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BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE

Daniel S. Markey's

China's Western Horizon:
Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia

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Daniel S. Markey

China's Eurasian Ambitions: Ground Realities of Great-Power Competition

Elizabeth Threlkeld

Much of recent academic and policy literature on China and its global ambitions has focused on the country's activities abroad, its motivations, and U.S. response options. Western analysts have largely emphasized the component projects of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), analyzing their viability, risk, and potential security implications while seeking to understand how this expanded reach will affect China's rise through the lens of great-power competition. When third countries are mentioned, they are typically invoked as cautionary tales, such as Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, which was leased to China for 99 years by local authorities desperate for debt relief. BRI's eastward-facing maritime projects have received relatively more attention than its westward continental aims, given their immediate impact on U.S. allies and interests in the Indo-Pacific. Works that have examined China's growing involvement across its western periphery have tended to concentrate on individual countries or subregions rather than provide a broader, comparative analysis.

Daniel Markey's remarkable and timely new book, *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia*, helpfully supplements these approaches in three key ways. First, Markey situates local actors at the center of his analysis, recognizing their roles as agents able to shape the scope and impact of Chinese regional investment. By placing these third-country powerbrokers and the ground-level dynamics in which they operate in the foreground, he is able to effectively trace the trajectories of China's relationships across the region and better assess the implications and likely future directions of Beijing's engagement. This approach provides a deeper understanding of how local actors direct and exploit Chinese resources for their own personal and political aims, which in turn affects the course of individual projects and BRI in the aggregate. This focus also allows Markey to assess the complex ways in which China's role is likely to develop in individual states and subregions and across Eurasia as a whole. Situating Chinese engagement in the context of pre-existing governance, economic, and security challenges reveals how Beijing could accelerate or

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upset existing trends with concerning implications for regional, Western, and, indeed, Chinese security interests going forward.

Second, Markey centers his analysis on Eurasia, a region less frequently studied in the context of Chinese engagement and one often artificially divided by Western analysts into its constituent parts—South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.[1] In so doing, he does not make the claim that the United States should treat Eurasia as equally vital to its interests as it does the maritime Indo-Pacific. Rather, he recognizes the historical and geopolitical importance that Eurasia holds from Beijing's perspective as the "greater Middle East" (*da Zhong Dong*) and makes a compelling case for its study as a broader unit. The book argues that China has historically understood itself as a western-looking continental power over and above its maritime role, a tendency that today is accentuated by security concerns in Xinjiang. With this focus in mind, Beijing seeks to both encourage stability in its restive west through economic development across Eurasia and mitigate external threats that could further stoke domestic insecurity.

Third, Markey takes a comparative approach that helpfully pulls together threads from existing state- and regional-level studies of Chinese engagement to reveal common trends across these linked contexts.[2] Without arguing that these domestic and subregional dynamics necessarily align, he demonstrates where and how China has more or less successfully navigated local and regional realities. This approach is particularly useful for local officials seeking to learn from the experiences of similarly situated states along this new Silk Road as well as for Western policymakers calibrating an appropriate response to China's Eurasian overtures. Accordingly, Markey calls for greater tailoring of U.S. policy responses based on a deep understanding of both local and regional dynamics and of perceptions of China and its engagement in each country. A one-size-fits-all approach would risk overcommitting the United States in areas where it lacks a clear national interest, under-engaging in other areas more critical to U.S. objectives, missing potential opportunities for collaboration with China, and overlooking specific emerging threats beyond the broader U.S.-China competition. Markey finds that, overall, "China tends to make

1 This approach follows on the work of Nadège Rolland. See Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017).

2 See, for example, Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Niv Horesh, eds., *China's Presence in the Middle East: The Implications of the One Belt, One Road Initiative* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

America's job harder throughout Eurasia," (p. 169) and he offers thoughtful response options ranging from "peaceful accommodation" to "militarized competition" to U.S. policymakers managing this challenge (pp. 178–84).

Along with these valuable contributions, it is worth noting a few areas in which the book leaves room for future research. First, Markey rightly highlights Beijing's widely touted principle of noninterference in the domestic affairs of BRI partner countries, but he could have gone further in considering the implications of potential divergences from this approach. Given that China's claims of noninterference appear less threatening to illiberal regimes than the United States' democracy- and governance-centric approach, the prospect of China straying from this restraint raises questions about how Eurasian states would respond. Markey, for example, points to Beijing's increasingly assertive behavior under the "constructive engagement" rubric in protecting its overseas personnel and assets—itself a framing that provides plausible deniability given its ostensible focus on safeguarding Chinese investments and workers rather than threatening host country interests.

In its role holding the purse strings on significant investments, Beijing has both used funding to tip the domestic political scales in favor of preferred leaders and selectively withheld support from governments over governance concerns, as it did with Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari (p. 55). Should similar issues emerge in other recipient countries, Beijing could attempt to use its funding to shape political systems to its liking. As Western efforts to build good governance demonstrate, however, success is far from guaranteed, and excessive meddling could sour Eurasian leaders on engagement with China. While the scale of Chinese investment and lock-in effects from existing projects are likely to limit any full-scale reversal, Pakistan's review of projects in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) following the 2018 election of Prime Minister Imran Khan is instructive. As Markey notes, China worked to assuage Khan's misgivings by emphasizing "job creation, industrial cooperation, and broad socioeconomic uplift" in CPEC's second phase (p. 53). Such initiatives, however, will only draw China further into Pakistan's domestic political economy, making greater interference inevitable going forward and raising questions about potential pushback within Pakistan and across Eurasia.

