



PERSPECTIVES

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The Chinese Are Doing What the Mongols Did Before Them, Only Better

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: All attention paid to China's Belt & Road Initiative misses historical precedents it is built on. In many ways constructed on the nomadic understanding of geography in medieval times, the Chinese follow what the Mongols, and later Tamerlane tried to do: unify (reconnect) Eurasian landmass through establishing trade routes and encouraging commercial activities from the Mediterranean to the Pacific Ocean.

Nascent Chinese [Eurasianism](#) is slowly taking shape. It is a concept not necessarily of forceful engagement of Eurasian states within the Chinese plans, as some in the west tend to believe, but rather an economic initiative which aims at attracting natural and financial resources of the major Eurasian states by providing large sums for infrastructure projects.

This Chinese idea obviously involves the need to control major trade routes from Europe (almost 500 million population market) to China and vice versa. Though invisible on geographic or political maps, trade routes (corridors) and the control over them in fact have constituted one of the major impulses in the development of Eurasia. Conquests/invasions were often motivated by the need to secure financial resources running through major trade routes in Central Asia and from the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean.

For centuries powers to the west wanted to access the huge Chinese market. Geography however has largely precluded this as the Himalayas, Gobi Desert and Eurasian steppes closed off the Chinese hinterland. In ancient of medieval times the only land route connecting the Chinese kingdoms to the outer world was through the modern Xinjiang province.

A further limiting factor was that the Chinese were not particularly eager to trade with foreigners (the country mostly had everything and essentially lived as an autarkic state), no Eurasian vision was present in the Chinese policies. True that Chinese rulers considered neighboring states as tributary, but they possessed little information about far flung Eurasian lands. Again, no economic necessity was propelling the Chinese to venture far away.

But the concept of the modern nascent Chinese 'Eurasianism' can nevertheless be dated to back to medieval times. It fits into what other Asian powers were trying to do centuries ago. Ironically it was the Chinese's gravest enemy – nomads, among them the Mongols – who elaborated a clear vision of transcontinental trade between China and the Mediterranean world.

Living in the steppe lands of Eurasia, the Mongols quickly realized large potential of the massive Eurasian trade and the possibility of serving as a bridgehead between the Mediterranean and the Chinese worlds. Their expansion (conquests of Central Asia, Iran, Syria as well as Russian steppes), often called chaotic, was in fact a logical development within the light of their quest to control major trade routes emanating from Middle East and Europe to South Asia and China.

For the Mongols Central Asia was an economic hub from which many trade routes emanated towards multiple places. Modern day Russian steppes as well were important as rather quickly with the horsepower it was possible to reach the Black Sea and trade with Eastern Europe.

Conquest was one affair, however completely another was to stimulate trade across these large swathes of land. Construction of roads, protection of caravans, provision of special financial rights to foreign merchants etc. those were fundamental principles guiding the Mongols. This concept of this first Asian 'Eurasianism' lived after the Mongols too. Famous Tamerlane with his capital in Samarkand (in modern Uzbekistan) invaded much of the Middle East, Caucasus, north India and before passing away was intent to invade China and thus connect two economic powerhouses – Chinese human and natural resources with the Mediterranean world.

Famous conquests by the nomads centuries ago were dictated by economic needs facilitated by Eurasian geographic landscapes. The modern Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) or Chinese Eurasianism, like its predecessor, the nomadic Eurasianism, involves Central Asian, Russian steppe and Indian-Pakistani geographic corridors. It also involves construction of roads, their protection and an overall stimulation of fare trade.

Thus I would fit the modern nascent vision of Chinese 'Eurasianism', based on economic connectivity, into the overall Asian geopolitical thinking of the past. But previous contenders to build connectivity through the whole of Eurasia still lacked the necessary resources. The Mongols and later Tamerlane's state lacked powerful economy of their own. They were mere trading middlemen between China and the Mediterranean world. Moreover, they also lacked human resources as well as technological expertise. As a result, the Mongols and other nomadic powers, though masters of half of Eurasia, largely depended on more experienced Chinese, Iranians and others to run their empires. In other words, those pan-Eurasian concepts, though an important milestone in human history, could not but be only short-lived.

What the modern Chinese 'Eurasianism' offers can indeed be likened to the past Asian prototypes, but is inherently stronger and of much long-lasting influence for the people of Central Asia, Middle East, the Caucasus and South Asia.

The Chinese have what the nomads lacked: large population, technological prowess, economically productive centers and a strong soft power instruments. It should be no wonder that Chinese BRI will be more successful and thorough with its results.

Moreover, unlike their Asian predecessors who swiftly invaded large territories, the Chinese nowadays are very patient at advancing their geopolitical goals. Any rush could bring about a veritable coalition of forces able to preclude Chinese initiatives.

Moreover, since the Chinese are closely working with states on protection along Eurasian trade routes/corridors, it is unlikely that there will be a swift deterioration of security in any part of the Chinese BRI.

From the historical perspective, nowadays we are witnessing the Chinese phenomenon of BRI which clearly outstrips any previous Asian global initiative in its longevity. In many ways built on nomadic understanding of Eurasian geography, Chinese vision of the continent surpasses mere military alliance models or a closed security-provision group of states. There is much larger picture to it, economic interconnectedness interwoven with centrality of China in Eurasia.

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