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## Iran, China, and the Future World Order *Unipolarity or Multipolarity?*

Njdeh Asisian



**AIR UNIVERSITY**

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**Iran, China, and the Future World Order**  
***Unipolarity or Multipolarity?***

NJDEH ASISIAN

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George C. Kenney, Commander of Far East Air Forces from 15 June 1944  
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## **Foreword**

The Kenney Papers series from Air University Press, in collaboration with the Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers, provides a forum for topics related to the Indo-Pacific region, which covers everything from the western shores of the Americas to the eastern coast of Africa and from Antarctica to the Arctic. Named for General George Churchill Kenney, Allied air commander in the Southwest Pacific during World War II and subsequently commander of Strategic Air Command and then Air University, this series seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the region, the geopolitics and geoeconomics that shape the theater, and the roles played by the US military in providing for a free and open Indo-Pacific.



DR. ERNEST GUNASEKARA-ROCKWELL  
Consortium of Indo-Pacific Researchers  
Director

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## **About the Author**

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## **Abstract**

The twenty-first century has seen a series of geopolitical and strategic shifts around the world, including in the Indo-Pacific, presenting major challenges to national leaders and military planners. Tectonic movements following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, paired with technological advances, changed traditional ways of thinking about the global political system. Such readjustments and advancements broke old alliances and spurred new geopolitical and economic realities. In the past, the West faced two different security and economic problems: The first was the Soviet Union as a significant security problem, and the second was the feasibility of producing certain goods and services in the West. The US-Chinese alliance of the previous 40 years intended to address and perhaps even solve these problems. China, in fact, was an instrumental tool to contain the Soviet Union, and in the economic sphere China replaced the United States and other Western countries' workers with cheap labor and coveted products. Thus, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the rise of China as a new global competitor. At the same time, technological advancements changed the overall industrial production in favor of the Western alliance. China clearly understood that its honeymoon with the United States was ending. Western economies can now produce the same goods and services at a reasonable cost and may become significant competitors for Chinese economic outputs. Thus, one can analyze the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative as a strategic attempt to shift the Chinese economy's current orientation from the United States and the West to the rest of the Eurasian landmass. The Belt and Road Initiative has become strategic as China shops for new alliances that could undermine the overall US position in the Eurasian landmass (forming a new alliance to contain the US hegemonic power). This paper discusses the Chinese strategic thought process and how Iran becomes the chokepoint of this gigantic Chinese program, which eventually will determine the future of the balance of power and finalize the fate of a unipolar versus multipolar global system.

## Introduction

*I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.*

—Albert Einstein

Today some foresee a long-term engagement that may change the world, and the current situation is the best example where geopolitical competition for improvement of position and survival is on the way. We are not witnessing a global conflict, at least for the time being. Still, there is major strategic competition in the forecast in the Eurasian landmass, where the *triangle of global powers* (the United States, China, and Russia) plays a crucial role in determining the future of world order.

Even though these countries are the major players globally, Iran plays an equally important role, not because of its industrial or economic power but as a result of its geographic location. Without Iran, the battle for the Eurasian soul will become meaningless.

At the strategic level, Iran's geography could provide the United States with unrestricted access to Russia's southern underbelly (Central Asia and the southern Caucasus) and western China. Alternatively, Russian and Chinese interest in Iran has both economic and geostrategic importance. The Russo-Chinese economic interests are not very different than those of the United States—access to oil and a market of 80 million potential customers. However, at the geostrategic level, Iran offers both Russia and China a safety zone that allows them to breathe without the United States' overwhelming power looming over them. Iran, acting as a buffer zone, protects both those countries' regional interests.