A second area for additional research is the question of how China will manage the intersection of partner country interests across Eurasian subregions. Markey, by necessity given length and scope constraints, focuses his analysis on Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Iran in describing regional dynamics and rivalries in South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, respectively. While an effective means to highlight key cases, this approach limits the book's analysis of dynamics among these three states and subregions. Pakistan, for example, appears in passing in the Central Asia chapter as a member of a proposed grouping alongside China, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan (p. 113). It is also cited as one of Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman's destinations following the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi (p. 142) and as a potential conduit for the transfer of Chinese warheads and delivery systems to Saudi Arabia (p. 155). Should Islamabad resist providing such assistance to Saudi Arabia, given Pakistan's shared border with Iran and sizable Shia Muslim population, for example, Chinese objectives in one subregion could increasingly conflict with its interests (or those of its partners) in another. It would be worth further exploring whether and how China could manage the added complexity of this and other scenarios while avoiding choosing sides.

A third area for further inquiry involves the extent to which broader great-power competition between the United States and China will constrain each side's approach in third countries. Particularly in the wake of mutual recriminations over the Covid-19 pandemic, China's aggressive posture in Hong Kong and elsewhere, and U.S. policy responses, prospects for U.S.-China cooperation appear limited. While Markey helpfully details a range of options for U.S. policymakers to choose from in responding to China's engagement in Eurasia, some of these approaches are premised on limited cooperation (or at least nonaggression) remaining viable. Another troubling prospect is whether gaining ground in the overarching bilateral competition will come to outweigh U.S. or Chinese interests in third countries, eliminating the possibility of less adversarial approaches. Despite their differences, Beijing and Washington do share interests in Eurasia, including stability in Afghanistan and on the subcontinent, which might not be assured should their rivalry intensify. If Beijing were to frustrate U.S. aims in Afghanistan or counter perceived U.S. support for India during a crisis with Pakistan, the consequences for U.S. and regional security interests could be severe. While such a scenario is unlikely given China's own proximity and aims, it is not out of the question.

The contribution of *China's Western Horizon* to the study of China's outward reach is significant for the agency it recognizes in local actors shaping BRI's scope, for the focus it brings to Beijing's continental aims, and for the common tensions it draws together across a broad region. The future of China's engagement in Eurasia will be largely determined as much by the confluence of these factors as by the overall trajectory of U.S.-China relations. Analysts and policymakers in Washington and Beijing—as in Nur-Sultan, Islamabad, and Tehran—would do well to take heed. ◈

Local Rules on China's New Eurasian Horizon

Alexander Cooley

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has generated a cottage industry of reports on Beijing's motivations, grand strategy, and its potential to transform the international order. Daniel Markey's important addition to this literature, *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia*, distinguishes itself by spotlighting how China's new economic, security, and legal instruments interact with local conditions across the Eurasian political space. Through a well-researched and informed analysis of recent Chinese engagement in South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Markey reveals how governments and political actors use such engagement to promote their own interests and agendas (i.e., "local rules"), often with messy and unintended consequences for China. Given that the general arguments of the book are convincing and well-supported, I will focus my comments in four areas that extend Markey's analysis and sharpen the important issues that he has identified for future policy-related debate.

First, the book's account of Beijing's meteoric rise in Central Asia and greater Eurasia downplays the enabling role played by U.S. choices and turning points across the region. Certainly, the military campaign in Afghanistan dominated U.S. policy and the regional security landscape for the two decades since 2001, as the United States established military bases in the region and pursed security cooperation with Eurasian governments and their security services. But a number of U.S. missteps also were critical in making local actors more amenable to China's influence. Chief among these was the New Silk Road initiative, announced by then secretary of state Hillary Clinton, that Markey identifies as an area of possible strategic convergence between the Chinese and U.S. regional agendas. In practice, however, Washington never actually funded this aspirational vision. Instead, U.S. policymakers used the New Silk Road initiative more as a slogan to signal they were leaving a positive legacy in Central Asia when plans to retrench from Afghanistan were announced.

As a result, Obama administration officials were conditioned to support China's infrastructure investment projects—uncritically framing them as alternatives to Russian-led regional architecture—as

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"connectivity" promoters. This not only depoliticized China's initial regional pipelines, roads, and transit infrastructures. It also ignored the actual economic challenges to realizing regional development that, from Kabul to Bishkek, were primarily caused not by a lack of regional infrastructure but by elite rent-seeking, grand kleptocracy, and capital flight out of the region.

In addition, U.S. policy supported two waves of regime changes—the post-Soviet "color revolutions" (2003–5) and the Arab Spring (2010–12)—that emphasized to governments throughout the region that the U.S. government and U.S.-funded NGOs would actively overthrow regimes in the name of democratization, even long-time allies. From being regarded as a political annoyance, local leaders came to view this so-called freedom and democracy agenda as just as threatening to regime survival as the militant Islamists they had partnered with the United States to combat. Governments cracked down on opposition movements and civil society in the name of security and enacted strict laws against foreign-funded NGOs. China's regional rise was perhaps inevitable, but U.S. actions paved the way for local actors to welcome new Chinese economic and security ties.

Second, according to examples in the book, another important consequence of China's rise in Eurasia has been redefining conventional understandings of how Eurasia's subregions and political geographies are constituted and connected. Across lively case study chapters, the book offers astute analysis of cases in what are typically labeled as South Asia (Pakistan), Central Asia (Kazakhstan), and the Middle East (Iran and Saudi Arabia). Yet even when analyzing these local agendas, we can see Beijing stitching new cross-regional fabrics. For example, in the Central Asia chapter, Markey admirably devotes attention to the little-known Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism, a new security grouping founded in 2016 that includes China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. This group cuts across South and Central Asia, with recent reports that all members now host Chinese troops and advisers, suggesting that the mechanism is bringing these partners in convergence with Beijing's regional security agenda. The fact that Beijing did not consult with Moscow despite the presence of Russia's large military base in Tajikistan suggests that China is confidently creating new regional connections, even in the security backyard of its strategic partner.

