

# Silk Roads and Great Games: Prelude to Global Governance or Great Power Conflict?

Robert R. BIANCHI<sup>①</sup>  
(Law School, University of Chicago)

**Abstract:** *The Islamic world has its own dreams of resurgence and global influence. They know that most of the mega-networks that China envisions will retrace the ancient routes of Muslim traders, seafarers, and pilgrims – routes that form the sinews of a thriving world civilization that can become the equal of China and the West. Citizens of Muslim nations are well-aware that their governments are paying Beijing for these projects with their national patrimony, and they are demanding that the benefits accrue to ordinary people and their descendants.*

**Key Words:** *Silk Roads; Great Games; Islamic World; Global Commons; Mega-regions; Coevolution; Mediterranean*

China is pioneering epic projects of hemispheric integration that

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<sup>①</sup> Dr. Robert R. BIANCHI is a political scientist and an international lawyer with special interests in China and the Islamic world. He is the author of *Islamic Globalization: Pilgrimage, Capitalism, Democracy, and Diplomacy*, World Scientific Press, 2013; *Guests of God: Pilgrimage and Politics in the Islamic World*, Oxford University Press, 2004; *Unruly Corporatism: Associational Life in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, Oxford University Press, 1989; and *Interest Groups and Political Development in Turkey*, Princeton University Press, 1984. He has taught at the University of Chicago, the Johns Hopkins-Nanjing University Center for Chinese and American Studies, the American University in Cairo, the University of Pennsylvania, Qatar University, and the National University of Singapore.

will speed commerce and transport across Eurasia, Africa, and around the world (Denyer, 2014). The expected advances in interdependence and complexity will not only create stronger economic capacity, they also will bring heightened vulnerability to possible disruptions, particularly from political and military conflicts. Shortening times and distances between far-flung markets increases the likelihood that trouble spots in different regions will aggravate one another and escalate into transcontinental confrontations between Great Power rivals.

The tug of war between integration and fragmentation is in full swing across the Western Pacific (Kaplan, 2014) and the Middle East (Bianchi, 2013b). It is steadily building in the Indian Ocean (Mohan, 2012) and throughout Africa (French, 2014). And it is already on the horizon in the Arctic Circle (Jakobson and Peng, 2012) and Latin America (Phillips, 2011). In adapting to this new world, scholars and statesmen will have to discard many well-entrenched assumptions and habits of geopolitics. Some of the leading examples include grouping neighboring countries into discrete regions, partitioning them into spheres of influence, and treating their natural resources and transit routes as sovereign possessions instead of global commons.

## **I. Unanticipated Consequences of Hemispheric Integration**

All of the emerging mega-regions will influence one another profoundly, for better and for worse. Their coevolution will undermine efforts to compartmentalize them and contain their internal conflicts. Building New Silk Roads will trigger strategic rivalries that turn into New Great Games. Efforts to promote

integration and harmony will also set off counter-tendencies of division and competition (Escobar, 2014b). Supposed spheres of influence will become spheres of weakness and constant friction—like geological collision zones where tectonic plates brush against one another and generate subsurface pressures.

Another outmoded view underestimates the agency of Asian and African nations—their capacity to act independently and to make their own free choices. This is particularly important in understanding the Muslim countries that sit astride the continental and maritime lifelines linking Europe and the Western Pacific. For centuries, outsiders have viewed Muslims as the people “in between” the giants of the East and the West—as stepping stones and storehouses underpinning the might of foreign empires.

But the post-colonial Islamic world has its own dreams of resurgence and global influence (Bianchi, 2013a). They know that most of the mega-networks that China envisions will retrace the ancient routes of Muslim traders, seafarers, and pilgrims—routes that form the sinews of a thriving world civilization that can become the equal of China and the West. Citizens of Muslim nations are well-aware that their governments are paying Beijing for these projects with their national patrimony, and they are demanding that the benefits accrue to ordinary people and their descendants.

If Chinese engineers want to create an Afro-Eurasian infrastructure, they must realize that they are writing on a palimpsest—a rich human and cultural infrastructure that precedes them and is shifting under their feet. Indeed, the Chinese themselves are unwittingly breathing new life into the social and political fabric of every country they touch. Their very presence is provoking the rise of stronger political groups that insist on more democratic and equitable

management of the new mega-networks once they're completed.

