Germany feels isolated amid opposition from Romania, Poland and France to the Russian energy supplies (Geropoulos, 2019). Russia has planned another pipeline to Italy via Greece and Black Sea that is Turk Stream to bypass the East European black mail at the behest of the US, who has its protagonists in Ukraine, Romania and Poland. The European house is in disorder on

issues such as migration, refugees, Brexit and sanctions against Russia. Finally, the Russians citizens have changed position from moderate to become strong supporters of Putin as there is increasing effort to isolate Russia. The Crimean merger has also proved that Russia would put its foot heavy to deter the West's advances of NATO or the missile defence. The New Great Game of pipelines still inherits the classical concerns held two centuries ago. If one would apply Rendall's three parameters to the oil geopolitics, then it is not difficult to see that oil geopolitics reveals perpetual fetishism of the US-led West with the Eurasian Heartland. The US has now assumed the role of the erstwhile British Empire and it is bent upon preventing Russia to increase its oil and gas supplies to Europe as a means of securing influence.

Belt-Road's Defensive-Offensive Realism

The Belt and Road driving the heartland geopolitics represents a unique situation where given the newfound synergies of Russia and China reveal enormous potential that lies within the region to seek paramount status. This is limited by the bi-polarity of the Heartland statehood constituted by Russia and China who have come together for governing the region. Thus, the all-powerful Heartland shall remain short of monopoly of a single state if at all it is to retain its greatness. The collective approach to fend off the US's global dominance itself creates a structure of limitations where Russia and China must curtail their own ambition of offensive realism in Eurasia. Therefore, it is apt to say that Defensive-Offensive Realism of Russia and China is the Core-Periphery Realism in terms of Heartland modelling of realist paradigm. And, the Belt-Road Geopolitics is an example of Core-Periphery realism in Euro-Asian space running from Atlantic to Pacific. The realists have visualised various situations of power maximisation by the states amid universal perception of anarchy. Their most favoured bi-modal approach is about the international order as a unipolar world favouring the offensive realists or at the other end a rather hierarchical one suiting to the defensive realists. Mearsheimer contented that hegemony prevents the rise of potential hegemons (Snyder, 2002). The US tries to globalise its hegemonic system

with allies, but at the same time faces the limitation due to peer competitors and the regional adversaries who would like to overthrow the US hegemony.

Russia has acted as a custodian and tweaked the Heartland model only in response to the global challenge posed by the United States and its influence over Europe that affects the Euro-Asian space. It is ironical that Mackinder did not see China collaborating with Russia in the region albeit feared the Chinese assuming the status at the cost of the weakened Russian state. This is quite in contrast to his surmising that Germany might join Russia in creating an all-powerful Heartland state. Destiny proved the opposite where in the Second World War Germany tried to overpower Russia, whereas the Chinese in the aftermath of Cold War only extended their hand to join Russia in creating Eurasian space. The defence of Heartland is the dialectical outcome of the rise of Heartland, which is seen as an offensive act by the West since British imperial times. This unique interaction of offence-defence (albeit defence-offence) geopolitics explains the unique status of Eurasian space. This underscores the binary of military versus economic, political and technological force defining the defence-offence structure of Heartland geopolitics (Quester, 2002). This also includes the peoples of the Eurasian space and near periphery that are potentially affected by the dual nature of contest. The western periphery of Heartland has witnessed military manoeuvres during the past century that has affected many peoples' lives. This is quite in contrast to the events unfolding now on the eastern periphery, where most of the action is governed by technological, economic and political interests and has affected the lives of many peoples' but in an entirely a different manner. One consequence of this has been the shifting of the geopolitical pivot towards Asia as the military deterrence on Heartland's western periphery has limitations over time, something the second type of momentum does not have. Mackinder collated the rise of mobility with the impetuous for a military offensive. But, the Belt and Road defies that logic with almost the entire mobility structure raised to cater the economic momentum.

The Belt and Road Offensive can also be qualified as China's charm offensive based on its experience of Asia-Pacific while dealing with the U.S. effort to curtail its

rise in the region. Leaf tells that China has been using these tactics in South China Sea with a calibration of offering loans and economic infrastructure to the parties in disputed territories. China has offered to better military ties with Vietnam and offering financial aid and infrastructure through the Maritime Silk Road (Leaf, 2014). Wang furthers this hypothesis explaining the rationale behind the necessity of Belt-Road charm offensive. China needed the strategy of offensive realism to secure against its growing energy needs under rising economic growth and an increasingly hostile environment of maritime communication. The Belt-Road became an offense-defence of interest to work with Russia in securing its needs. China's excess economic capacity and accumulation of foreign reserves have been pivotal to functionalisation of this initiative. Russia got the suitable opportunity it needed to transform China's Belt-Road offense-defence into defensive-offensive realism in order to safeguard against the NATO aggression and at the same time incentivising the economic development of Eurasian heartland with the Chinese initiative. Therefore, one more conclusion can be drawn is that what caters to China as an offensive approach actually feeds into Russia's defensive approach.

