

Pax Sinica along the Silk Road: Avant-Garde Perspectives on Eurasian Geopolitics

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Pax Sinica is a historiographical term, modeled after the original phrase *Pax Romana*. It refers, in Latin, to a Chinese-provided peace which in turn is used to describe an era of peace in East Asia sustained by Chinese hegemony. In historical terms, both the *Pax Sinica* of the Eastern hemisphere through Han China and the *Pax Romana* of the Western hemisphere through Rome signified a trans-regional order based on rules and regulations. This orderly world of the *Pax Sinica* generated a number of positive results such as the intensification of travel, ever-expanding trade relations, an increase in the overall living standards of the populace, the proliferation of cities, and a demographic upsurge in Eurasia along the ancient Silk Road. During this period, China was the dominant civilization not only in the Eastern hemisphere but also in the Middle hemisphere due to its political, economic, military and cultural influence. This paper aims to reintroduce this historiographical term to elucidate the recent Chinese initiatives in Eurasia along the Silk Road to facilitate the integration and connectivity of the continent.

Keywords: *Pax Sinica*, Eurasia, Geopolitics, Silk Road, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Belt and Road Initiative

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Introduction

Some dramatic economic transformations and political intrusions affected the Eurasian geopolitical space in the final decades of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the economic rise of China attracted lots of attention and was labeled a success story by the Western world. On the other hand, in December 1991, fifteen new states emerged in Eurasia from the ashes of the Soviet empire.¹ All these newly independent former Soviet Union republics struggled to rebuild their economic base in an era of globalization. Consequently, this remarkable increase in independent states at the heart of Eurasia gave rise to a number of convoluted political, legal, environmental and economic problems.

China and the newly independent former Soviet republics made some efforts to strengthen bilateral ties and improve cooperation on different fronts to overcome those convoluted problems. After the transitional years of the 1990s, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) under the leadership and the financial backing of China became an essential component of the Eurasian political landscape. The organization established a new sort of cooperation among Eurasian nations ranging from the former Soviet space to Iran to Pakistan to India. The SCO member states have handled many issues related to geopolitics, Eurasian security, the economy, and regional politics.

Throughout its long history, China had intense commercial and cultural interaction with its hinterland. Indeed, in recent times, China's economic and diplomatic influence in Eurasia has been on the rise. Although China is now a global power, it has not always been one. Arguably, until the early 2000s, it was first a fast-growing regional power, and before the beginning of the reforms in 1979 a vast but isolated country, incapable of asserting itself vigorously in global affairs. However, up until the eighteenth century, China was by far the world's largest and most vibrant economy. At this junction, it is important to remember that the fundamentals of the British Industrial Revolution were established by transferring critical technologies from China to the West through the Silk Road.

In 2013, in Kazakhstan, President Xi Jinping revealed the commencement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), confirming China's long-term strategic, security and economic objectives in Eurasia. The new Silk Road project(s), also known as BRI, is promoting infrastructure along with land and sea trade between Europe and Asia with a total investment from Beijing that could well exceed a trillion dollars. The initiative also forms the nexus of power, culture, and commerce which is now at the center of China's foreign policy. Currently, China's BRI, which has become the centerpiece of China's economic diplomacy in Eurasia, has already started to transform the outlook of the region. This foreign policy initiative uses *Pax Sinica* as *modus vivendi* for rewarding developments. Consequently, it would be fair to assert that Xinjiang and Central Asia play a crucial role in the success of this initiative.² On the other

¹ In this article, Eurasia is considered a single continent circumventing the social construct dating back to antiquity. Eurasia in geographical terms refers to the entirety of the European and Asian landmass. In that sense, Eurasia encompasses approximately 55 million sq. kilometers, which corresponds to slightly over one-third of the earth's total land area containing three-quarters of the global population.

² Xinjiang is one of the People's Republic of China's ethnic "autonomous" regions, a province that officially allows

hand, the growing Uyghur demand for a separate homeland and continuing ethnic tension in Xinjiang pose some challenges to China's authority in the region.³

The magnitude of the BRI is indicated through some spectacular numbers and has far-reaching implications for Eurasia in particular and the globe in general. For instance, the territory in question comprises a substantial part of global trade generating more than half of global economic output and is home to three-quarter of the world's population while holding an estimated three-quarters of proven global energy reserves. Most certainly, the initiative would put China at the center of global economic gravity and create a genuine potential vis-à-vis the changing global geopolitical arrangement.