As China expands its commercial reach, it also becomes more vulnerable—along with the rest of the world. Much of China's desire for hemispheric infrastructure stems from fear that an American naval blockade could cut its lifelines to European markets and Middle Eastern energy. But building wider networks creates more potential choke points, which then require new bypasses and redundancies to keep the mega-system from imploding. Each add-on is a new bone of contention for geostrategic rivals and a new target for potential enemies. Beijing pursues diversification in order to reduce risk, but ends up generating still greater risk instead. China has no guarantee that what it builds today won't blow up tomorrow.

Is there a way out of this self-defeating cycle? Perhaps we can begin with the core issue for China and most other nations that survive on long-distance commerce and scarce natural resources—the shared need for secure access to supplies and routes rather than the right to control them exclusively. If we view the goods and the roads that carry them as common pool resources, then the differences seem more amenable to bargaining and compromise. Instead of carving out spheres of influence in separate regions, the goal is collectively managing a chain of contested commons sustaining fragile economies across continents and oceans. For political architects hoping to fashion a system of global governance, the balance of interests shifts as well—from exclusion to inclusion, from ownership to sustainability, and from power to fairness (Ostrom et al., 1999).

Managing contested commons relies on an array of collective action skills that have been inherited from all cultures and eras. Today's world employs both customary and legal regimes for sharing and preserving common spaces and resources locally, internationally,

and globally. We have extended the methods to govern the seas, transnational river basins, the atmosphere, Antarctica, cyberspace—even the moon, other planets, and outer space (Koppell, 2010). This is an invaluable tool kit for the Chinese, Western, and Islamic leaders who bear the major responsibility for creating the new mega-networks and, hopefully, for insuring their survival.

## **II. Segmenting Thinking in American Foreign Policy Debates**

While China's leaders are promoting grand strategies of integration, American policy makers are moving in the opposite direction. There is little enthusiasm in Washington for the prospect of a unified Eurasia connecting neighboring mega-regions across a densely networked eastern hemisphere. In the United States, the notion of Eurasia still seems like an Old World phantom—a recurring delusion of universal empire that starts with efforts to control imagined “heartlands” and “rim lands” in order to dominate the entire “world island” (Petersen, 2011).

Students of modern geopolitics know that these catchphrases have been recycled countless times—with different lands and waters labeled as “pivotal” to securing promised realms of varied scope. In recent memory, the Tsarist and Soviet Empires were the most familiar incarnations, and America's Cold War strategy of containment was crafted to stifle exactly these kinds of ambitions. When the Soviet Union collapsed, visions of Eurasia seemed far-fetched or at least severed from their pesky Russian roots.

Today, however, Washington worries that the Eurasian phantom is reviving and might grow stronger than ever—not just in a resurgent

Russia, but this time with China at the helm. More troubling yet, this edition of Eurasia could advance under a joint Sino-Russian banner that would attract many others, including quarrelsome American allies such as Pakistan, Turkey, and Germany. If it gained traction, such a combination might seem irresistible to a slew of nervous hedgers—particularly Indonesia and Saudi Arabia—who are skeptical of America’s promises to protect them against overbearing neighbors (Escobar, 2014a).

Washington is once again moving into containment mode, but it’s far from certain which competitors or coalition it intends to contain. During the Cold War, the United States imagined that it faced a single continuous front ringing the Soviet Union from ocean to ocean. Military units organized around three sectors—NATO in the west, the Middle East and South Asia in the center, and the Pacific theater in the Far East—but strategists always viewed them as one unbroken line fencing in Soviet expansionism.

Today, American planning is more difficult. Instead of a single clear adversary, Washington is struggling on three different fronts at the same time—against Putin in Europe, armed extremists across the Islamic world, and Beijing’s territorial claims in the Pacific. Moreover, there is no consensus in government or public opinion about the relative importance of these three fronts—which is the main event and which are the side shows—or about the proper balance of political and military approaches that America should employ in any of them.

Among American foreign policy writers, one of the few points of general agreement is that Europe, the Islamic world, and the Pacific are powder kegs that must be kept apart because if an explosion in one triggered the others, not even a superpower could escape the conflagration. This is the underlying premise of Obama’s pivot from

the Middle East to the Pacific—put a smoldering power keg behind us in order to deal with an even bigger one just on the horizon. In the meantime, hope they do not explode at the same time or morph into a great inferno.