This paper looks at the overall geopolitical picture of Chinese-Russian and Iranian activities from four dominant geopolitical perspectives in the twentieth century: the British, the German, the Russian, and the American. Understanding how they intended to create a parallel order to keep the United States in check is the Eurasian landmass's primary geopolitical concept. They are using the mixture of three different geopolitical theories simultaneously: Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland theory, Karl Haushofer's Eurasia and Monsoon countries theory, and Nicholas Spykman's theory of the Rimland. Mackinder represented the British Empire's interests. Haushofer specialized in asserting German imperial influence in Eurasia between 1920 and 1945. Spykman was a geostrategist who depicted US foreign policy in the post-World War II era. And finally we discuss Alexander Dugin, the famous Russian right-wing geopolitician who considers Eurasia to be Russia's Grossraum ("great space").<sup>1</sup>

This paper is intended to analyze Iranian geopolitics and its influence on the global balance of power. This influence does not stem from Iranian economic power or the country's ability to threaten any major power. Instead, Iranian power lies in its geography, where Russia, United States, and China compete for supremacy in the Eurasian landmass. In the end, this paper is not intended to provide ideological tools to favor one against the other. In contrast, it seeks to explain the situation on the ground. It offers some practical solutions to reduce future regional tensions, which eventually may catch one or more countries in Thucydides' Trap: when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, the most likely outcome is war.<sup>2</sup>

### **Literature Review**

Since the late 1970s, many scholars have analyzed US-Iranian relations from different perspectives, such as:

- The hostage crisis and Iranian inflexibility to deal with the West.
- The collapse of the Iraqi government and expanding Iranian influence in the Middle East.
- The Israeli-Iranian strategic competition in the Middle East.
- Unending Iranian and Israeli threats of mutual annihilation.
- The Iranian quest to possess a nuclear bomb in its arsenal.
- The Iranian demand to become a major player within the greater Middle East.

The classic analyses mentioned above, in one way or another, help us to better understand the Iranian position within the international political system. However, they also provide us different angles to US-Iranian relations. Still, they do not provide answers to the international global system's situation and its effects on the future global balance of power. Each scholar discusses a small part of the issue. At the same time, they confuse the real story behind Iran's nuclear activities, its missile program, and malign Iranian influence within the Middle Eastern geopolitical perspective.

Other analyses of US-Iranian relations help readers comprehend Iran's overall understanding by those earlier scholars. Simon and Stevenson elaborate how US policy toward Iran aims to not only contain Iran's power but also to disarm and force regime change, which Iran's government finds intolerable.<sup>3</sup>

And Mandelbaum suggests that the United States must exert maximum pressure on Iran, Russia, and China, in order to contain their interests and protect those of America.<sup>4</sup>

There is another element of the US-Iranian relations, in which the major European powers such as Germany are not in favor of the US posture toward Iran. Such powers would prefer critical dialogue built around trade and investment to America's attempts to isolate Iran diplomatically and strangle it economically.<sup>5</sup>

The West keeps busy addressing minor details without seeing the bigger picture. The major problem is *not* the Iranian nuclear issue. Many other countries have nuclear industries or bombs, and the West can maintain cordial relations with them and ensure those nuclear programs do not fall into the wrong hands. India and Pakistan are two examples. Western scholars have therefore missed Iran's position within the new world order. Its geopolitical situation, population quality, economics, and military capabilities make Iran a prime target globally. The future of the global system, whether unipolar or multipolar, will be determined in Iran. Therefore, to fill in the gaps in the scholarly work on Iran, this paper will analyze the Iranian crisis within the struggle between two world orders: the unipolar versus the multipolar system. Therefore, in this paper, Iran—whether viewed as a geographical location or as a political unit within the international Westphalian system—is an independent variable. The dependent variables are geographic areas such as the World Island (the joint continent of Europe, Asia, and Africa) and Eurasia.

### **Recent History of US-Iranian Relations**

Iran is caught between two different strategic competitions. The first is among the triangle of global powers and Iran, where Iranian geography plays an enormous role. The second is between Iran and the United States in the Middle East. Even though these strategic competitions are different, they are merging into a single problem. The US-Iranian strategic competition has a profound influence on the triangle of global powers' strategic competition, and there is only one major destination: Iran. Two seemingly separate conflicts are deeply connected.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, due to soured US-Iranian relations, the United States decided to use Turkey as a bridge to bring the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia closer to the West. The economy was the primary factor, in conjunction with the Caspian Basin and its natural resources. The other part was strategic. The United States tried to eliminate Iranian, Russian, and Chinese influence in the region and contain their ability to influence the global balance of power.