This study will argue that the rise of China alters the geopolitical landscape in Eurasia. The dynamics behind this changing perspective have been unveiled through a renewed interest in the old *Pax Sinica*. Notably, economically less developed and politically unstable areas of Eurasia may benefit from *Pax Sinica*-facilitated political or economic strategic planning, which in turn would help in maintaining much-desired stability and much-needed economic development in the region. However, inescapably, the concept also finds its applicability in the entirety of Eurasia highlighting the Chinese hegemonic posture. After presenting a comprehensive overview of geopolitics in regards to Eurasia and the Silk Road, this article will elucidate the concept of *Pax Sinica* from a historiographical point of view. The subsequent sections will delve into Chinese geopolitics within the framework of a more significant Eurasian geopolitical panorama designating *Pax Sinica* as a Chinese foreign policy motto to increase its influence and control over Eurasia. The final section will investigate the rationale behind the formation of the China-Russia axis through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Geopolitics as a Conceptual Framework

This study utilizes a geopolitical method of analysis to elucidate the significance of a *Pax Sinica* along the Silk Road. In this article, the term “geopolitics” is defined as being the study of international relations “from a spatial or geocentric viewpoint, the understanding of the whole ... being its ultimate object and justification” (Parker 2015, 2). The first use of the term “geopolitics” is associated with the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen in an 1899 article (Chapman 2011).

special social, religious and even political rights for the ethnic minorities native to the region. However, in the region, these privileges are not always applied. There is no doubt that China has strategic issues at stake in Xinjiang. Throughout Chinese history, this province has been one of the vast buffer zones shielding the core of China from foreign attacks and influences. However, equally, Xinjiang has long served as a key trade route for Chinese commerce through the notorious Silk Road, connecting mainland China to Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Today, Chinese strategists are looking back to the old Silk Road routes as a way to safeguard economic security. Central Asia possesses vast energy resources, which are indispensable for future Chinese economic development. In that sense, Xinjiang offers an essential passageway to Central Asia. This geopolitical aspect reinforces Beijing's perceptions about the need to keep the Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities under control.

³ The large Uyghur diaspora in Central Asia comprises approximately 300,000 people based mainly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Geopolitics is essential to the understanding of the behavior of human societies organized into complex, geographically well-defined systems. Evidently, in modern times, this approach has translated itself to the study of nation-states. While the methodology of geopolitics is inherently spatial, its subject matter draws heavily from other social sciences. Notably, three intertwined notions, namely, economics, war, and politics, are instrumental in understanding the behavior of nation-states. They are an indivisible entity together establishing the reality of the nation-state. Subsequently, the nation can be viewed as a wealth-producing and wealth-defending structure connected through a complex web of domestic and foreign relations performed by individuals governing the nation-state. Geopolitics offers an overarching approach by eliminating these distinct spheres of economics, military, and politics, which in turn provides a more coherent picture of the social reality of the nation-state. Political and military power continually influence economic life and vice versa. It is impossible to imagine war, peace or development without taking into account politics and economics. Equally, it is inconceivable to think of domestic or foreign policy without weighing economic and military matters. In crude terms, the abovementioned three aspects are only conceived to organize human activities into manageable pieces. The reality is only seemingly made more manageable, and in fact, is falsified. The conventional classification of these aspects imagines distinctions that don't exist and complexities that hide rather than expose the nature of the problem at hand (Friedman 2008).

There is no doubt that geopolitics is also an abstraction, but it has the virtue of not creating imaginary distinctions. By adding a layer of simplification, geopolitics provides a more comprehensive view of reality. In a way, geopolitics can be presented as a quest for the center of gravity of reality. Most certainly, the factors and actors at play are never entirely political, military or economic. However, they are neglected and deemed insufficient because they are considered too simple. The idea of using geopolitics to understand the rationale behind *Pax Sinica* in Eurasia is to set the essential parameters and distinguish the broad direction of this study.

This article's model of applied geopolitics starts with geography. It looks at how mountains, plains, rivers and mineral resources constrain a nation's political, security and economic imperatives. Political geographers believe that power is firmly rooted in the physical nature of the world itself.

Geopolitical thinking matured significantly at the *fin de siècle* with the intensification of imperialist map coloring. The unequivocal global dominance of the West translated itself to some political mottoes such as "*la mission civilisatrice*,"⁴ "Manifest Destiny,"⁵ "white man's

⁴ *La mission civilisatrice* was one of the mottoes of French colonial expansion under the Third Republic, referring to the period from the late 1870s all the way to the beginning to the decolonization period in and around World War II. For further information see Brunschwig 1960

⁵ This American slogan first revealed in 1845 indicated a political philosophy to support 19th century US territorial expansion. According to the central tenets of this approach, the United States was destined – by God – to advance democracy and capitalism across the entire North American continent.

burden,”⁶ or “*ein Platz in der Sonne*.”⁷ Within the parameters of this sort of global political climate, Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) of the United Kingdom, Friedreich Ratzel (1844-1904) of Germany and Alfred Mahan (1840-1914) of the United States started to emphasize the connection between history and geography.

Any discussion about Eurasian geopolitics must start with the seminal work of Sir Halford Mackinder *The Geographical Pivot of History*. He referred to the Eurasian continent as the “world-island” containing two-thirds of the world’s population and identifying the defining nature of certain geographic relationships, particularly the “Pivot” or “Heartland” area of Eurasia (Mackinder 1904). His work stressed his concern that one power or alliance of powers could gain control of Eurasia and use that region’s resources to dominate the world (Tuathail, Dalby, and Routledge 2016).