A similar argument can be made about how Beijing gathered widespread membership for the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), successfully overriding U.S. and Japanese opposition, while its agreement to expand the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2017 to include India and Pakistan shows that Beijing is rescaling its activities to cover greater swathes of the Eurasian region. Beyond such formal regional groupings, Markey reveals other examples of more "hidden" forms of connectivity across all three subregions, including the introduction of technological and telecommunications standards set by Chinese firms like Huawei, the sales of surveillance and drone technologies, and infrastructure lending that has entangled governments across Eurasia in debt renegotiation and ensuing strategic concessions.

Third, Markey convincingly shows how Beijing has effectively made regional inroads with corrupt and insecure regimes that remain "allergic" to the economic and political conditions imposed by Western governments and Western-backed international financial institutions. Certainly, China's emergence as an alternative patron gives regimes around the world additional options to the traditional U.S.-based ones, along with their accompanying norms and values. Markey helpfully reminds us that "to anticipate the political consequences of China's overseas activities in any particular instance, we must appreciate the other state's preexisting domestic conditions and geopolitical relationships" (p. 159), but he avoids weighing in on some of the tougher policy choices this analysis implies. Should Western-led international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank water down economic conditions or political demands on highly indebted and corrupt regimes that have courted China? Should Western-led international organizations systematically engage with the Chinese-led counterparts, such as the SCO and AIIB, unconditionally and uncritically? Should the State Department channel funding to independent media outlets and civil-society actors that investigate the opaque deals and arrangements made between local political actors and their Chinese counterparts? Of course, recognizing the individual circumstances of different local regimes is a prudent first step, but just how confident should Washington be in its traditional playbook of "liberal ordering" mechanisms and institutions? And if the United States were to pick preferred partners or clients in Eurasia, should they be more integrated into liberal institutions and conditions or exempt from them?

Finally, the book's prediction that the security situation is likely to deteriorate across much of Eurasia even as engagement with China accelerates appears prescient. But it perhaps also underestimates the speed toward which Beijing and Washington are intensifying regional competition, especially given the increased tensions in the wake of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The Trump administration's critical stance toward Chinese leadership in UN agencies, its skepticism of BRI, and its warning of the geopolitical consequences of Beijing's debt traps all inform a reframing of Eurasia as a far more competitive arena than a couple years ago. Moreover, the passage of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 will not only ramp up scrutiny of China's policies in Xinjiang but also provide reporting and funding mechanisms through which Uighur diaspora and civil-society advocates in neighboring Central Asian countries can criticize China's regional policies. Indeed, supporting Uighur political rights looks set to displace the broad promotion of democracy as Washington's regional values agenda in the near future. In turn, Russia is likely to continue eagerly siding with China as the two countries continue to oppose U.S. influence and U.S.-led ordering practices across the region. Markey's account suggests that rather than retrench from the region, the United States is likely to continue competing with a new great-power challenger, and with less potent instruments of influence than in previous eras. ◈

China's Expansion to Eurasia as a "Fate-Changer": For Better or Worse?

Nargis Kassenova

Daniel Markey's *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia* is an excellent and extremely timely study of China's growing engagement in South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. It addresses the need to better understand current developments in Eurasia and consider the options and implications for U.S. policy.

The book has multiple strengths. A geographic scope comprising three regions allows for good optics and perspective levels. The author makes granular analyses of developments on the ground in both domestic and regional political contexts and compares and generalizes findings into broader stroke geopolitical assessments. This helps avoid the pitfalls of preconceptions and superficiality that are typical of the grand strategy genre. Central Asia—generally less in the limelight and less-studied than other regions—tends to suffer in particular from this mistreatment. Another of the book's strengths is its accounting for individual agency that skillfully incorporates statements and opinions of policymakers and experts. This inclusion of many voices, ranging from purposeful rhetoric to anonymous reflections shared with the author during interviews in the United States, China, Russia, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Israel, enriches the narrative and conveys the nuances of the complex politics of the different regions.

Markey draws attention to the role of digital infrastructure that, along with energy and transportation infrastructure, has become a pillar of cooperation between China and its partners under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) umbrella. He rightly emphasizes that "to be influential, China's involvement in other states does not need to take the shape of old-fashioned empire or even modern investments in roads, railways and ports," and that "in this century, information and telecommunications networks—and their supporting hardware, software, and standards—are also potent sources of power" (pp. 3–4). The book also discusses the new Chinese-built overland fiber-optic network connecting China and Pakistan to service all of Pakistan, as well as Iran's import of surveillance technologies

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from ZTE and the commission of its National Information Network data centers to Huawei. Over the past several years, Chinese information and communications technology companies and their digital technologies also have made inroads in Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia that are not mentioned in the book. While China's Digital Silk Road is a hot topic, developments in specific regions are generally still underexplored and there is clearly room for further study.[1]

In the book's comparative analysis of national responses to BRI by Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, I was struck by their similarity and synchronicity. In 2015, Pakistan's Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform adopted the "Ascending the Saga of National Progress" document envisioning the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a "'fate-changer for Pakistan'" (p. 48). It included a comprehensive package of cooperative initiatives and projects, covering key areas including connectivity, information, network infrastructure, energy cooperation, industries and industrial parks, agricultural development, poverty alleviation, tourism, financial cooperation, and livelihood improvement via municipal infrastructure, education, public health, and people-to-people communication. The same year, Kazakhstan launched its new economic policy, Nurly Zhol (Bright Path), that aimed at investing $9 billion in domestic transportation and logistics, energy, and industrial and public utilities infrastructure—and agreed with China to develop a plan for linking it with BRI. In 2016, Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman announced the ambitious Vision 2030, envisaging the expansion of non-energy industries, including manufacturing, technology, and tourism, and turning the kingdom into a competitive hub for global trade and transit. From the very beginning, China has been seen as a major partner for implementing Vision 2030. All three governments established committees with Chinese counterparts to link and harmonize their development plans. This official alignment of national development strategies and ambitions with those of Beijing is an important phenomenon: the appeal of the Chinese model and the all-around veneration of infrastructure are at the core of China's global soft power. It remains to be seen what will happen if these national infrastructure and connectivity-focused plans fail or result in unintended consequences.

