

Is This China's Eurasian Century?

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China's response to the U.S. pivot to Asia — a “march west” — faces serious hurdles.

In October 2011, *Foreign Policy* magazine published an article by then-U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. Titled “America's Pacific Century,” the subheading of the article reads: “The future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States will be right at the center of the action.” This article is widely viewed as the manifesto of the Obama administration's Asia policy — originally stated as the “pivot to Asia” but subsequently rephrased as the “rebalance to Asia.”

For most Chinese officials and analysts, this rebalance to Asia is a thinly-disguised U.S. attempt to “encircle” a rising China. Indeed, considering the chain of U.S. military deployments and defense alliances in the Western Pacific, it is impossible for Washington to refute such an interpretation of its rebalance.

So how did Beijing respond?

Some Chinese analysts propose that China should instead “march west,” looking for potential geopolitical allies and new economic opportunities in the vast Eurasian continent. They also point out that this “march west” has the additional benefit of boosting economic development in China's underdeveloped western regions.

When the Silk Road Economic Belt (the Belt for short) was announced in September 2013, it seemed that advocates of the “march west” had won the full endorsement of China's top leaders. The Belt is an ambitious Chinese initiative that aims to enhance interconnectivity and economic cooperation among Eurasian countries located along what used to be the ancient Silk Road. China's Eurasian century dawns, if only because it is unable and unwilling — at least for the moment — to compete with the United States for predominance over the Pacific century.

One can argue that China's westward strategy has a southern component, namely, the 21st century Maritime Silk Road (or the Road, which was announced just a month after the Belt), because the Road goes through Southeast Asia and extends to the Indian Ocean and the east coast of Africa. Like the Belt, the Road also focuses on promoting economic integration and cooperation by increasing infrastructure investment.

The future of the Road, however, is uncertain at best and doomed at worst, due to rising tensions in the South China Sea. Thus the Belt seems to be the best option for Beijing to counter the U.S. rebalance to Asia and to expand its global influence. What are the prospects for China's Eurasian century, then?

First there is Central Asia, the bridge between China and Europe. For now China appears to be enjoying a cozy economic and political relationship with this vast region (see, for example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), but it is highly questionable that this relationship will remain so in the long term. There is already growing resentment among local populations against being treated by China as merely a critical source of energy and a dumping ground for Chinese manufactured products.

Then there is Russia, which has long viewed Central Asia as its legitimate sphere of influence. Enfeebled by diplomatic isolation (primarily because of Crimea) and economic difficulties (due to Western sanctions and falling oil prices), Russia seems to have no better choice but to embrace China. But once Russia gets back on its feet, its relations with China may undergo a sudden reverse.

Finally, there is Europe. On the economic front, China and Europe are witnessing unprecedented interdependence. That Britain, France, Germany, and Italy — and a few other EU members — decided to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank provides further evidence of their close economic ties with China. But on the political front, many in Brussels have been highly critical of the EU's "unconditional engagement" with China, which they believe has produced few significant changes in Chinese behavior.

Adding to all the complexities and uncertainties mentioned above is China's economic slowdown. When the Belt was first proposed, China was widely viewed as the savior of world economy, the most powerful engine of future growth. Now there are signs everywhere — particularly the dramatic fall of the Chinese stock market — that China could well be the biggest liability for world economy. Without sustainable growth, China will be hard-pressed to take the lead in financing infrastructure projects across the Eurasian continent.

Thus it is too early to hail the dawn of China's Eurasian century. As inspiring and attractive as it is, the "march west" does not seem to have a real chance of becoming true. Yes, China's trade with and investment in Central Asia and Europe have been increasing steadily, but economic interdependence does not necessarily translate into geopolitical alliance. Besides, such interdependence tends to benefit a few (exporters and importers) at the cost of the many (ordinary workers), and hence can be played up by local politicians for short-term gains.

In the end, no matter which direction China turns, it has to eventually face up to the reality developing in the western Pacific and try to find a way to break U.S. "encirclement." Regardless of what official rhetoric says about the importance of periphery diplomacy (that is, building up good relations with neighbors), the most important country in China's foreign relations remains the United States.

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