



China's Objective 2049: From Rimland to "World-Island" ?¹

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The goal of this short paper is to provide the essential elements to better understand some of the geopolitical issues related to the control of the notorious Rimland by China².

1.WHO SHALL CONTROL THE RIMLAND?

In 1915 J. Fairgrieve was already talking about a "crush zone", encompassing "Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, Switzerland, Poland, the Balkans, Iran, Afghanistan, Siam, and Korea". Decades later S. Cohen will define this region as "shatterbelt": "*a large, strategically located region that is occupied by a number of conflicting states and is caught between the conflicting interests of adjoining Great Powers*"³. Although every specialist defines the region in a *more or less* analogical way and brings its own nuances to the definition, it is clear that the basic reasoning remains unchanged. The union between Rimland and Heartland must be avoided at all costs, as Spykman says: "*who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; Who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world*"⁴. The control of the Rimland and the seas by a maritime power

doesn't necessarily mean that the Heartland will be under its control, but it unequivocally underlines the impossibility of world domination through the latter⁵. In other words, these last decades, the countries located within the Rimland have been torn apart between the adherence to the spheres of influence of the land power (Russia) or to the maritime power (United States). And if in the past years the situation has become increasingly more complex – due to the evolution of the international order – it remains clear that the play of strength among powers lays within the Rimland.

THE ETERNAL U.S. – RUSSIA RIVALRY

In the collective thinking of the United States and Russia the Rimland still constitutes a buffer zone between them. The American will to curb Russian advances and Russia's desire to reach warm seas through Europe and the Middle East remains a reality⁶. Even the paths of both gas and oil pipelines whether initiated by Washington or Moscow follow the same trail of thoughts. For Moscow the goal is to promote vertical gas pipeline projects. Inversely Washington defends horizontal projects.

Indeed, after the Cold War the United States reinforced their presence on the Rimland in the hope of controlling it via NATO's enlargement and through a greater presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia – without forgetting the Middle East where Washington is trying to counter Russia's influence in Syria and Iran. The goal for Washington is to follow its good old containment doctrine: deprive Russia (and China) of access to the warm seas and thus to the various straits. On the other hand Russia intensifies its efforts to hinder this American policy and consolidates its positions in the Caucasus and Central Asia regions by reinforcing relations amidst the Commonwealth of Independent States, through the creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization or with the use of energy as "geopolitical weapon".

CHINA: THE PURSUIT OF THE MONGOL EMPIRE?

The traditional competition between United States and Russia over the Rimland must now take into account a new parameter: China, which additionally has a strategic culture different from the U.S. and the Russian ones. China is increasingly asserting itself in the region through

an Asian guideline of geopolitics that can be translated in practice by implementation of a Go game. Whereas Western culture favors games such as chess, which requires a direct confrontation aiming for the opponent's defeat, Asian culture – and in particular the Chinese one – prefers a more indirect approach. In a Go game actions initially come across as not linked to one another, the logic behind actions only reveals itself later in the game, according to the junctions made among actions. Success isn't obtained by a *coup de grâce* or a move; it is the result of numerous actions, each with various objectives, at the service of a grand strategy. In other words, victory doesn't translate into a total domination but rather by an advantageous division of a territory (acquisition of spheres of influence). A focus is given on relational strategies instead of confrontational strategies.

With great subtlety, Beijing lets Moscow and Washington clash on the Rimland's chessboard (Ukraine, Syria, Iran,...), while trying to benefit from this historical rivalry in order to increase its own influence in the region. Since the beginning of the 90s, China has been taking care of settling border conflicts with countries of Central Asia and has increased its influence in the region through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, without forgetting its cheque book diplomacy (investments, loans), the construction of various oil (Kazakhstan) and gas (Turkmenistan) pipelines towards the Xinjiang region, and the development of numerous roads and railways going to various States of the region. The Chinese presence can also be seen through the Confucius Institutes, bilateral summits and the China-Eurasia exposition.