[1] *Asia Policy* in January 2020 featured a roundtable on the implications of the Digital Silk Road in Southeast Asia; a similar undertaking for western Asia would be of great value. See "China's Digital Silk Road: Economic and Technological Implications," *Asia Policy* 15, no. 1 (2020) ~ https://www.nbr.org/publication/asia-policy-15-1-january-2020.

However, as rightly pointed out in the book, at present this appeal works well for the political and economic elites of developing countries, especially those in power and with access to the opportunities presented by cooperation with China. While the dichotomy of elites and people outlined in the book is not always clear-cut, it does help frame China's relations with other countries. One interesting aspect of this is China's "noninterference." Authoritarian leaders are happy with Beijing's insistence on noninterference in states' domestic affairs. Citizens, however, can perceive the spread of Chinese surveillance technologies in their countries as a form of domestic interference. In one example, Iranian demonstrators chanted "death to China" because they believed that China provided anti-riot equipment and surveillance technology (p. 138).

Markey convincingly shows linkages between domestic cleavages and Chinese investments and recognizes the potential for conflict that they create (as in the case of Pakistan) or can create (as in the cases of Kazakhstan and Iran). He also explores the impact of China on regional dynamics in South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East and draws the thought-provoking conclusion that "China's involvement is, on balance, likely to exacerbate existing geopolitical and political-economic patterns that favor conflict, competition, and instability" (p. 7). Indeed, China has become a significant factor in regional security complexes. It is not yet clear how much Beijing will want to burden itself with conflict prevention and resolution or what toolbox it will create, but it is apparent that China has been actively accumulating expertise in regional affairs and working on more balanced approaches.

Markey concludes the book with recommendations to U.S. policymakers. He advocates for more attention to local political-economic conditions and strategic competitions and promotes selective engagement drawing on American strengths. Indeed, the multiple linkages, complexities, and fluidity of relations between the states of Eurasia and China revealed in the book call for such a nuanced and flexible approach. If, as proposed by Markey, Washington can help Eurasian governments develop better ways of receiving and absorbing much-coveted Chinese investments, we might see a win-win situation for all parties involved. ◈

Parallax Visions of the Belt and Road Initiative

Jonathan Fulton

Daniel Markey's *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia* offers an important, original, and timely analysis of one of our time's most significant geopolitical transitions, as the People's Republic of China (PRC) evolves from an East Asian power to a global power. It is the type of comprehensive book that many would shy away from given its vast territorial coverage, and Markey should be commended for his ambitious undertaking. The result is an informed and engaging work that analyzes China's foreign policy as well as those of several states across South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. As China's interests and influence spreads, we need a clearer picture of the PRC's foreign policy objectives, and to understand the PRC in the Xi Jinping era, we have to start with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The second chapter, "Beijing's Global Aspirations," capably articulates the motivations of Chinese policymakers in developing BRI, putting it in the context of a foreign policy that has grown increasingly confident and ambitious. Perhaps the most important contribution of Markey's book is its emphasis on the agency of countries partnering with China in BRI projects—a part of the BRI story that is sometimes neglected. In nearly every bilateral relationship, excepting only the Sino-U.S. relationship, China's economic leverage creates asymmetry that contributes to a sense of the PRC marching toward dominance while taking advantage of weaker states' needs for development loans and FDI. China's emergence as a funding source represents a challenge to the liberal Western model, which has become increasingly irrelevant to many countries' infrastructure projects. David Dollar, formerly of the World Bank, has compared the Western model's limitations when measured against BRI:

> Only about 30 percent of World Bank lending is for infrastructure these days. Having run the largest infrastructure program in the World Bank, I can say that it's extraordinarily bureaucratic. Mostly, clients don't like to come the World Bank because it's just too time consuming. It takes many, many years to get things going. China is offering to finance infrastructure, not at highly concessional terms, at what we would generally call commercial terms, but frankly at interest rates that most of

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> these countries could not get from any other lender, unless they jumped through the hoops to go with the World Bank.[1]

The English-language narrative about BRI is often dangerously simplistic: China is using its economic might to overturn the liberal order through massive loans and infrastructure projects primarily designed to strengthen its own economy. Developed by Chinese state-owned enterprises, monitored by Chinese technology, and staffed with Chinese labor, the result is environmental degradation, the spread of an illiberal surveillance state model, unfair labor practices, and crippling debt. Partnering countries accept these adversities as the price of doing business with China. The implication is that with relatively little practical experience in dealing with the PRC, these smaller states do not know what they are getting themselves into. However, this perspective reflects a Western view of BRI in general, and a U.S. view in particular. *China's Western Horizon* illuminates how this process looks from the perspective of Eurasian countries working with China, explaining the motivations to forge closer ties and take on these loans and providing a more nuanced approach to BRI than we normally get from great-power competition analysis.