Another eminent scholar of geopolitics, Nicholas J. Spykman, considered geography the preeminent factor in international relations because it was this subject’s most enduring characteristic. *The Geography of the Peace* built upon Mackinder’s work in a much more extensive and focused manner (Spykman 1944). He highlighted two main geographical entities in international politics, namely the Old World and New World. The Old was composed of four geographical features. The heartland was Eurasia’s core and followed Mackinder’s heartland (Petersen 2011). The Rimland was also similar to Mackinder’s inner crescent. However, the third Old World feature included a circumferential maritime belt covering the Baltic, the North Sea, and the Mediterranean to the Sea of Okhotsk. The fourth and final feature was offshore islands such as England, Japan, Australia, and Africa (Cohen 2009).

The term “Eurasia” is rooted in classical theories and concepts of geopolitics, particularly the concepts of “pivot” and later “heartland.” Although Eurasia is a highly debated, contested and elusive term with different meanings and perceptions in time and space, this article will rely upon the geopolitical aspect of Eurasia to describe a *Pax Sinica* along the Silk Road.

***Pax Sinica* in Historical Context and the Ancient Silk Road**

Throughout history, it is possible to observe a number of periods facilitated by a politically, economically, militarily or culturally dominant power. For instance, the *Pax Assyriaca* was set to describe an extended period of military-enforced peace in the Neo-Assyrian Empire during the 7th century BCE in regions that included mostly Mesopotamia and the current Levant. The *Pax Mongolica* was established in the 13th century after the initial invasions of the Mongolian armies and the creation of the extensive Mongolian Empire. The following

⁶ This Anglo-Saxon foreign policy motto originated from Rudyard Kipling’s poem about the Philippine-American War (1899-1902) encouraging the American colonization of the Philippines and supporting imperialism as a noble enterprise of civilization. To some extent, it is conceptually related to the American policy of Manifest Destiny.

⁷ This imperialist foreign policy motto of the German Empire was adopted at the end of the 19th century after the German reunification with the intention of turning Germany into a first-rate global power through new overseas colonies. The intellectual origins of the phrase belong to German Foreign Secretary Bernhard von Bülow.

peaceful time was called the *Pax Mongolica* where stability, peace, development of culture and economic growth ruled the land. It helped to diffuse different ideas through cultural expansion and trade routes all around Eurasia.

However, most certainly, the *Pax Romana* is the most acclaimed one, symbolizing a period of relative peace and stability across the Roman Empire prevailing for over 200 years between 27 BCE and 180 CE. The Empire was to a great extent decentralized, allowing provinces to make and administer their laws while acknowledging Roman taxation and military authority. Rome's most magnificent and colossal infrastructure projects were built during the *Pax Romana*. Roads all over the Empire were constructed to maintain a harmonious unity. Subsequently, there was also spillover to other areas in the realm of arts, humanities, and social sciences. The Roman Empire was prosperous because it was peaceful, warfare banished to the frontiers which were protected by the army. The *Pax Romana* held sway over much of Western Europe, the Middle East and North Africa for centuries. The area in question was stable and economically developed, with little or no trace of devastation. Due to the *Pax Romana*, much-feared rebellions and large-scale violence were notably rare.

Along the same line of logic, it is possible to argue that the *Pax Sinica* was the Chinese version of the *Pax Romana*, lasting from 202 BCE – the foundation of the Han Dynasty by Liu Pang – to 195 CE, almost 400 years. The *Pax Sinica* allowed a notable part of the Eastern and Middle hemisphere to flourish. Interestingly, the *Pax Sinica* introduced by the Han Dynasty corresponded to the *Pax Romana* of the Western world. The Han emperors inaugurated a merit system and a strong/stable central government much like in the Roman Empire in the West. During the *Pax Sinica*, under the tutelage of the Han Dynasty, several critical developments occurred such as the civil service and the first papermaking process and territorial expansion on the eastern front into Korea, Manchuria, and Vietnam by the Han emperor Han Wudi. Many symbolic and historical Chinese benchmarks such as the Great Wall of China were erected in this period. Long-distance travel and trade facilitated commerce in silk, spices, and tea with the Roman Empire which in turn created co-prosperity zones in Eurasia.

Moreover, the Silk Road played a pivotal role in cultural diffusion. For instance, Buddhism, which originated in India, reached the Middle Kingdom and ultimately arrived on the Korean Peninsula through a Chinese monk in 372 CE, when King Sosurim of Goguryeo was in power. The ancient Silk Road was instrumental in the diffusion of not only Buddhism but also Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Consequently, it would be fair to assert that the Silk Road should not be envisioned just as a promoter of commerce between the East and the West in Eurasia but also culture, knowledge, and ideologies (Frankopan 2017).

Chinese Geopolitics and the Rationale Behind *Pax Sinica*

The Chinese approach to 21st-century geopolitics in Eurasia and subsequently the basis of *Pax Sinica* is better understood through a survey of some aspects of recent Chinese political history, which in turn provides a guide to deciphering Chinese diplomatic tactics and initiatives. For instance, the “Century of Humiliation,” in which the European powers shaped the world, has not been forgotten, but it is now overlooked by China and considered as an historical lesson. Most certainly, these traumatic historical experiences are shaping the current Chinese behavior in the international arena. China, by becoming a powerful challenger to the status quo of the United States in the international arena, has asserted one more time its Sinocentric worldview. Most certainly, Chinese geopolitics is going through some fundamental changes in this new chapter of adaptation to a world full of geopolitical puzzles.