The rebalancing campaign has never won the day either inside the government or beyond. The “pivoters” were mainly China specialists and Asia-interested business groups who thought that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were poison pills left over from the Bush era. “Pivoters” quickly drew opposition from two sets of “foot draggers” who thought that problems in the Islamic world and Europe were more serious than the so-called “China threat” in the Pacific.

Both groups of “foot draggers” gathered momentum as revolution and war swept through the Middle East and as Russia lashed back at western inroads on its borders. Critics of America’s Middle East policy pointed to the huge backlog of unfinished business that stymied Obama’s efforts to shift attention to Asian diplomacy and Congressional paralysis (Nasr, 2013). Even the President’s former cabinet officers started accusing him of giving up too quickly in Iraq and Afghanistan, of underestimating obvious threats in Libya, Syria, and Iran, and of standing by while fighting between Israelis and Palestinians made a mockery of his peace initiatives (Panetta, 2014).

Soon Putin defied Western warnings to stay out of the Ukraine and announced his own plans for Eurasian integration. In America and Europe, many commentators complained that Obama’s foreign policies had dashed all hope of drawing Russia into the EU-NATO orbit and unwittingly pushed Moscow closer than ever toward an informal alliance with China (Kinzer, 2014). From this perspective, Obama was undoing the Nixon-Kissinger legacy of splitting China

and Russia precisely when Washington was reeling from persistent forecasts of American exhaustion and decline (Simes, 2014).

Meanwhile, the Asia-focused “pivoters” broke into rival factions that fought with one another over every facet of China policy. At least three China-centered camps now vie for preeminence. One group urges partnering with China in economic and diplomatic pursuits in order to socialize its leaders into co-managing existing international institutions (Lampton, 2008). This trend is most popular in corporate, university, and technology circles.

Another approach advocates encircling China with US maritime power in order to neutralize Beijing’s drive for supremacy in the Pacific. A popular version of this view advises Washington to reposition its warships at a greater distance from China’s coast while preparing for an extended naval blockade that could strangle the Chinese economy in case of hostilities (Hammes, 2012). In theory, this would allow American diplomats to practice “off shore balancing” backed by a threat of force carrying low risks of escalation to all-out war (Kaplan, 2005).

A third group of Asia “pivoters” favors a far more confrontational strategy designed to deter—and, perhaps, to intimidate—China’s military commanders. A widely debated example of such a strategy, termed “AirSea Battle doctrine,” would marshal American air supremacy to deliver an overwhelming strike on China’s nuclear missiles deep inside the mainland (Etzioni, 2014). Because it could jeopardize the survivability of China’s nuclear deterrent, this doctrine probably has strengthened Beijing’s determination to deploy nuclear-armed submarines that would guarantee a “second strike” capacity against a surprise attack.

Thus far, the “pivoters” and the “foot draggers” have created



greater divisions among themselves than among their foreign adversaries. American thinking on foreign policy and defense is still bound to its historic preoccupation with trans-Atlantic relations. There is a compelling argument in Washington and Brussels for building a wider West by tightening links with Russia, Turkey, and Germany before China wins them to its side (Brzezinski, 2011). But this would be a far more Asiatic and Muslim West than anything imagined by post-World War II statesmen such as George Marshall or Robert Schuman. Its birth is bound to provoke even greater discord on both sides of the Atlantic.

At the same time, the Middle East and the Islamic world are more critical—and many think more dangerous—than ever. Great powers are eager to enlist local aid in putting out the region's fires rather than use their own forces. This need has set off a spirited debate about the merits of relying more on Turkey and Iran at the expense of Israel and Saudi Arabia (Kinzer, 2011). That kind of intraregional rebalancing would be painful indeed for American and European politicians who have spent decades marginalizing the former pair and privileging the latter.

Beijing's dream of peacefully increasing its power by integrating the new mega-regions of Afro-Eurasia is clashing head-on with America's countermeasures to contain China—and any China-led coalition—by reinforcing segmentation in the Old World. Both sides may be underestimating the strength of emerging mega-networks and exaggerating their ability to influence them. Segmenting strategies could delay the growth and linkage of mega-regions, but that is not likely to stop the momentum from reaching a point of no return. Indeed, the Obama administration's inability to contain overseas crises in regional compartments suggests that the turning point already has

passed.