An important theme throughout the book is that elites in partner countries adopt a logic reflecting pressures at the domestic or regional level. The chapter on South Asia offers the best illustration—not surprising given Markey's background in the region. The book begins with an interview with former Pakistani prime minister Pervez Musharraf discussing Gwadar port, the anchor of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): "'Yes, Gwadar was entirely my idea, not a Chinese idea. I was concerned only about Pakistan's strategic interests'" (p. vii). This is an important but underreported aspect of BRI—local projects in need of funding are often folded into BRI cooperation. In Oman, for example, the expansion of a port and industrial park project in the fishing village of Duqm generated attention after China announced it was investing $11 billion, making it a pillar of bilateral cooperation. However, Oman had been searching for foreign capital for over a decade before Chinese involvement in the project was announced.[2] Like Gwadar, it was a local project in need of foreign capital and expertise, and like Pakistan, the

1 From an interview with David Dollar in Amar Bhattacharya et al., "China's Belt and Road: The New Geopolitics of Global Infrastructure Development," Brookings Institution, April 2019 ~ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/FP_20190419_bri_interview.pdf.

2 Eric Staples, "The Ports of Oman Today," in *The Ports of Oman*, ed. Abdulrahman Al Salimi and Eric Staples (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2017): 357–66.

Omani government used China's need to build momentum and legitimacy for BRI to gain something it had long wanted.

Throughout Pakistan, CPEC is being used by institutions and political elites. The Frontier Works Organization, the Pakistan Army's engineering unit, has developed a substantial portfolio of CPEC projects spanning infrastructure, power, oil, real estate, mining, and railway sectors (p. 62). Prime Minister Imran Khan, who campaigned on a platform critical of China, has governed much like his predecessors who used China "as a tool to serve their own needs" (pp. 53–54). This is not to say there is no criticism within Pakistan or that CPEC is seen in a wholly positive light; rather, it underscores that local actors are using China's initiative to achieve national goals.

Markey shows that the same dynamics exist in Central Asia, but international-level considerations are more prominent. Competition for influence between China, the United States, and Russia has created opportunities for Central Asian leaders to force the great powers to play by local rules.[3] Even with contemporary relations between China and Russia at an unusual high, local leaders anticipate a return to the centuries-long norm of competition and realize that this tension creates opportunities "to cut deals with the West, Russia, China, and anyone else" (p. 95). As in South Asia, local conditions and actors play a significant role in shaping China's regional presence.

If all countries are using BRI for their own purposes, its success could cause considerable security and political problems for Beijing. Chinese leaders insist that BRI is a development-focused initiative rather than a geopolitical strategy, but what happens if its partners see the initiative as a strategic opportunity? As Nadège Rolland has pointed out, "roads and railways crisscrossing Eurasia are not just meant to facilitate cargo transportation; they have a strong political component."[4] BRI, spanning countries and regions with intense security competition, will undoubtedly be used by local actors to further their own strategic and political ends. Every Persian Gulf state sees BRI as a net positive for domestic development agendas, for example, but also recognizes that its rivals are benefiting

3 Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

4 Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017), 41.

from cooperation with China as well.[5] Will Eurasian rivals try to use BRI cooperation with Beijing as leverage against each other and in the process weaponize the initiative?

It is in Markey's analysis of the Middle East where I have my only complaint. His discussion of the PRC's interests in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and of the U.S. factor in this region are both solid, but the focus is limited to Saudi Arabia and Iran and thus only tells part of the story. Perhaps this criticism is unfair—China's growing role in MENA through BRI could be a book unto itself. While the Saudi and Iranian relationships are both important to China's regional ambitions, their rivalry is probably less of a concern for Chinese policymakers than it is for their U.S. counterparts. The tremendous gap between Chinese trade and investment with Saudi Arabia and its MENA partners on the one side and isolated Iran on the other is telling; China's vision of regional connectivity through BRI makes cooperation with status quo states much more valuable than with a revisionist Iran. While Washington focuses on Iranian malfeasance, Beijing is less preoccupied with this and knows that Tehran's reliance on China is great enough that it will not jeopardize Chinese regional interests. China has developed a strong foundation of economic relations across MENA, using its strategic partnership model to build up cooperation in areas of shared interest while overlooking issues where they diverge. As a result, China's investments in industrial parks and ports in the Persian Gulf and along the coastlines of the Arabian and Red Seas tell more about this particular dimension of China's western horizon.

Markey's book provides a macro-level perspective on BRI across Eurasia. In years to come, how the dynamics he describes play out across states and regions will be the focus of a great deal of international relations research, and this book will provide a useful starting point. ◈

5 Jonathan Fulton, "The Gulf Monarchies in the Belt and Road Initiative: Domestic, Regional, and International Pressures," in *Regions in the Belt and Road Initiative*, ed. Jonathan Fulton (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

China Goes West, to Mixed Reviews

Tanvi Madan

Between 2013 and 2015, as Beijing rolled out the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its subsidiaries like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, there was some enthusiasm in Washington for these initiatives. They were hoped to be a net positive—an opportunity for U.S. businesses as well as a potential source of resources and stability for countries that needed both. Daniel Markey's *China's Western Horizon: Beijing and the New Geopolitics of Eurasia* is both a reflection of how that view has changed and also an effective explanation of why these Chinese initiatives are now seen as problematic and even as contributors to the more competitive "new mood" on China in Washington (p. 171).

In recent years, there have been a number of publications and discussions about the motivations, instruments, and effects of China's endeavors beyond its borders, especially—but not only—through BRI. Markey's book is an important contribution to that collection, adding a perspective on Beijing's Eurasian strategy and the region's responses. The book explores China's growing interest and role in three subregions of continental Eurasia that are often considered in separate silos: South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. In each subregion, Markey chooses one or two countries (Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia) to highlight China's approach as well as the local realities at play. By looking across the silos, this approach has the benefit of allowing the reader to compare and contrast the Chinese efforts and the responses across the broader region.

China's Western Horizon argues that Chinese activities in this region are quantitatively and qualitatively different than in the past and worthy of Washington's attention. Markey asserts that even if the region is a lower priority than China's actions to its east, the United States should not ignore Beijing's westward expansion. He argues that China's increasing presence and influence in continental Eurasia is having an impact in a way that could affect even the broader U.S.-China competition in the future.