To this end, the new “Long March” à la 21st century, initiated by Xi Jinping under the rubric of the Belt and Road motto, has revitalized the ancient trade roads by embracing the new Silk Road, which covers the entirety of Eurasia. Figuratively speaking, these Chinese initiatives have reversed the 500-year-old direction of imperialism from eastward expansion to westward expansion (Rousset 2018).

China has *grosso modo* 14,500 km of coastline from the Bohai Gulf in the north to the Gulf of Tonkin in the south. Undoubtedly, there are some severe impediments in the way of the Chinese navy’s access to the high seas. From Japan and Korea in the north to Malaysia and Indonesia in the south, an invisible line of American surveillance restricts the freedom of the Chinese navy (Emmers 2010). Chinese uneasiness and resistance to that feeling of encirclement manifested itself in April 2018 through the most significant naval exercises since its independence with 48 ships including two aircraft carriers in the Taiwan Strait projecting its military might with the aim of asserting its sovereignty and territorial integrity in the South China Sea and beyond. Consequently, it should be clear at this juncture that China’s opening to continental Eurasia represents a strategic alternative to the coastal geopolitical impasses that it endures.

Geopolitical frameworks are at the center of this multifaceted political strategy. Due to slowing economic growth year-on-year, many Chinese domestic industries find themselves in an overproduction situation. For instance, once the driving force of the country, the cement and steel industries are facing severe surpluses due to diminishing domestic demand for those materials. One venue to overcome those bottlenecks is to launch gargantuan infrastructure projects through the new Silk Roads in Eurasia, which in turn would facilitate and fortify Chinese political and cultural influence in those respective regions of the Silk Road(s) pathways (Bost et al. 2018).

The Strait of Malacca is very likely to be blockaded by the US in a political or military crisis. Due to the necessity to secure the flow of natural resources and particularly fossil fuels, Chinese policymakers are attempting to circumvent the Malaysian Peninsula through Eurasian land corridors. The port facility in Gwadar, in the Baluchistan region of Pakistan by the Arabian Sea, is a Chinese-subsidized construction mega project. The 3,218 km China-

Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the most significant projects under the BRI stretching from Kashgar in China's Xinjiang region to Pakistan's Gwadar Port. On the other side of the Indian subcontinent in and around the Andaman Sea, the 1,700-plus kilometer China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), stretching from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province in China, to the seaport at Kyaukpyu in Myanmar's Rakhine State, is designed to avoid such geostrategic dilemmas (Tan and Grillot 2014).

According to the Chinese master plan vis-à-vis the new Silk Road(s), significant investments are envisaged in all industries ranging from tourism to mining to manufacturing. Large-scale infrastructure undertakings such as railroads, bridges, tunnels, and dams will attempt to increase connectivity among the Silk Road countries. Moreover, energy projects in the domain of oil/natural gas pipelines and power plants will constitute another facade of this complex interdependence in Eurasia (Erdem 2016).

These transport corridors will give birth to new cities or the enlargement of existing ones. Moreover, they will magnify the erection of brand-new manufacturing businesses/assembly lines, and necessitate the construction of school systems, electricity grids, water systems, and health/hospital systems. This sort of development will indubitably entail an expansion of the labor force and overall population, which in turn will increase the population density in thinly populated areas and decrease the population density in overcrowded coastal parts of Eurasia (Bost et al. 2018).

The Khorgos development project is an excellent example to elucidate this sort of development. Khorgos sits across the border between Kazakhstan and China. Although this Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is located in one of the most remote areas of the globe, it is also a good illustration of effective Sino-Kazakh cooperation (Stevens 2018a).

The allocation of much-needed financial resources for the projects will originate mainly from Chinese backed international funds such as the New Development Bank (NDB),⁸ the Silk Road Fund⁹ and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).¹⁰ On the one hand, despite the disapproval and reservations of the US towards these initiatives in Eurasia, many rich first world countries have shown a genuine interest in taking part. The attractiveness of the projects and the high expected financial returns are the primary rationale behind their desire to get involved. On the other hand, developing countries in Eurasia see a window of opportunity to expedite their economic development, although in some cases, it also contains some elements of servitude to Chinese belligerent aspirations.

The new Silk Routes are to reach major industrial and commercial centers in Western

⁸ The NDB is a BRICS multilateral development bank established on July 15, 2014, by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The bank was seeded with US\$50bn initial capital, with the intention to increase capital to US\$ 100bn. The bank will be headquartered in Shanghai. Each country will have one vote and no country will have power of veto.

⁹ Launched in February 2014, the China-led US\$40bn Silk Road Infrastructure Fund invests in BRI projects. The fund is capitalized mainly by China's foreign exchange reserves and is intended to be managed like China's sovereign wealth fund.

¹⁰ Founded in October 2014, the AIIB aspires to be a global development bank with 21 Asian member countries with registered capital of US\$100bn.