After having carefully laid its pawns in Central Asia (including in Afghanistan and Pakistan) for twenty years, other regions have gained Beijing's interest: Middle East, South East Asia, Caucasus, Turkey and the Europe-

an Union. In the Middle East even though China is primarily focusing on Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have gained its attention. In the Caucasus relations between Azerbaijan and China have thrived. The Sino-Turkish relationship is blooming on the commercial and the military level, and in the infrastructural field. Chinese presence in the European Union is tangible especially since the financial crisis. China made its way into the EU through the European markets most enfeebled by the crisis (Greece, Spain and Portugal), but also via countries from Eastern Europe (Bulgaria) and the Balkans (Serbia). Chinese corporations are interested in ports (e.g. Piraeus port), in railway companies (OSE) and in the expansion of the Pan-European Corridor X, which links Turkey to Europe. Concerning South East Asia, China strongly invests in infrastructural projects. Kunming (a province of Yunnan) in China is becoming the new hub through which China intends to penetrate the old Indochina, more precisely via (among others) the Great Mekong Subregion Program and various trade corridors: Kunming-Bangkok, Kunming-Haiphong and Kunming-Kyaukpyu. Even Guangxi is concerned with the Nanning-Singapore Economic Corridor project⁷.

China's ambitions do not stop there. There is a clear will from Beijing to develop a maritime option, which would start in China (Fuzhou) passing through Malacca, the Indian Ocean, Suez and the Mediterranean to finally attain Venice. Furthermore, China has an alternative in store to the Suez Canal, by planning to reach the Mediterranean Sea through Israel (*Red-Med Railway*)⁸.

The key objective of these policies is to reinforce the connectivity between the main actors of the Rimland leading to the encirclement of the whole area – a crucial step in a Go game – in order to integrate it to China's sphere of influence. Not surprisingly, the "One Belt, One Road" ini-

tiative was launched in October 2013 by President Xi, confirming officially the Chinese will to reinforce connectivity and cooperation among states of primarily the Rimland. This new initiative consists of two main components, the "Silk Road Economic Belt" (land-based) and the "Maritime Silk Road". In 2014, 40 billions of dollars were raised (*Silk Road Project Fund*) to finance the infrastructural projects of the *Silk Road Economic Belt* and the *Maritime Road Economic Belt*⁹. In the same year, China founded the *Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank* with a starting capital culminating at 50 billions of dollars (25 of which were brought by China).

In fact, China is attempting to recreate the famous Silk Road which shone in all its glory when the Mongol Empire was at its zenith, and which historically encompassed different branches, one via Central Asia towards Europe and Russia and another one going to South and South East Asia through countries such as Tibet, Myanmar, Vietnam and India (among others). China is aware that it is akin to the Mongol Empire: a Rimland power in its era, yet it is half-land, half-maritime. Therefore it appears that the long-term Chinese intention is to control the Rimland by isolating (or allying with) Russia, while engaging a long-term competitor with the American maritime power for supremacy on sea. Furthermore, mastering the Rimland would allow China avoiding the famous Malacca dilemma.

2. INTERCONNECTING THE WORLD-ISLANDS ?

An in-depth observation of China's foreign policy leads us to ponder its very long-term objective, which might be more ambitious than expected. What if China was actually aiming at controlling also the "world-island", a term coined by H.J. Mackinder in his findings of 1904? He defined the "world-island" as a landmass encompassing Asia, Europe

and Africa. Its center is composed of an Eurasian heartland (roughly corresponding to the territory of the old Soviet Union) and an African heartland, which shares the same geographical borders as the actual DRC. In order to reinforce its presence on the Eurasian heartland, China aims at strengthening its partnership with Russia through various engagements for tactical reasons: e.g. giving support to the Russian government on international matters such as the Ukrainian crisis or by concluding gas deals (two agreements were concluded in 2014, accounting for approximately 800 billions of dollars).