On the debate about whether BRI is part of a grand strategic decision or design, Markey seems to conclude that the issue is now largely irrelevant. Regardless of whether "flag followed trade" or the reverse, as presence

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expands so do interests and impact. As the book outlines, even economic initiatives—as the British government learned with the East India Company in the nineteenth century—can take on a strategic logic of their own, resulting in greater interference in other countries' internal affairs or the deployment of troops abroad. Beijing has done both, despite its earlier professions to do neither.

While Markey explores what Chinese officials and companies are trying to do in Eurasia, he makes a strong case that it is just as crucial to understand the local dynamics and imperatives that shape China's options as well as outcomes in the region. The book vividly describes and analyzes subregional and local realities and their consequences for Chinese efforts. Benefiting from conversations with stakeholders from China and the regional countries studied, as well as first-hand observations, Markey highlights not just the "push" factor from China but the "pull" factor at play in Kazakhstan, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia (i.e., different leaders and constituencies using China for their own purposes). The book is replete with examples of how local actors exercise agency and influence the nature and extent of Chinese activities. Indeed, it begins with a vignette about how the idea of a Chinese role in the construction of the much-discussed deep-water Arabian Sea port of Gwadar originated in Pakistan, not China. However, Markey also outlines the heterogeneity of perspectives toward the increasing presence of Chinese companies, officials, and people in each country. Some of it, he notes, is because the impact of their activities is not uniform; BRI is creating both winners and losers in these countries.

One of the book's most interesting discussions is about the differences between elite and popular views of China in the regional countries. Markey notes the impact of Chinese projects and presence on public perceptions, and also how Beijing's actions in Xinjiang can shape opinions in these predominantly Muslim countries. One question that emerges is what, if any, Chinese behavior at home or in these regions will widen the gap between elite and popular perceptions to the point that it has significant impact on China's ability to operate in these countries.

In a thoughtful final chapter, Markey, bringing to bear both his academic and policy experience, examines the implications of China "going west" for the United States and outlines options to respond to China's growing Eurasian footprint. He lays out a spectrum of approaches that the United States could follow, ranging from "strategic withdrawal" or "benign neglect" to "militarized competition" (p. 184). This framework could be applied to thinking about U.S. options in other regions as well. Setting the context for these options and decisions, Markey emphasizes the differences between the present-day U.S.-China competition and the U.S.-Soviet Cold War. But I would argue that the book itself reflects that, beyond the debate about whether this is a "Cold War 2.0," the earlier superpower competition can offer lessons for the present and the future, and not just for the United States but also for China.

For one, the Cold War is littered with examples of local agency. The historian Geir Lundestad, for instance, laid out the concept of "empire by invitation," that is, how European countries, to support their own interests, worked to get—and keep—the United States involved in Europe.[1] Through nonalignment, India diversified its options, acquiring resources and support from both Moscow and Washington to achieve its own objectives. As competition intensifies, Beijing and Washington will again find that countries around the world will use Sino-U.S. rivalry for their own benefit.

The Cold War also offers lessons in terms of approaches to take (e.g., development finance) and instruments to use (e.g., the U.S. Information Agency, as Markey notes). Furthermore, it cautions against overstretch and major powers unintentionally being pulled into countries and conflicts when they view them through the prism of rivalry. Reading *China's Western Horizon* could offer policymakers glimpses of scenarios in which this could happen.

There are points in the book where one would have liked to see the examination extended. For example, it would be valuable to further explore the issue of potential tipping or turning points that could significantly affect China's operating environment in countries like Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. One that Markey mentions is the upcoming leadership transition in Nur-Sultan that could change the dynamics between China, Russia, and Kazakhstan. Are there other such inflection points, red lines that Beijing might cross, or a point at which the gap between elite and public perception vis-à-vis China becomes consequential?

Another issue the book brings to mind is whether there are key differences in China's approach and impact across Kazakhstan, Iran, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Are there elements that make these countries different from others where China might be investing? For instance, none of them is an effective democracy in the traditional sense of the term. Finally, while Markey's focus on one or two countries as representative in each

1 Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945–1952," *Journal of Peace Research* 23, no. 3 (1986): 263–77.

region is understandable, are there key divergences between the agency of these large states (in some cases, resource-rich ones) and of other states to shape the Chinese presence in them?

Furthermore, as the book notes, Beijing has avoided making choices or taking sides in these subregions. How is Beijing thinking about the choices it might need to make in the future? For example, will it prioritize its interests in Iran or Saudi Arabia, in Kazakhstan or with Russia? Finally, given Markey's experience in government, it would have also been interesting to read his perspective on whether agencies like the State Department are well-organized to deal with these issues that cut across various regional and functional bureaus—and what it might take to improve their ability to respond.

These questions are, in part, sparked by the rich discussion in *China's Western Horizon* and a testament to how much detail and analysis Markey packs into the book. Overall, this is a book that will benefit analysts and policymakers—in the United States and beyond—interested in China's growing footprint not just in Eurasia but across the world. ◈

Author's Response: *China's Western Horizon* as a Framework for Assessing China's Global Reach

Daniel S. Markey

I am grateful to *Asia Policy* for assembling such an excellent group of reviewers for this roundtable on *China's Western Horizon*. Engaging in discussion with experts of this caliber makes the labor of writing a book worthwhile, and I appreciate the evident time and care each took to craft a review. Generous in their praise, each reviewer also raised important questions and offered smart suggestions for an expanded research agenda.

