

The World Ocean Versus the Continent

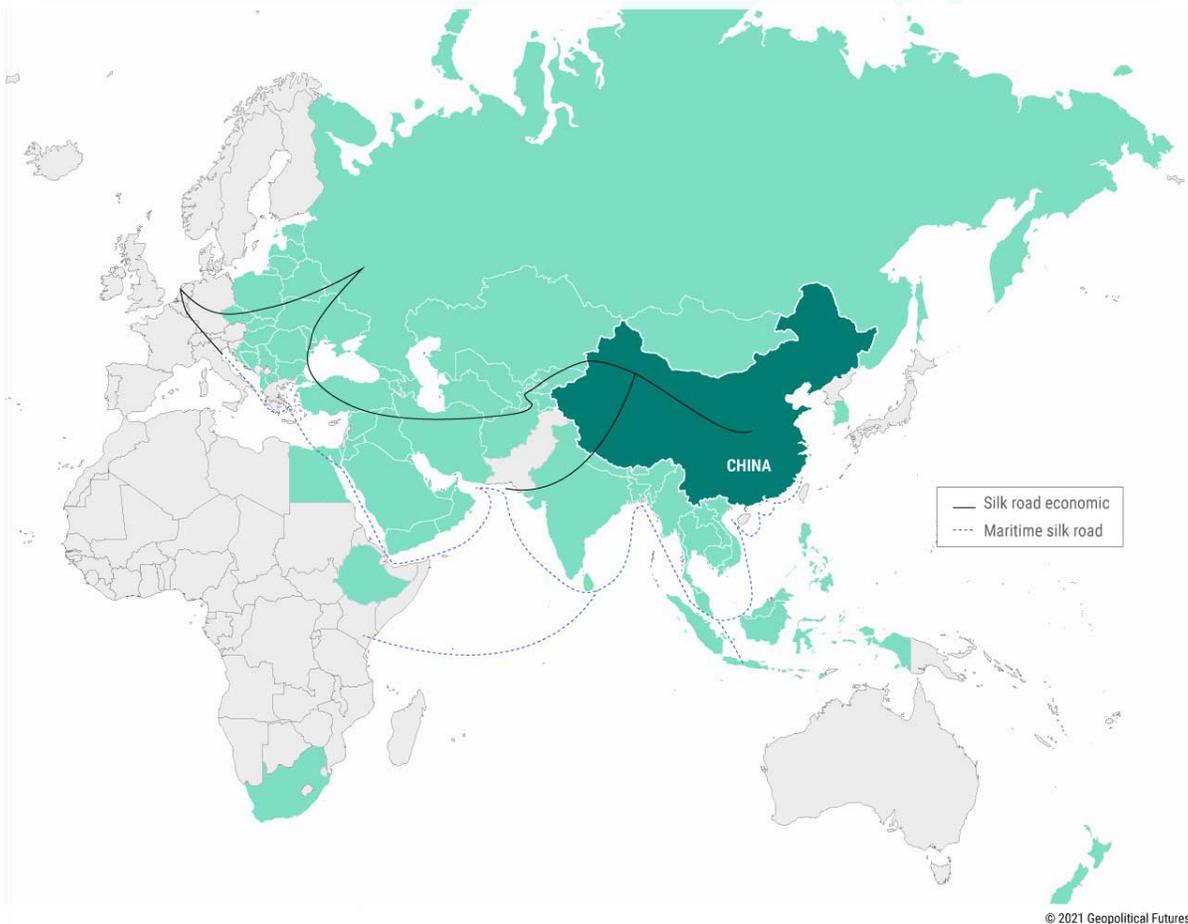
by Jacek Bartosiak - November 23, 2021

For centuries, the power that controls the seas – the “World Ocean” – has successfully stymied continental rivals and dictated the rules of world trade. The German geographer Friedrich Ratzel described this contest as one between the Leviathan and the Behemoth, respectively. The Behemoth tries to tear the Leviathan to shreds using his horns and teeth, while the Leviathan tries to smother the Behemoth so that he cannot breathe, eat or drink. Classically, this refers to naval blockades, but in the modern world the Leviathan – the United States – has other, less risky options, such as cutting off the Behemoth’s access to the global reserve currency. This was by design.

Halford Mackinder believed that over time the Continent would gain a clear advantage over the World Ocean because the Eurasian Heartland, though inaccessible to merchant ships, is also inaccessible to warships, and is thus immune to the World Ocean’s authority. At the same time, innovations in rail, road and air travel would dramatically improve land connections. The Eurasian land mass, Mackinder argued, possessed all the elements for economic and military mobility (what today we would call the free projection of power) over very long distances. As an added benefit, the Continent would enjoy internal communication lines throughout the Eurasian land mass, as opposed to the inefficient external communication lines of the power controlling the World Ocean around Eurasia.