The geographical distances, lack of infrastructure, and unresolved historical issues in the Caucasus do not allow Turkey to create East–West access (i.e., Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Turkey) and pushes Russia, Iran, and China out of the heartland. The creation of East–West access was the final stage of

the glory of the “Seaman” (“a person whose trade or occupation is assisting in the handling, sailing, and navigating of a ship during a voyage”)<sup>6</sup> against the “Landman” (“a person who lives or works on land”).<sup>7</sup>

However, Turkey was not successful. The collapse of the Turkish attempt to build East–West access brought Iran back to the forefront as a pivotal state. Due to Iranian geography and easy access to the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, the assumption was that Iran could build North–South access very quickly. It is essential to highlight a historical precedent wherein Iran played a pivotal role globally. The occupation of Iran during World War II was an example where the United States and Great Britain were able to send much-needed assistance to the Soviet army through the Caucasus. However, the political environment was not ready for such a bold assumption.

The US-Iranian problem has two sources. The first is ideological, the second geopolitical. In the beginning, Iran’s ideological worldview (political Islam) and its anti-Americanism were significant obstacles to find common ground for collaboration. Later, the US-Iranian confrontation became more geopolitical, wherein both countries were competing for the same space (the Middle East). On one hand, there are differing US and Iranian regional interests. On the other, the Iranian quest to have the upper hand in the region, which directly undermined the US regional interests, made the situation more complicated than ever.

To ease the tension and find reasonable ground for collaboration and negotiation with Iran, on 17 March 2000 then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright gave a speech that was both admission of US guilt in deposing Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq as well as US involvement in the Iran-Iraq War. The speech ended with a total, complete apology, unprecedented in its nearness to capitulation.<sup>8</sup> However, Secretary Albright’s historical gesture did not have the expected effects on the Iranian side.

The Clinton administration’s reconciliatory gesture failed because Iran was expecting something more than an apology: Iranians were looking for formal US recognition of Iran’s interests in the Middle East. But the United States was unwilling to allow Iran to assume a dominant position in the region.

At the strategic level, the reason behind the US rejection of the Iranian proposal was straightforward: the West–East axis, which prevailed in the Yalta era of ideological confrontation, was replaced by the *center-periphery* model. From now on, the world revolved around the United States and Western Europe, and everyone else was peripheral.<sup>9</sup> In other words Iran, as a periphery state, was not in a position to request any recognition from the center.

The lack of US recognition of Iran’s regional interests triggered the current rivalry. The US rejection of the Iranian proposal forced Iran to gravitate toward the Sino-Russian regional alliance, a partnership that is presenting Iran with a

problem and an opportunity. The problem is that Iran is protecting Sino-Chinese interests as a buffer zone for free while suffering heavy economic and political losses. The opportunity is that Iran extends its influence in the Middle East with the tacit approval of Russia and China as a counterbalance to US regional interests and contains Sunni regimes' influence in the region.

From the United States' perspective, its strategic rivalry with Iran takes two different directions. The first is that the United States needs a friendly government in Tehran to penetrate the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia; Iran also contains the Russo-Chinese alliance in the Eurasian landmass. "The second direction is that American officials need to reaffirm U.S. credibility in the face of Iranian defiance of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East."<sup>10</sup>

One can conclude that the collision of Russo-Chinese interests with US interests in Iran makes the situation more complicated than ever. Consequently, the US-Iranian strategic competition is not separate from the triangle of global powers competition. The Iranian question cannot be addressed if we do not place Iran within the more significant international strategic rivalries.

I have contended that the US-Iranian strategic competition has covered more significant issues than uranium enrichment or the range of Iranian missiles. Iran's geography and unhindered access to the Eurasian heartland and China are the most critical aspects of the current global strategic rivalry, wherein the global power triangle is involved. Geographical access has given Iran extraordinary strategic leverage in the Eurasian landmass, where it can change the course of history. In other words, *the global power that has Iran as an ally has the heartland, and who has the heartland has the world.*