Europe. To that end, China has already started a shopping spree for logistics facilities and ports – Piraeus in Greece (Stevens 2018b) – in order to promote transport corridors between Asia and Europe. A cargo train from Shanghai runs for more than 12,000 kilometers to directly connect China to major European cities. Since 2011, China Railway Corporation (CRC) has run as many as 11,000 cargo trains to Europe, intensifying trade and connectivity across Eurasia. CRC currently runs 65 China Railway Express freight routes that reach 15 countries in Europe. For instance, the main routes consist of Chongqing to Duisburg, Zhengzhou to Hamburg, Suzhou to Warsaw, Yiwu to Madrid, Shenyang to Hamburg, Changsha to Hamburg, Daqing to Zeebrugge, Xiamen to Moscow, Nanjing to Moscow, and Tianjin to Minsk. The China-Europe cargo train connection allows the benefits of large volume, low freight rates and high speed, cutting the transportation time to one-third compared to shipping by sea and slashing the cost to one-fifth compared to air cargo (Suokas 2018). Such an impressive undertaking at the Eurasia level is probably unique. Perhaps only the Trans-Siberian Railroad initiative between 1891 and 1916 could be comparable in scope and vision.¹¹

There are some significant social, cultural and ecological challenges to be faced with these Silk Road initiatives. Investor(s) will face possible geopolitical, economic and financial uncertainties and fallout. The successful advancement of these strategic investments may be affected by political unpredictability on the ground. For instance, the core of Eurasia is quite prone to such disturbances: the independence movement in Pakistani Baluchistan, the “renaissance” of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the rejuvenation of political Islam in Central Asia, the Kashmir problem between Pakistan and India, the Xinjiang and Tibet puzzles in China, the Crimea/Eastern Ukraine/Chechnya issue in Russia, and the Sunni/Shite struggle in the Middle East.

Contemporary Geopolitical Dynamics in Eurasia

Eurasian integration and connectivity is unfolding on many different levels. Multiple simultaneous processes are now pointing to a new Great Game à la 21st century: the China-induced new Silk Roads, the Russia-driven Eurasia Economic Union (EAEU), the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the International North-South Transportation Corridor (INSTC).

On one level, in the 21st century, geography is still indispensable for analyzing some hefty geopolitical, environmental, and socio-economic conflicts of contemporary Eurasia. In fact, geographical reasoning can provide valuable hints about the challenges that the world currently faces. Most certainly, China is not an exception to this criterion. On the contrary, it

¹¹ At the turn of the Century, Russian Tsar Alexander III and Tsarevich Nicholas II, showing spectacular vision, leadership and dedication, initiated the Trans-Siberian Railroad (1891-1916), covering more than 9,000 km which also included the southern Chinese branch connecting Chita and Vladivostok through Harbin in Manchuria. The Trans-Siberian is the longest railroad line in service. Currently, the line is still further expanding into various parts of Siberia and the RFE.

lies at the center of many global geopolitical maneuvers. For instance, the Strait of Hormuz, off the southeastern coast of Iran, represents one of the most critical geopolitical maritime chokepoints in the world, not only for Iran but all other Persian Gulf countries.¹² The strait is a must-go route and main artery for oil and natural gas shipments from all Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), Iraq and Iran to the rest of the world.¹³ Consequently, it represents a critical geopolitical reality to take into consideration since the majority of oil imported into China originates from this region.

Furthermore, there are also some fundamental transformations vis-à-vis geopolitically dormant parts of Eurasia such as the Arctic region. Due to global climate change and rising temperatures, academics, as well as policymakers, are discussing a possible future polar Silk Road to avoid the lengthy and costly Suez Canal option to reach major European industrial centers. The Arctic Ocean is melting at a startling pace with some serious geopolitical implications. On the one hand, the ecological balance in the region will change with the thinning of the ice. There will be implications for the global climate, too. The waters of the Arctic Ocean will absorb more heat from the sun, thus introducing more energy into the ocean. On the other hand, there are also some potent geopolitical entanglements of the Arctic's melting. This new phenomenon will make the Arctic Ocean navigable throughout the year. The sea route linking northeast Asia and Western Europe will shorten the shipping distance by over 4,000 kilometers and will lead to changes in the patterns of global trade and shipping (Gupta 2009).

Apart from its significance in the domain of shipping routes, it is critical to understand that the Eurasian Arctic is also one of the most affluent regions in the world in terms of its fossil fuels – oil, natural gas, coal – and mineral resources. It also has immense geopolitical importance. Over the past decade, there has been noteworthy interest vis-à-vis the Arctic region in Western academic circles (Allain 2011; Anderson 2009; Byers 2009; Emmerson 2010; Gerhardt et al. 2010; Grant 2010; Howard 2009; Wilder 2010; Young 2011), in Russian academia (Evdekimov, Vsotskaya, and Kostlev 2012; Kozmenko, Selin, and Shchegolkova 2012; Lebedev 2011; Nikolaeva 2010; Tamitskiy 2012; Timoshenko 2011; Vsevolodovich 2012), and most recently among academics from northeast Asian countries (Hara and Coates 2016; Iwashita 2016; Tonami 2016).