I should add at the outset that I was delighted—and relieved—to see that *China's Western Horizon* successfully avoided burying its lede. Reviewers found the book's central argument compelling and amply supported by evidence gathered across the three main cases. In brief, local actors shape the context and consequences of China's activities across Eurasia. Yes, Beijing is "pushing" westward—economically, diplomatically, and militarily—to serve its increasingly ambitious global agenda, but China is also being "pulled" by regional leaders and interest groups who seek to advance their own aims. The interplay between this push and pull is often complicated, but appreciating these complications is necessary to anticipate political outcomes and, I argue, to shape an effective U.S. policy response. On balance, my research suggests that China's deepening involvement in Eurasia is likely to create new strategic headaches for the United States.

Reviewers were also united in suggesting that the book's analytical framework could be extended or deepened to assess other case studies in Eurasia and beyond. In many instances, such as Jonathan Fulton's comparison of Duqm and Gwadar, a reader can immediately grasp the potential utility of an even more comprehensive approach. I enthusiastically endorse these recommendations and read them as constructive ideas for a broader, long-term research agenda.

The challenge for framing additional case studies lies in judiciously weighing the balance of numerous factors, as the book attempts to do in its assessments of Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Iran. I can envision a collective research initiative in which a larger team of analysts would follow a similar methodology. Each case study would begin with an assessment of

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China's historical and contemporary ties to, and evolving interests in, the nation-state in question. This would be followed by a systematic assessment of each state's domestic political economy, with the goal of determining how evolving ties with China are likely to play into local political contests. Next, the analysis would extend to an assessment of how each state's relations with China affect its primary regional—and if necessary, global—geopolitical relationships. Finally, if intended for use by U.S. policymakers, the analysis would conclude by discussing how the developments would help or harm U.S. aims, both at the local or regional level and in the broader context of Washington's competition with Beijing.

At the very least, a research initiative of this sort would deliver a comprehensive political—as opposed to narrowly economic or sectoral—assessment of China's relationships across the world, and one that would extend beyond the question of "What does Beijing want?" to include the vitally important question of "What do other states want from China?" A systematic emphasis on the second question would help U.S. policymakers avoid seeing the world through a simplistic, China-centric lens that too easily obscures the ways that local actors create opportunities and obstacles for Chinese economic expansion, political influence, and military power projection. If tackled effectively, this collective research initiative would also accomplish at least four other purposes that partially eluded me in *China's Western Horizon* but that the reviewers correctly identified as opportunities for further study.

First, a collective research initiative would enable an additional level of analysis of the interconnections among regional states in the context of their dealings with China. For instance, as Tanvi Madan pointed out, it would be useful to consider how ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are likely to be affected by their independent relationships with China. Other triangular and cross-regional relationships, such as Russia-China-Iran or Russia-China-India, also merit special attention beyond what I was able to tackle in the book. As China's overseas activities evolve and leaders in Beijing and other capitals learn from their experiences with each other, the web of ties will become increasingly dense. Unintended and unanticipated consequences will result from these interactions.

Second, extending the range of cases would address Alexander Cooley's suggestion to identify where Beijing is most likely to confront the "contradictions" in its evolving relationships in contentious neighborhoods of the sort it faces in balancing ties with Kazakhstan and Russia. Similarly, it would help analysts spot where, as Fulton argues in the case of Iran and neighboring Gulf states, China is unlikely to perceive such contradictions in the same way that the United States does. That, in turn, should lead some scholars back to Beijing to "peel the onion" of how Chinese analysts and policymakers actually weigh the inherent tradeoffs in these relationships. In addition, new case studies would highlight other patterns of "similarity and synchronicity" that Nargis Kassenova observes across the national development plans of Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Saudi Arabia, and would shed light on China's investments in the "hidden forms of connectivity" that Cooley noted across cases, such as standards-setting, shared technologies, and lending practices.

Third, a wider range of cases would enable analysts to better judge whether the focal studies of *China's Western Horizon* are representative or unusual, answering another of Madan's astute questions. In the book, case selection was driven by a consideration of several factors, starting with the question of which Eurasian states are already attracting significant Chinese attention. Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and Iran are also important regional players involved in central geopolitical contests in their respective subregions. Many other states, from India and Russia to Sri Lanka and Malaysia, also make appearances in the book, and their responses to China clearly vary. Some of this variation appears attributable to political regime type, and a state's degree of agency in its interactions with China could be informed by its relative size in some consistent way. That said, even a cursory look at a variety of smaller states like Georgia, Israel, and Maldives leads me to anticipate that the specific interests, entanglements, and histories of each case will matter as much or more than its size or generic institutional features.

Fourth, if such a study could be updated routinely and compared with prior iterations (as is done, for instance, with the U.S. National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends* series), it would systematically expose trends in how China's bilateral and regional relationships are evolving over time. Among other benefits, analysts could better discern the regional and localized consequences of intensifying competition between Beijing and Washington. A trendline analysis would help answer Elizabeth Threlkeld's question about whether China-U.S. competition is steadily narrowing opportunities for cooperation on critical regional issues, such as Afghanistan, as well as Kassenova's questions about whether China will gradually shoulder a heavier burden of regional conflict prevention, such as between India and Pakistan. Comparing cases over time could also compensate for the tendency of any static analysis to project immediate trends into the future, even offering analysts ways to account for the waxing and waning of China's overseas ties.

In short, *China's Western Horizon* could thus serve as a pilot study for a much wider research initiative, or simply as a framework that informs other regional and single-state case studies of China's influence. Either way, it will have done useful work in advancing our understanding of contemporary international affairs. In that vein, the reviewers have raised a number of other intriguing questions worth tackling in future research.