## **World Order, Strategic Rivalries, and Global Changes**

In one sense, the world order has defined Realists "as seeing international politics occurring among sovereign states balancing each other's power. The world order is the product of a stable distribution of power among the major states. Liberals . . . look at relations among peoples and states. They see the order from broad values like democracy and human rights and international law and institutions like the United Nations."<sup>11</sup> The modern challenges to the world order are beyond the traditional struggle of American Realists versus Liberals. Instead, the new players are not following the same pattern in ways we anticipated or like. We can see the reflection of contemporary strategic competition in the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States in 2017, which outlined three sets of challenges facing the United States and its allies: The revisionist powers China and Russia, rogue states Iran and North Korea, and transnational threat organizations.<sup>12</sup>

The NSS clarified the reasons why the United States should consider Russia and China as strategic competitors: China seeks to dominate the Indo-Pacific while Russia seeks to restore its great power status.<sup>13</sup> As for the Iranian case, the NSS stated that “the Iranian regime sponsors terrorism around the world. Iran is developing more capable ballistic missiles and has the potential to resume its work on nuclear weapons that could threaten the United States and our partners.”<sup>14</sup> The NSS has a specific message that the international political structure is in the process of changing and that the United States has severe competitors at the regional and global levels.

Based on the NSS, the United States is actively engaged in a strategic rivalry with Iran, Russia, and China. Such rivalry revolves around the zero-sum nature of power, influence, and resources. “[Further,] pairs of states regard each other as significant threats to goal attainment. There are two main types of dyadic situations at this end of the continuum. Dyads encompass either roughly comparable states or circumstances in which one of the rules is much more potent than the other.”<sup>15</sup>

The strategic rivalry is intensified by the weakening international system and dominant power. Among the intense conflict zones around the world, perhaps the most intense is where Iran and the United States face off against one another in the Middle East. There is a dyad. One direction is between equal powers (US-Russia and China), and the other is between unequal forces when one is more potent than the other. In the US-Iranian strategic competition, the United States is powerful, Iran less so. Two different events signal the end of a hegemonic era and a return to power politics: (1) the appearance of the new powers that want to ensure their interest within the international system, and (2) the fact hegemonic power is not able to maintain hegemonic stability. (It is essential to mention that some scholars attribute hegemonic stability to nuclear power parity, while others credit stability to the distribution of power among states.<sup>16</sup>)

I use “hegemonic stability” in the context of a power capable of maintaining relative peace by containing challenging forces on the scene that the system of hegemonic stability has weakened. We are facing the fact that there are strategic rivalries erupting all over the world. Some powers are trying to challenge US hegemonic power, such as China, Russia, Iran, and Turkey and to some extent Brazil and India.

Haass has described this era as a “trend towards disorder that has been a function of structural changes in the international system.” Further, he described diffusion of capacity that presents challenges such as “the actual and potential spread of nuclear weapons and long-range delivery systems, terrorism, a spike in the numbers of refugees and displaced persons, a chaotic Mid-



dle East, a Europe under siege, a precariously balanced Asia-Pacific, mostly ungoverned cyberspace, an inadequate response to climate change, a growing rejection of free trade and immigration, and the potential pandemic that could cost many millions of lives.”<sup>17</sup>

Ian Bremmer has called this era one of “Geopolitical Creative Destruction.”<sup>18</sup> *Creative destruction* is an economic theory introduced by the famous Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter. He contended that the

opening up of new markets, foreign or domestic, and the organizational development from the craft shop and factory to such concerns as U.S. Steel illustrate the same process of industrial mutation. . . that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, destroying the old one, and creating a new one.<sup>19</sup>

Both Haas and Bremmer are conveying the same message. Haas talked about the “difficulties of protecting the unipolar system if the United States cannot impose order. . . . [N]o country can contend with global challenges on its own given the very nature of these challenges.”<sup>20</sup> Haas describes the world based on the assumption that the United States will assume the CEO position in close relations with other powers to maintain global law and order while US power goes unchallenged. However, it seems Haas was not concerned about the future institutions of the new order. For his part, Bremmer accepted the idea of a unipolar world while paying closer attention to forming the new order’s institutions.