Most of the networks depend on the lands, waters, and resources of nations that are populated by large concentrations of Muslims. The governments of these nations and the foreigners who conduct business with them will have to persuade millions of ordinary citizens that the new projects will improve their lives and their families' futures. That requires sharing power and benefits in an inclusive and equitable manner. In confronting these issues, parties on both sides of the integration-segmentation divide have been timid and disingenuous.

Meanwhile, the combined forces of rapid development and violent revolution are sweeping every corner of the Islamic world. Both the beneficiaries and the victims of these upheavals are likely to reject the roles that American and Chinese leaders envision for them today. Like China, they too expect a more democratic international system that offers them greater status and power. But they are doubtful that Beijing is ready to grant other non-Western nations the equal status that it demands for itself. Like the United States, they too value freedom of expression and competitive elections, but they are skeptical that Washington will tolerate the dissenting voices it is certain to hear from Muslim democracies.

### **III. Scholarly Trends in World History and Civilizational Exchange**

To catch a glimpse of tomorrow's global politics, it might be useful to consider some leading trends in today's transcultural scholarship. In one country after another, the social sciences and humanities are increasingly preoccupied with three profoundly

disturbing transformations—the unpredictable politics of the post-Cold War era, the astonishing resurgence of non-Western civilizations, and the alarming deterioration of the earth’s environment. This confluence of panoramic change has inspired a growing desire for perspective and context among scholars, policy makers, and ordinary citizens. Some of the most influential responses to this desire have come from recent contributions in world history, geopolitics, and human ecology (Duara, 2014). As history and social science collaborate more and more, they also reach out to the humanities and natural sciences. Interdisciplinary inquiry is flourishing and team research is spawning new fields everywhere—big history, deep history, complexity studies, chaos theory, behavioral economics, and many more, including renewed interest in developing “theories of everything” (Christian and McNeill, 2011; Byrne, 2013; Kellert, 1993; Gubser, 2010).

One of the most important contributions of newer trends in global history and social science has to mentally remap the modern West and the post-colonial world through much longer time and across far wider space than we usually imagine. This work is placing European civilization in fuller comparative perspective by tracing its ancient and continuing intersections with other cultures and by acknowledging its deep indebtedness to peoples in distant lands (Hobson, 2004; Bala, 2008). Many Chinese scholars are doing something very similar. For more than a century, some of China’s most renowned historians, social scientists, and archaeologists have been reimagining Chinese civilization in a way that spotlights its mutual exchanges with other societies from its very inception until its rise to global leadership today (Richter, 1994; Fei, X., 1988; Chen, X., 2009).

The combined imaginations of theorists in the social and natural

sciences have yielded a profusion of models and analogies. But in thinking about the mega-regions of the future, two metaphors stand out—the geo-biological notion of “coevolution” elaborated by Enrico Coen and John Thompson (Coen, 2012; Thompson, 2005) and the socio-ecological portrait of “the Mediterranean” popularized by Fernand Braudel and his many followers (Braudel, 1995). Coevolution is a key temporal concept that highlights collective adaptation among mutually transforming species and communities over wide territories. The Mediterranean is a spatial image for diverse and densely networked human ecologies that stresses their symbiotic interdependence.

Joining these two metaphors, we can envision the coevolution of several intertwined Mediterraneans in Afro-Eurasia—the emergence of overlapping Mediterraneans crisscrossing the Eastern Hemisphere and triggering constant changes in one another and their environments. These ideas are regularly applied in research on complex adaptive systems. Such work in natural and social science helps to explain the accelerating circulation, recombination, and re-export of more and more innovations across larger and larger areas.

Efforts to trace the long histories of big regions now encompass all of the lands and seas that China plans to connect along its New Silk Roads. A few of the most notable examples include Joseph Fletcher on “Islamic Inner Asia,” Christopher Beckwith on the “Eurasian cultural complex,” S.A.M. Adshead on Central Asia, Morris Rossabi on the legacy of the Mongol Empire, Roy Bin Wong and Wang Gungwu on “Chinese Mediterraneans,” Denys Lombard and Barbara Watson Andaya for Southeast Asia, Engseng Ho and Sugata Bose on the Indian Ocean, Richard Frye on Iranian civilization, Richard Eaton’s notion of “the Persian Cosmopolis,” and J. Spencer Trimingham’s

work on Islam in East and West Africa (Fletcher, 1995; Beckwith, 2009; Adshead, 1993; Rossabi, 2010; Wong, 2001; Wang, 2008; Lombard, 1998; Andaya, 2006; Engseeng Ho, 2006; Bose, 2009; Frye, 2011; Eaton, 2013; Timingham, 1970).