Today, China is implementing Mackinder’s ideas for Eurasian consolidation via its Belt and Road Initiative. Highways, railways, air connections, ports, cables, 5G and data flows are all symptoms of Eurasian consolidation. Beijing’s decision-makers have not forgotten Nicholas Spykman’s teachings – their Belt and Road also runs along the coast and across Eurasian coastal seas – but the Continent will necessarily come first.

China's Belt and Road Initiative



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The signing of the EU-China investment pact in December 2020 was a signal that the trans-Atlantic unity that has defined the balance of power since 1945 could very quickly disappear and that Eurasia could become one system for the first time. The Eurasia-centric system would be highly complex, and competition for markets and money would be intense. Such a turn of events would be a threat to the status of the World Ocean – one that the United States cannot tolerate.

The battle for supremacy has always been about value chains and the resulting global division of labor. These determine new technology and investment cycles, which confer money and power on those who enter the market first or in a better structural position. The ultimate arbiter is the military power capable of dominating the escalation ladder, which for the most part is determined by wealth.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States enjoyed unquestioned domination (or, as the Americans prefer to call it, leadership or primacy). It has been the only hegemon in the past 30 years of globalization, buoyed by the dollar, the U.S. Navy and its aircraft carriers, GPS, Silicon Valley, the New York Stock Exchange, Hollywood, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The United States sets the rules, which gives it massive influence over the division of labor in production, services and value chains; prices and strategic flows; the currency in which transactions occur; the direction and objectives of investment; technological cycles and new scientific breakthroughs; and regulations that shape the market.

The wealth and power of the U.S. rests on the size of the American middle class, its immense demand capacity, and the strength of the U.S. internal market, but that power would not have arisen without sea trade in the World Ocean. Nor would the Americans hold primacy without control of the World Ocean, where most of the world's strategic flows take place. The rules of the World Ocean are made in America and defended by the U.S. Navy, which dominates its foes with its flagship fleet of aircraft carriers capable of projecting force far from North America's shores.

In the modern world, global power projection through the oceans and control of maritime traffic increasingly make use of many space-based observation and communication systems that aid in both navigation and warfare. This greatly reduces the fog of war, which was the bane of the maritime domain, especially offshore. It helped the U.S. control the course of globalization and promote principles of world trade that worked in its favor, all while the U.S. maintained its dominant position in international finance, and the dollar serves as the world currency. The U.S. was able to spread its influence through investment as well as the maintenance of military alliances beneficial to Washington, such as bilateral accords with Japan, Australia and South Korea and collective security arrangements like NATO.

For the past 500 years, the North Atlantic has been the world's geostrategic linchpin. Control of the North Atlantic in the 19th and 20th centuries helped the United States and Britain coordinate and jointly implement policies through the major European wars of the time. During both world wars and the Cold War, uninterrupted communication from the U.S. East Coast to Western Europe was the basis of NATO's strength and the foundation of America's forward presence on the Continent, which made credible U.S. security guarantees in Europe against the Old Continent.

The basic goal of both powers' strategy is to protect their interests and security and to ensure the stability and predictability of an international system that serves their interests. The key elements of this system are lines of communication, including across borders, which ensure social and economic

stability and military assistance when necessary. There are significant differences between land and sea borders, and thus between lines of communication. Land-based communication lines are always less secure because people live on land, and their actions and interactions (capital flows, remittances, migration, etc.) mean land borders are much more prone to change, especially in the absence of natural barriers like mountains, swamps or forests.

Moreover, balancing behaviors against pressure from land powers is much more common because on land every threat is more immediate. The history of Europe is a striking example. Land borders generate more conflict, which was another reason Eurasia was structurally weaker than the World Ocean.

Alfred Thayer Mahan is famous for claiming that naval powers that control the sea lanes are inherently more powerful than land powers. This is true, but there were and still are important overland routes. In fact, for some Eurasian countries, like Kazakhstan, there is no alternative. One such route was the old Silk Road, connecting China to Europe and running through the Middle East and the Levant. A network of oil and natural gas pipelines, railroads and highways essential to the functioning of the global economy still ensures connectivity between resource-rich areas.

Eurasia – inhabited by many nations, states, empires, ethnic groups and even tribes bound together in a web of conflicting interests – is extremely volatile, especially over long horizons. Alliances are mutable, and trust is scarce. By contrast, the stability of sea lanes can lull us into a false sense that navigation of the oceans is free and open, beyond the control of any one power. This perception persists in times of domination by a single maritime power – formerly Britain, and now the United States. But the sea hegemon may at any time deny to others the right to free and undisturbed navigation, cutting off strategic sea flows. Germany's maritime trade was cut off during World War I, and the U.S. cut off Cuba during the Cuban missile crisis. The same could be tried at any time along the approaches to Malacca or in the South China Sea, whether by the Chinese or U.S. navies.

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