Many people may ask themselves why the US global (unipolar) position has weakened. There are many explanations why we are witnessing the gradual deterioration of the old order: Japan’s economic malaise and crises in Europe including the 2016 Brexit vote; each complicated by the 2008 economic collapse that limited US financial power.<sup>21</sup> The question is, what type of world do we intend to build? There are at least two options on the horizon: unipolar versus multipolar global systems. The United States, as the only superpower, is trying to preserve the world order in a manner wherein the United States maintains economic and military hegemony at the global level (unilateral system). However, other forces favor the multipolar system, which allows them to have an equal footing within the international system (multiple centers). For instance, the National Intelligence Council, a US government think tank, projects that “by 2025, China and India will have the world’s second- and fourth-largest economies, respectively. . . . [U]nless rising powers such as China and India are incorporated into this framework, these international regimes’ future will be uncomfortably uncertain.”<sup>22</sup>

It is crucial to understand Drezner correctly. He sounded alarmed in 2007 regarding incorporating China and India in US-led international organizations as the only way to preserve the status quo and US global superiority. In 2021,

China is not fully incorporated within those US-led international organizations. In contrast, China is taking entirely different routes by collaborating with Russia on economic, military, or security issues. India is indecisive at best, which eventually will damage the US position as the sole superpower sooner or later.

It is essential to mention that China has agendas as a rising superpower. India's economy is performing better, but India is not yet the next rival. Both countries have large merchant navies and ocean access, but at the same time they face severe strategic competition on the seas. Both countries' naval power is not enough to protect them in the long run. Consequently, they have to solve two different problems. First, they have to increase naval power, which is not an easy task, and it will take decades to prepare adequate naval forces. Second, the United States Navy can potentially limit both countries' economic growth by blocking merchant ships or their navies' access to the sea.

The question does not end at China or India's unwillingness to be part of US-led international organizations: the United States cannot ignore Iran and its future within the global system. Iran plays a crucial role in providing access to Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and vice versa. Consequently, the future of a unipolar versus multipolar global system will be determined in Iran. The battle is not about capital or resources; the primary struggle is land access to important population centers in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. This land access provides for the free flow of capital and resources into China, Russia, and India.

In the Middle East, perhaps one of the most organized countries with some power capabilities is Iran (after Israel). US-Iranian relations have experienced many ups and downs and are mainly based on the center versus periphery problem. However, we see a new reality that has changed the nature of the US-Iranian relations for the foreseeable future. The rise of Iranian power has challenged the US position in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, and therefore both sides have been locked in the strategic rivalry. This rivalry has two aspects: (1) the Iranian geopolitical posture creates a new world order, and (2) growing Iranian power may undermine the interests of the United States and its regional allies.

To understand the root of this struggle, we have to consider local and world-wide events that changed Middle East history. At the regional level, we must understand the consequences of the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf Wars, and the Iraqi regime's collapse in the overall regional balance of power. On the global level, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a significant game-changer in the region. The absence of the Soviet Union as a competing superpower allowed the United States to fill the power vacuum and created a new regional order. However, the United States' regional foreign policy slights the Caucasus and Central Asia, while Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey have significant influence in the region.

## **Iran Versus the Russo-Chinese Alliance and Creation of a New World Order**

The Russo-Chinese alliance on the Eurasian landmass is key to the analysis. Diminishing Russian power and rising Chinese power have one issue in common: how they deal with US power while “the United States’ immediate task is to ensure that no state or combination of states gains the ability to expel the United States or even diminish its decisive role [in Eurasia].”<sup>23</sup>

China and Russia are relentlessly preparing the ground for a multipolar international system. They create security, economic, and military organizations, and they are developing financial institutions independent of the global monetary system, where the United States has total control. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is the best example of this, in which India and Pakistan have been granted full membership.<sup>24</sup> In addition: In October 2007, the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the SCO signed a Memorandum of Understanding, setting up future military cooperation between the two organizations. This agreement involves creating a full-fledged military alliance between China, Russia, and the SCO/CSTO member states.<sup>25</sup>

The integration of Iran into the Russo-Chinese military and economic infrastructure will multiply the Eurasian project’s importance. Iran is a bridge that brings together North/South/East and West by offering accessible ports to Eurasian countries. At the same time, Iran has an effective transportation system that will connect crucial Eurasian population centers to the rest of the Middle East and Africa.

