

China's Western Opportunities

By Daniel Markey

As the starting point for the novel coronavirus, China has faced unprecedented global criticism. Now, however, China is also emerging from the pandemic's first wave to restart its economy before much of the rest of the world. In tandem, these circumstances have led Beijing to pursue an unusually aggressive diplomatic posture, counterpunching its critics and pressing its economic advantages.

However, China's current approach is unlikely to pay quick dividends in much of the developed world, especially in Western Europe or East Asia. Beijing's approach is better placed to work in the regions on its western horizon, across the vast sweep of continental Eurasia that runs through parts of South and Central Asia, into the Middle East, and up to Europe's doorstep.

The geopolitical consequences of China's expanded Eurasian influence may not be immediately evident. Over time, however, Beijing could achieve a lasting continental reach, privileged access to natural resources, and global political influence it now lacks. In combination, these advantages would contribute to the transformation of China's geopolitical competition with the United States into a true superpower rivalry.

Not China's Intentions Alone

A great deal of attention in Washington has focused on debates over Beijing's strategic intentions. To be sure, these debates are consequential: what China aims to achieve in the world is an important question. Xi Jinping's China has stopped playing coy about its ambitions on the world stage. Beijing now strives for global achievement rather than "hiding and biding" its time. In addition, influential Chinese strategists have themselves recognized the advantages of focusing greater attention westward, both as a central piece of the infrastructure-oriented Belt and Road Initiative and other activities with more pointedly political and military aims.

Moreover, China is no longer wedded to policies of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states. Instead, it entertains plans for "creative engagement" that look and smell a lot like self-serving political and economic meddling. China's military is breaking old taboos on building overseas bases and its diplomats bully, bribe, and cajole their way to overseas influence. Ominously, Beijing is building out its technological tools for better controlling telecommunications, mining data, and repressing political opponents.

Yet debates over China's intentions are only half the story. Beijing does not act in a vacuum; its powers are—like Washington's—always constrained, first by the inevitable political and bureaucratic frictions that afflict all state institutions charged with translating national aspirations into strategies, and then by the practical and operational challenges that make it so difficult to turn strategies into effective foreign policies.

Daniel Markey, senior research professor at Johns Hopkins SAIS, explains that "Beijing's approach is better placed to work in the regions on its western horizon, across the vast sweep of continental Eurasia that runs through parts of South and Central Asia, into the Middle East, and up to Europe's doorstep."

Beyond China's practical constraints, the national interests, aspirations, and vulnerabilities of other states will define the geopolitical opportunities available to China. Like an incoming tide, Beijing's influence is rising everywhere, but where some places will serve as welcoming inlets, others present rocky shoals.

West, Not East

To its east, China finds more of the latter. There it is surrounded by relatively wealthy, well-armed, and historically wary, even hostile Asian powers, some of whom are ideologically opposed to China and allied with the United States. When Beijing pushes Taiwan or Japan, for instance, it is greeted with skepticism, resistance, and even force. To China's south as well, some important Asian powers are also inclined to resist Beijing's advances. India and Vietnam are prickly in their defenses against Chinese "salami slicing" tactics of territorial expansion, whether in the high Himalayas or the South China Sea. The recent bout of violence along the Line of Actual Control between Indian and Chinese-held territory has only reinforced India's commitment to investments in border defense. Although the circumstances are quite different in western Europe, it is clear that many citizens in the liberal democratic states of the region see through China's insincere "mask diplomacy" and their leaders tend to reject pressure from China's new breed of "Wolf Warrior" diplomats.

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Along its western horizon, however, China's neighbors are less historically hostile or worried by China's rise, or at least less capable of resisting what Beijing has to offer. In dealing with countries like Iran, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and even Russia, China holds essential economic cards that deliver potent political influence. Trade and commercial ties, investments, and direct bribery of top officials make these states beholden to Beijing. Leaders across the region, including among some of America's strategic partners like Saudi Arabia, openly admire the "China model" of economic development without political reform, eagerly purchase technological tools of political control from Chinese companies like Huawei, and tend to excuse Beijing's brutal repression of its own people, especially its Muslim minorities.

The pandemic is already hitting these countries hard. Iran, deeply dependent on China as it feels the weight of US "maximum pressure" sanctions, was one of the first regional hot spots for the coronavirus but a blip of official criticism of Beijing was quickly muzzled. All energy producers, from Russia and Kazakhstan to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, will suffer disproportionately from plummeting demand in the West, and only China's consumption will keep them afloat. Neither war-torn Afghanistan nor its larger neighbor in Pakistan has the public health or budgetary wherewithal to respond to the calamities wrought by the pandemic.

All of these developments render the region even more desperate for China's support, investment, cheap goods, and purchasing power. As was the case after the 2008 financial crisis, China has the necessary capital to buy equity stakes in major concerns across Eurasia—especially in the oil and gas sector—at fire sale prices and faces relatively little competition from other buyers. In the process, Beijing can simultaneously expand its regional economic dominance and, in the process, buy—or at least rent—the political loyalties of regional leaders.

The United States was poorly placed to respond to China's growing influence in continental Eurasia even before the pandemic. Now, given America's manifest disarray at home and Washington's faltering global leadership, US influence across that region has slipped closer to the vanishing point. The pandemic has also cut China's stride but appears to have left Beijing's global ambition undiminished; China's western horizon is the most likely part of the world to feel the geopolitical consequences.

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