Threlkeld, for instance, asks essential questions about how different states are likely to respond to China's "constructive engagement." A wider comparative study that includes cases across regions and of different regime types would almost certainly shed greater light on this issue. It would also capture the evolving character of China's experiments in overseas meddling. As a preliminary study, the cases in the book show that popular sensitivity to China's interference is manifest across Eurasia and that appeals to national autonomy are politically potent, whether in Pakistan, Kazakhstan, or Iran. Further Chinese involvement could well exacerbate these sensitivities. However, because these nations lack a firm ideological difference or historically rooted animus toward Beijing (as compared with, say, Japan), the door is open to relatively deeper Chinese involvement. Moreover, while elites across each of these cases always benefit more than their publics from expanded commercial (and sometimes political and military) ties with China—and Chinese influence with these ruling groups is likely more durable than in politically fluid liberal democracies—*China's Western Horizon* shows that Beijing's ability to control the locus of political power even in these countries is currently in fact rather limited. Yet fascinating questions remain about the potential for what Threlkeld calls "lock-in effects."

Where might the combination of Chinese investment, technological and commercial dominance, security cooperation, and pervasive media presence enable the near-permanent entrenchment of Beijing's political influence, and where would it instead spark costly new sources of tension, either bilateral (between China and its partner state) or internal (between pro- and anti-Chinese factions within these states)? And what, as Madan wonders, are the specific "tipping points" that could send any particular nation firmly in one direction or the other? In the case of Iran, we may be witnessing just such a tipping point, as Tehran enters an economic and military partnership with Beijing as a means to insulate itself from the effects of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign.[1] If in several years the only way for Iran to escape China's embrace is through another revolution, Beijing's "lock-in" will be considered strong indeed.

Finally, while many of the policy implications and options for the United States sketched out in *China's Western Horizon* fly at the 30,000-foot level, real policy decisions must be made about what to do on the ground. These should be driven by specific questions and rooted in particular circumstances. Given the relatively lengthy process associated with writing and editing the book as well as the looming U.S. presidential elections, I determined that many of these topics would be best addressed in shorter follow-on articles or reports.

I remain convinced that the U.S.-China competition is different from the U.S.-Soviet contest in fundamental ways, starting with the depth of global economic interconnectivity that will persist even if we move toward a significantly decoupled future. Nonetheless, Madan is correct that Cold War history offers a rich trove of experience from which Washington can pull smart policy instruments and, at the same time, recall lessons to avoid overstretch or failure. The Vietnam War is often framed as a tragic case of Washington inappropriately foisting a framework of competition against an ideologically inspired Communist monolith on what was in fact a locally inspired nationalist struggle. Appreciating the nuance in such circumstances is precisely what Washington must do as it now deals with states in Eurasia and elsewhere that are neither pro- nor anti-China per se, but that will turn to China when and if they believe Beijing will help them achieve their aims.

The post–Cold War period also contains lessons for U.S. policymakers. As Cooley observes, recent U.S. policies in Eurasia likely contributed to China's expanding influence by threatening local autocrats with democratization, failing to deliver on grand visions, and unduly depoliticizing regional economic integration ventures. Looking forward, he worries that the United States will face China "with less potent instruments of influence than in previous eras," even as Eurasia becomes a more critical arena in U.S.-China competition. He identifies several tough choices that Washington must make in its competition with China, including evergreen foreign policy conundrums about whether the West should join in a "race to

[1] Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, "Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership," *New York Times*, July 11, 2020 ~ https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/world/asia/china-iran-trade-military-deal.html.

the bottom" on political and other standards, giving illiberal states a pass in an attempt to win their affection.

As in the past, however, there will not be a single sweeping answer to these questions. The devil is always in the details. For instance, sending a sub-ministerial level U.S. official to the first Belt and Road Forum in 2017 sent a more nuanced and effective signal than did the decision to boycott the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2014. Similarly, policy calculations will always depend on relative stakes. Few would question the decision to loosen U.S. political conditions on assistance to Pakistan in the immediate aftermath of the September 2001 attacks, but ten years later—once Osama bin Laden was eliminated in Abbottabad—the situation looked much different. The post–Covid-19 era could shift the stakes in Pakistan yet again. Finally, policy tools must be judged in part by their likely effectiveness. Whereas Western funding for civil society groups once gave a leg up to opposing illiberal regimes, a global proliferation of laws intended to stem foreign influence now means that such funding can jeopardize an NGO's existence, even in some democratic societies like India. Now, new policy tools are required to support similar aims.

Whether U.S. foreign policy and national security agencies are well-organized to deal with the China challenge should be a matter of sustained national attention, so Madan is right to have raised the question. The short answer is they are not adequately organized. But the issue is not merely that Washington faces a global geopolitical competition disconnected from existing, too-rigid bureaucratic silos in the U.S. government. Any choice of regional or functional bureaucratic division will necessarily yield gaps and disparities, but mitigating practices can be implemented to better address issues that cut across regional and functional divisions.

The more profound problem is that Washington's institutions need to navigate a shift in their basic organizing principles. Post–Cold War policy bureaucracies have evolved incrementally over several decades into an ungainly mess, generally intended to enable a sole superpower to grapple with a vast, shifting mix of threats, ranging from failed states and international terrorism to humanitarian relief and climate change. At present, however, Washington would benefit from streamlined institutions that prioritize the effective management of competition with China, but the pendulum of reform should not swing so far that the China threat defines all else.

As I argue in *China's Western Horizon*, the United States should outcompete China not by aping or outspending Beijing's initiatives, much less by structuring itself to counter Chinese actions. U.S. policymakers should instead invest in institutions that harness and demonstrate American strengths, especially those associated with liberal democratic practices, and should place renewed emphasis on policy tools of attraction as much as—or more than—those of coercion. U.S. policymakers also need institutions that enable a deeper understanding of the challenges faced in societies—in Eurasia and elsewhere—and the resources and tools to develop appealing, practical solutions. Finally, Washington desperately needs to reassert its global leadership. This will require reconstituting sufficient institutional wherewithal to coordinate among allies and partners as well as with adversaries and competitors, including China, when the stakes require it. ◈