Europe has become the pampered child of Eurasian Sino-Russian defensive-offensive realism. It now receives trains loaded with Chinese toys, fashion toiletries, dresses apparels, electronic items all from the Chinese industrial towns. And, at the same it is receiving generous shipment of natural gas from Russia both north and south ways. The Nord Stream 2 and Turk Stream once completed would fully satisfy its energy needs. This sounds like harbinger to the concert of Euro-Asia, a successor to the concert of Europe. It becomes clear that the security dilemma of great powers is bound to increase, if one goes by the tenets of Jervis, the proponent of Offense-Defence theory (Glaser & Kaufmann, 1998). The arms race would increase on both the frontiers of Heartland, namely, the Eastern Europe and now the Asia-Pacific as the oceanic frontage has been added by China's consociation ownership of heartland geopolitics under the Belt-Road initiative. This is more evident in the policies of the UK and the US who see the Belt-Road twin realism a creeping threat to their paramount position. The offence-defence is defined as a ratio of the cost of the attacker to take the territory

to the cost of defender's forces. However, in a nuclear strategy these costs are meaningless with a mutually assured destruction by both sides effectively wiping out the influence of international alliance and first-move advantage. Glaser believes that the cost ratio can be shifted within that constraint by the size of forces, accumulation of resources and nationalism. The cost ratio increasing in favour of offense would lend an arms race and heightened security dilemma. The only way to bring down this cost ratio is the increase the defence capabilities by economic and technological growth. Russia and China have been calibrating the Mackinderian Heartland geopolitics by covering the gap between offense and defence through Belt and Road Initiative primarily. Glaser also includes military capabilities to succeed and skill level together with the growth of military technology. The Heartland has demonstrated unique degree of parallelism in developing military technology both by Russia and China to counter the West.

Conclusion

The signification of Chinese presence in Eurasia as the future threat points to the apprehension of creating a dominant Asian order that challenges the trans-Atlantic order. Russia fully acknowledges this threat perception and has chosen to play truant to the European interest in the event of such proximal situation. Peace is the bonus of Heartland geopolitics and advantage with the Defensive-Offensive Realism as practiced by Russia and China. Russia hard learnt the lesson that whenever it desired to peacefully coexist with the West in return actually contributed to the heightened offensive realism of the West. All through its history Russia has been an ally to the West in its Europe's wars against Sweden (1655), Prussia (1756), Napoleonic France, and the two World wars. The disillusion with the West forced periods of isolation upon Russia that allowed to seek her internal strength (Tsygankov, 2012). The Belt and Road salvages Russia from this predicament for the first time in its geopolitical history. The abandonment of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty by both the US and Russia signifies the desire to clear the obstacles to the renewed arms race. This is again a step by the US to increase the cost ratio in favour of offense to counter the heartland

geo-economics that increases the defence imperative with ever more integration of Europe-Asia. But, containment of Russia (USSR in cold war period) was different than breaking Russia and China partnership in post-cold war period.

The Belt and Road Initiative has also engaged the Silk route history in its lateral connect with what is known as Mackinder's Inner Crescent. The connectivity with Gulf and West Asia is one such significant linkage. The second important connection lies with the Mediterranean and the Eastern Europe. These are also the converging points of China's Maritime Silk Road; though hard to understand the rationale of Chinese calling maritime linkages as a 'road'. These lateral land bridges have now become Heartland's super highways to reach out the Inner and Outer periphery of Makinderian geopolitical order; though there are few flash points. South Asia and the Northeast Asia remain volatile that present a challenge to peace on the heartland periphery. The great powers once having reached the equilibrium of their cost ratio would perhaps prevail upon these regional conflicts in order to bring them in sync with the global harmony. The Belt and Road would prove to be a facilitator of geopolitical balancing at multiple scales if it remains engaged in weaving economic linkages as unhindered pursuit. And, the major transition would be visible if a southern oceanic frontage is created in Arabian Sea for the Mackinderian heartland through the Belt and Road Initiative.

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