The recent inauguration of the Yamal Arctic gas terminal proclaimed a new era of cooperation between China and Russia to explore Arctic resources. Yamal contains natural

¹² The Strait of Hormuz is a geostrategically important strait connecting the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea (Indian Ocean). The Strait is only 33 to 95 km wide throughout its length. Iran and Oman are the countries surrounding the Strait of Hormuz and share territorial rights over its waters. Nearly 17 million b/d of crude oil and refined products passed through the Strait in 2013 (about 30% of all seaborne traded oil and 20% of the total oil produced globally). A substantial amount of another fossil fuel, liquefied natural gas (LNG), also moves through the Strait of Hormuz. Around 3.7 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) of LNG was transported from Qatar via the Strait of Hormuz in 2013, corresponding to more than 30% of global LNG trade.

¹³ The Gulf Cooperation Council (May 25, 1981) is a loose regional intergovernmental political and economic union consisting of all Arab states of the Persian Gulf, except for Iraq. It was founded in 1981 against the backdrop of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The member states of the GCC are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

gas reserves totaling the equivalent of more than four billion barrels of oil, and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the Silk Road Fund hold a combined 29.9 percent stake in the project. The Yamal liquefied natural gas project has strategic significance for both countries and takes the BRI all the way to the inside of the Arctic Circle. The Arctic gas terminal is predicted to supply China with four million tons of LNG a year and expedite the country's transformation to clean energy sources. Shipping to China would take place via the Northern Sea Route, which in turn would allow ships to reach China in 15 days, shaving almost 20 days off the regular time using the traditional route through the Suez Canal. The shipping lane running between the Pacific and the Atlantic along Russia's northern coast offers valuable incentive for the Polar Silk Road envisioned by China and Russia (Notes 2017).

By all accounts, trade between Europe and Asia largely exceeds transatlantic or transpacific trade. For the last five hundred years, Europeans have thought of Europe and Asia as two opposing ends of the world. Europe represented the modern, technological, progressive facade of the globe. Asia, on the other hand, was depicted as stagnant, backward, and undeveloped. However, it seems today that that sort of Eurocentric reading of the world has some serious flaws and the roles have been reshuffled to highlight a Sinocentric reading of international relations. Although Eurasia as a geopolitical framework is evolving as an integrated entity, it seems that political organization is a *sine qua non* for any further rewarding development. China was the first to propose and initiate such policy. The BRI is a gargantuan undertaking to redesign Eurasia according to its Sinocentric worldview. A *Pax Sinica* would be a first step in the direction of conceiving Eurasian identity in the 21st century by investing in common denominators around the four corners of Eurasia. It is essential to remember that the Eurasian supercontinent would host three-quarters of the world's population and more than two-thirds of its economic output. However, in the making of this Eurasian supercontinent, the BRI is presented as an attempt to replace the "West" with something new. A *Pax Sinica* in its desire to redesign the map of the world would also face a set of competing projects and initiatives from India, Japan, Russia, and Europe. Nonetheless, these distinctive/competing assumptions and conceptualizations – from the liberalism of Western Europe to the capitalism with Chinese characteristics of Beijing to the militarism of Russia – about future Eurasian political organization could also be a source of possible conflict. The new Eurasia-wide "Great Game" may also be a source of instability for an undetermined period. Most certainly, a possible loose form of association by all the major Eurasian powers under the rubric of a *Pax Sinica* would marginalize the US by pushing it away from the center of gravity of global political and economic affairs. However, on a positive note, it is important to remember that the Americas and Eurasia could be geographically connected through a possible Bering Strait crossing.

The Bering Strait crossing would link the entirety of Eurasia to the entirety of the Americas, and it can be seen as a natural extension of any BRI projects (Erdem 2017). There are some immense geopolitical benefits to such a project. It would bring about a profound and lasting change in the global economic and political outlook. The most

valued function of the Bering Strait crossing and the extension of the associated railroad network would be to release the massive natural resources trapped underneath the tundra and permafrost for the benefit of global economic development. Moreover, the railroad project(s), the connection energy grids and the extension of pipeline systems would also be instrumental in building development corridors in those underdeveloped and sparsely populated regions of the world. The development of the resources and their rapid transportation to global markets would contribute not only to the overall development of the region but also would be valuable for resource-poor countries of northeast Asia such as Japan, Korea, and China (relative to its economic size). A rational and pragmatic US foreign policy would eventually realize the endless possibilities this would present to both sides of the Bering Strait. Consequently, future US administrations would explore the possible impact(s) of the Bering Strait crossing as a formidable infrastructure project for the economic development of Eurasia and the Americas. A cohabitation of a *Pax Sinica* with a *Pax Americana* would only complement each other to create much desired global peace, stability, and prosperity. By doing this, the US would secure not only its primary role in a multipolar world but also the moral upper-hand in global politics as a responsible superpower (Mações 2018).