From this perspective, China's dreams of mega-regional integration rest on more realistic foundations than usually assumed. Beijing might take the lead in updating the hardware with state of the art infrastructure projects, but – particularly in the lands of Islam – the software has been in place for centuries in the form of human and psychological bonds that are more vibrant today than ever.

Some might argue that this sort of hemispheric imagination is better left to romantics than to statesmen. But governing is a mysterious blend of ruling and dreaming, especially when trying to cope with global survival. We should expect some pleasant surprises when our statesmen show that they too understand the power of serving universal human interests. Remember, for example, the sudden switch from disappointment to elation when Chinese and American leaders scuttled a widely anticipated agreement on battling climate change in Copenhagen in 2009 and then revealed they secretly concluded a breakthrough pact to cap emissions of greenhouse gases just five years later in Beijing (New York Times Editorial Board, 2014).

In time, we might eventually hear of similar negotiations on many other issues, including some of the increasingly contested commons of natural resources and long-distance transit routes where Chinese, Western, and Islamic destinies intersect once again.

#### **IV. Feedback, Agency and Unfinished Revolutions**

The key drivers of regional coevolution are the mutual feedbacks

between transnational social networks that allow all elements to influence one another more and more. As China promotes global connectivity and interdependence, it transforms every society it touches—and these developments inevitably combine to change China as well, regardless of its leaders' intentions. By serving as a catalyst for wide-ranging economic and social growth, China becomes embroiled in countless controversies it cannot control in places it barely understands. Increasingly complex foreign entanglements push China into activities it may not plan or desire—constantly mediating, monitoring, and renegotiating relationships with a host of public and private groups that are often competing for larger shares of wealth and power. No matter how much Beijing hopes that its initiatives will promote harmony and stability, they will also generate division and turbulence that endanger its interests abroad and its well-being at home.

The time lags between Chinese initiatives and foreign responses are contracting with astonishing speed. Moreover, reactions are increasingly skeptical and critical even in China itself. Just a few weeks after the launch of the New Silk Road programs, China's financial press opined that the globalization of interest groups and social movements was forcing Chinese companies to adopt more flexible labor practices and more stringent environmental controls in their overseas operations than they employed at home (Wang L., 2014). German experts noted that supplying foreign governments with specialized Internet technology was exposing China to widespread denunciations for allegedly abetting censorship, surveillance, and repression by authoritarian regimes (Heilmann et al., 2014). Brazilian scholars argued that emerging economies throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America should exploit China's "parallel global order" in

finance, technology, and diplomacy to win greater concessions from the Western-controlled institutions that still dominate the international system (Stuenkel, 2014a and 2014b). Journalists around the world began calling attention to some of China's other trans-regional megaprojects that pundits had previously discounted as impractical or indefinitely suspended—the Trans-African Railway connecting the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, the Nicaragua Canal between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and the Kra Canal across the isthmus of southern Thailand that is designed to bypass the dangerous maritime chokepoints around the Straits of Malacca (Lakhani, 2014; Sun, 2014; Wang B., 2014).

The common thread running through all of these cases is the recognition that China's expanding influence is empowering multiple groups in one region after another—emboldening them to act as independent and opportunistic agents who can benefit from Beijing's ambitions while thrusting greater demands on their own governments and on Western powers that can no longer assume a dominant position in world affairs. Whatever their intentions, Chinese leaders are subverting monopolies everywhere—stirring aspirations among common citizens that can threaten entrenched elites in all quarters, regardless of nationality and ideology.

This is a potentially revolutionary role that contradicts the conservative interests and stabilizing aspirations of China's ruling party-state. In reality, China's rise and global expansion are likely to energize multiple reformist voices pressing for a more egalitarian sharing of power and wealth in the international system, in the emerging megaregions, and—perhaps—in China as well. Today, the trope of ongoing and unfinished revolution is nearly universal. It flourishes among Neo-Liberals, Post-Communists, Islamic Modernists,

Anti-Imperialists, Pan-Asianists, and Non-Westerners of all shades and descriptions, including the highly awakened citizens of the Middle Kingdom—whose historical experience with revolution has probably been the most continuous and inconclusive of all.

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