In Africa China seems to follow a well-defined plan. Chinese presence on the continent dates back to the early 90s. Even though China was (and is) mainly there for raw materials it rapidly understood the burden that is the lack of infrastructural development. For instance China has already rebuilt the railway of Benguela. Nowadays it aims to restructure the *East Africa Railway* in Eastern Africa and the *Trans-Kalahari Railway* going from Namibia to Botswana. Additionally China concluded a partnership with the African Union in order to build infrastructures that will link the capitals of the continent. These infrastructures will be easily connected to those from the Silk Roads, thus reinforcing the Chinese Go game strategy.

Moreover the famous string of pearls¹⁰ seems to have expanded to the Eastern coast of Africa where China is upgrading the ports of Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique... and appears to be interested to have a forward base in Djibouti.

The short-term objective here is to protect the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). But isn't the endgame of China to shield the "world-island" against the American maritime power? The strategy would therefore be to drive the maritime power (US) away from the coasts, which is exactly what Beijing is attempting to

do in the South China Sea (by trying to take control of the first line of defense) through area denial. In this instance the war on maritime piracy in which China is involved can be analyzed as being part of a wider objective: to gain control of the waterways stretching from the African coasts to the Strait of Malacca.

The Chinese endgame seems to follow closely the words of MacKinder, "who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island, who rules the World-Island commands the world". Thus the aim for Beijing is to control – or at least have in its sphere of influence – the two centers of the World-Island: the Eurasian and African Heartlands.

This scenario might come across as pure fiction but the Chinese, as good Go players, are placing their stones on the world board; each stone being connected at a point in time to one another. Moreover the fact that the Chinese understand time in a different way than Western societies has allowed them to develop a long term strategy. The key date for China is 2049: at that time China will celebrate the centennial of the PRC and should have reached the "Chinese Dream" supported by Xi Jinping since his arrival at the head of the CCP in 2012, in other words: to be number one on the international scene.

This grand strategy will probably not occur, because other powers will oppose it, especially United-States – but this will also be due to the difficulty to contain the rampant instability in some regions of the "world-island". Nevertheless this strategy offers, from a geopolitical point of view – and therefore with a hint of determinism and with limits specific to this standpoint – a viable conceptual framework allowing us to understand the coherence of China's contemporary foreign policy.

3. CONCLUSION

In the end, it clearly appears that we are only at the beginning of a long historical reconfiguration of the world chessboard. In other words, the world is evolving and a new geopolitical map has started to draw itself out, bearing multiple aspects: it includes strategic, geopolitical and economical issues.

(ENDNOTES)

1 We would like to thank Rodrigue Delrue for his help.

2 Belt stretching from Scandinavia to maritime China.

3 Cohen, S., *Geography and Politics in a Divided World*, New York, Random House, 1963, pp. 83-87

4 Chauprade, A., *Introduction à l'analyse géopolitique*, Paris, Ellipses, 1999, p.31 ; Moreau-Defruges, Ph., *Introduction à la géopolitique*, Paris, Seuil, 1994, p.35.

5 Gray, C., *The Geopolitics of the Nuclear Era*, New York, Crane, Russak & Co, 1977, p.15.

6 On the same subject read also STRUYE de SWIELANDE, T., “ Piraterie maritime: un nouveau rapport de force dans l’Océan indien? ”, in *Notes d’analyse de la Chaire InBev Baillet – Latour sur les relations Union européenne – Chine* (Catholic University of Louvain), number 1, February 2009.

7 Will to control the Asian Rimland (ASEAN).

8 Negev desert – Eilat port.

9 Will to create a network of infrastructures (roads, gas and oil pipelines, railways and waterways, optic fiber).

10 The string of pearls has the ambition to get accesses to various naval ports along the SLOC, going from the South China Sea to Africa by passing through Middle East: Hainan (China), Sittwe and the Coco islands (Myanmar), Gwadar, Pasni (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Sri Lanka, Maldives and Mauritius. These accesses should allow China to use the ports as bases for food supplies, logistics and so on.