However, there are also some concerns and uneasiness vis-a-vis the BRI among the countries in which Chinese investment is taking place. The *Pax Sinica* envisaged by the BRI attempts to facilitate political and economic interaction among Eurasian countries and discover the full economic potentials of member nations that are so far lagging behind economically. China has always characterized the BRI as a win-win situation for all parties involved, presuming that both China and host countries would enjoy some *Panglossian* ramifications regarding economic prosperity. Notwithstanding, the reality on the ground may be quite different. China's BRI, through the trade infrastructure project(s), could be running into notable impediments due to the rising massive debt loads of the countries involved. At the time of its announcement in 2013, the overall cost of this trade initiative was calculated to be around \$26 trillion in infrastructure investment (railways, power plants, ports, highways, etc.) by 2030 in order to connect and expand the regional economies in Eurasia. Seemingly, China is the primary provider of billions of dollars in credit to drive these projects. The main competitors of China in the global arena concerning influence and power, such as the United States, Japan, and India, have displayed earnest anxiety vis-à-vis the new Eurasian economic system since it would diminish their weight in international politics. From the international development point of view, it may create some severe sustainability issues regarding the sovereign debt of, in particular, eight countries receiving infrastructure project funds from

China, namely Pakistan,¹⁴ Djibouti,¹⁵ the Maldives, Mongolia, Laos,¹⁶ Montenegro, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, some governments in Eurasia are portraying a gloomy picture amid complaints against China for generating a debt trap that dispossesses those countries involved from accessing critical assets (ZeroHedge 2018).

China-Russia Axis in the Making: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Russia is an influential global power with a vast territory, abundant resources and tremendous potential for development and remains a critical factor in China's strategic goals. In the decade(s) following the demise of the Soviet Union, territorial disputes have been wholly settled through negotiations, and a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination has been established. Russia holds unique strategic value for China. Russia is expected to become a major strategic partner of China regarding the latter's peripheral diplomacy, maintaining Eurasian peace and stability, building a distinct international order and balancing ties with the US. Both China and Russia as emerging non-Western powers possess some common denominators, sharing similar strategic needs, interests, and ideas about global politics which in turn could form the foundation of their diplomatic relations. Therefore, it is possible to see the burgeoning Sino-Russian relationship within the context of Eurasia as a long-term strategy for both parties based on mutual benefits (Wang 2017).

Russia as a critical Eurasian power possesses a puissant military but has struggled to rebuild its economic base. There are some significant difficulties in guaranteeing a stable domestic order due to demographic shifts, economic changes, and institutional weaknesses. However, economic power is only one variable defining a country's strength in the international arena, but some other variables such as military capabilities, geopolitical strength, and international standing are equally indispensable. On the other hand, another prominent Eurasian power, China, is characterized as an economic powerhouse and has captivated a great deal of attention across the globe. Relations between China and Russia have evolved dramatically in

¹⁴ The soaring Pakistani foreign debt is mostly fueled by loans from China to finance the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a wide range of infrastructure projects built by Chinese construction companies throughout Pakistan.

¹⁵ Djibouti is facing a high risk of debt distress since its public debt rose from 50 percent of its GDP in 2014 to 85 percent in the following two years. China inaugurated its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017, and it represents a critical step in the global ambitions of China's military. It most certainly changes the local politics and challenges the current power balance at the Horn of Africa. Djibouti is the third smallest country on the continent, but due to its unique geographical location in the Gulf of Aden is home to the military bases of the US, France, Great Britain, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and China. The only Japanese military base in the world was established in that particular country.

¹⁶ Most certainly, the initiative has immeasurably improved the economic and social provisions within Laos. The construction of the China-Laos railway has been instrumental in uplifting the economy of this landlocked country. But at the same time, the \$6.7 billion China-Laos Railway project represents almost half of Laos's GDP.

recent times. During the past decade, China and Russia have made some efforts to strengthen bilateral ties and enhance cooperation on a number of economic/political/diplomatic fronts. China wants to keep Russia engaged in Eurasia as a key regional actor, and the SCO represents a great framework to do so (Erdem 2015).

The configuration of the new Russia-China strategic partnership contains many common denominators from energy to trade to security. Notably, in recent times, it is possible to observe the entente at play between Russia and China on multiple grounds. The concerted drive to bypass the U.S. dollar, the push towards an alternative banking clearance mechanism,¹⁷ the AIIB- and the NDB-involved infrastructure financing, the massive accumulation of gold reserves and the expanded politico-economic role of the SCO are all indications of a “Grand Rapprochement” in Eurasia (Escobar 2018). However, Sino-Russian bilateral relations are more of an entente, a basic understanding of the structural realities of the current global order supported by mutual interests, rather than an alliance. Russian policymakers have the fear that robust Chinese economic and financial capabilities will drive Russia into second-tier status in Eurasia (Chandran 2018).

As a result of this entente, the SCO was founded on June 15, 2001, in Shanghai by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. At present, the SCO’s full membership stretches from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean, covering most of the territory of the Eurasian continent. In June 2017, India and Pakistan gained full membership status. The four observer states are Mongolia, Afghanistan, Belarus, and Iran. Moreover, the position of “Dialogue Partner” was created in 2008, and currently, there are six countries in that category, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey. The fundamental goals of the SCO are strengthening confidence and good neighborly relations among the member countries and promoting effective cooperation across a wide range of sectors ranging from politics/trade/economy to science/technology to culture/tourism. All interested parties are making joint efforts to preserve and ensure peace, security, and stability in Eurasia. The SCO has been instrumental in China increasing its influence across Eurasia and formed the foundation of the BRI project of Beijing in 2013. The SCO, as an emerging regional organization, has become an essential part of both Russia’s and China’s strategy in Eurasia. Moreover, the evolution of the SCO is of broader significance to global geopolitics and geo-economics.

Consequently, it would be fair to argue that the SCO has played a pivotal role in terms of advancing China’s Eurasian policies in par with officially stated goal of peaceful rise. Most certainly, the SCO has provided some policy benefits for China and a window of opportunity on the way to launch a *Pax Sinica* in Eurasia. China’s engagement with Central Asia needs to be evaluated in regard to its own national and international security concerns. China’s discourse on the “three evils,” namely fundamentalism, extremism, and secessionism, determines its foreign policy orientation vis-à-vis the region (Peyrouse 2018).

¹⁷ Russia and China are attempting to link their national payment system. China’s UnionPay system and Russia’s *Karta Mir* system would be linked to avoid problems arising while using American payment systems such as Visa and MasterCard.

On the other hand, Moscow has activated a partnership agenda for cooperation between different Eurasian organizations such as the EAEU, the SCO, and ASEAN, but also with a wide range of major regional powers on a bilateral basis, particularly China, India, Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran. Although China has exhibited a strong desire and an apparent preference for developing a free trade agreement within the format of the SCO in Eurasia, Russia has displayed a very cautious approach due to China's dominant economic position within the organization and repeatedly declined to commit to such plans (Dragneva 2018).

China's relations with the Central Asian states have also been based on the creation of a more comprehensive set of tools with which to address non-security issues, most notably increased economic and energy cooperation. The establishment of the SCO Business Council and Interbank Consortium was intended to coordinate and finance joint projects among regional entrepreneurs. The Chinese government has been especially committed to developing the trade potential of the SCO. Consequently, Chinese trade with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan has increased considerably since 2001. This development has not only allowed Chinese goods and services to compete with those of Russia and Europe but has also permitted greater access to Chinese markets by Central Asian countries. Moreover, China provides a great deal of financing and technical know-how to critical infrastructure projects such as the improvement of transportation links and pipelines (Baizakova 2013; Lanteigne 2010; Movkebaeva 2013).

Conclusion

The compilation of rationales pointing to the pivotal nature of Eurasian geopolitics is overwhelming. China as an emerging Eurasian power in global politics seriously challenges the current status quo and American interests in Eurasia. This long-delayed but expected rise may be just a normal and healthy political outcome given the rapid and substantial global transformations taking place in recent decades. The various Silk Road schemes through the BRI project serve as a blueprint for China's ambitious geo-economic and geopolitical strategy of connecting itself to the global economy and strengthening its influence. In this regard, a *Pax Sinica* would necessarily unleash "Promethean" forces and lead to a more stable Eurasia over the long run. There is no doubt that securing stability and peace along the Silk Road would instigate a new age of renaissance in Eurasia with spectacular economic, commercial, cultural, and scientific breakthroughs.

A new *Pax Sinica* along the Silk Road has been conducive to Chinese efforts dedicated to deepening Eurasian connectivity and some degree of loose integration, urging all countries to operate in cooperation to create a more open Eurasian economic space. Eurasian connectivity and integration have a substantial potential taking into consideration its combined landmass, population, natural resource base, and economic scale. Despite a significant range of development gaps, Eurasia enjoys a massive, dynamic and competitive market with a wide range of opportunities for economic growth and comprehensive cooperation. The developed

as well as the less-developed economies of Eurasia complement each other in such a way that a win-win situation could present itself for the entirety of the continent. This reciprocal leverage for each country is currently at the center of Eurasian cooperation schemes.

Against a backlash of unilateralism, protectionism, and hegemonic posture, the BRI and the *Pax Sinica* as a mechanism provide an invaluable opportunity to rejuvenate the ancient connectivity along the Silk Road by forging new possibilities for investment in many areas. Silk Road projects, through a path towards openness, innovation, prosperity, and peace in Eurasia without falling into the trap of a hegemonistic perspective, would be a reliable indication of the eagerness to promote cooperation and connectivity across Eurasia.

Although there is much remaining to be done, this study has mainly focused on *Pax Sinica*'s fundamentals as a strategic concept in Eurasian geopolitics. It is not in the scope of this paper to provide an extended discussion of the possible impacts of the United States' approach to Eurasian geopolitics. Nevertheless, it is critical to bear in mind that in the decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States has retained the status of a prevailing power in the international state system. Although in recent years, this status has increasingly been brought into question, the American unipolar moment has never been achieved by any other state in modern times. Consequently, this article would benefit substantially from extending the analysis in that direction and analyzing Eurasian geopolitics from the American perspective by comparing and contrasting *Pax Sinica* with *Pax Americana*. Furthermore, an investigation of the potential benefits and drawbacks for other Eurasian powers such as the European Union, Korea, Japan, Turkey, India, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia would only be complementary to the current study by providing a better decipherment of the consequent Eurasian puzzle. Notably, a more detailed investigation of the Russian-driven organization EAEU in conjunction with the SCO would further enhance our understanding of current Eurasian geopolitical realities.

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