The other advantage of the Iranian geopolitical location is that Iran has unhindered access to the heartland (Central Asia and the Caucasus) and eventually to Russia either by land or by the Caspian Sea. Also, Iran has access to China through the Central Asian railroad and open access to India by the Sea of Oman and the Indian Ocean. Iran can close the Eurasian ring to make it impenetrable by the Seaman, but the opposite is also true; its alliance with the Seaman will disorient the Eurasian powers. In addition to its role in the future orientation of the Eurasian landmass, Iran may become a fulcrum to incorporate Middle Eastern countries as an Islamic bloc within the new world order. This bloc may consist of Levant countries such as Syria and Iraq and, to some extent, Lebanon.

The creation of a Middle East under Iranian leadership will guarantee a multipolar system and make Iran a significant player within the international system. China and Russia do not object to Iranian influence in the Middle East. Indeed, they can rely on Iran to oppose American hegemony.<sup>26</sup> At the regional

level, all Sunni countries in the Middle East consider Iran to be a dangerous threat to their very existence. They know what Iran's rise means and how the balance has shifted against them. It is why Saudi Arabia has ceded ground on the issue of Israel.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the region has effectively been divided on religious lines: Sunni/Shia or Persian/Arab. We are witnessing a new form of alliance that no one could imagine a few years ago in which Sunni countries are trying to form an anti-Iran partnership with Israel and the United States.

The Iranian side also has regional allies and nonstate players capable of containing a Sunni alliance. They are carefully trying to avoid confrontation with Israel and the United States for the time being. It is naive to believe that Iran does not have significant power support from Russia or China. The Russian interference in Syria was the natural fruit of the Iranian efforts.

Russia is aware of Iranian strategic importance. Iran as a part of the Eurasian heartland can play a vital role in preserving Eurasian integrity, or it can play a spoiler role and lead the West to disintegrate Eurasian land continuity. Iran is also a buffer zone between Russia and the West, protecting Russia's southern underbelly in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Iran contains Sunni countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Turkey, preventing their ability to exercise influence in the northern Caucasus, Tatarstan, and Bashkirstan (Volga), where most of the populations are Sunni Muslims.



Source: State. Office of the Geographer. Administrative divisions of Russia. [Washington, D.C.: State INR/GE, 1993] Map, <https://www.loc.gov>.

**Figure 1. Possible zone of conflict in Central Russia–Volga Basin.**

Alexander Dugin described an important phenomenon where the “Neo-Eurasianism”<sup>28</sup> is extending its influence in the Middle East. It recognized

Iran as a significant geopolitical powerhouse within the Eurasian balance of power and was willing to incorporate Iran within the Eurasian economic and military infrastructure that Russia and China built in the last three decades.

A simple question arises here: Can China and Russia offer a solution to past efforts? Creating parallel institutions can help renegotiate terms with the United States and balance US power. Creating an environment that allows Eurasian trade and business to become less dependent on US power is another potential benefit. To do so, Russia built the Eurasian Economic Union. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides opportunities to create a market in which the United States will have less influence.

To understand China and Russia's grand strategy, it is essential to explain these theories concerning the BRI and its far-reaching consequences. It is necessary to mention that the Russian element is not independent from the Chinese quest for global hegemony. Both Russia and China are part of the same power bloc, and their main priority is to keep Seaman out of the Eurasian landmass, World Island, and monsoon area (the Rimland).

## **Geopolitics: Mackinder and the Russo-Chinese Alliance in the Eurasian Landmass**

Mackinder is among the best-known political geographers. His theories were in the forefront of the British political elite's imperial ambitions during the twentieth century.

### **The World Island**

Mackinder discussed three different elements of geopolitics: "[The] World Island, the Heartland, and the South Heartland," which have become part of the overall Russo-Chinese geopolitical moves in the dawn of the twenty-first century. The World Island is the joint continent of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and is now effectively, and not merely theoretically, an island.<sup>29</sup>

He described the connection between "three parts of the World Island by the natural links."<sup>30</sup> Besides the natural links between the three major continents of World Island, one may add Suez Channel and the old Ottoman railroad system that connects Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. The Iranian railroad system connects to Turkey's railroads from the west and from the north to the Republic of Azerbaijan and to the Iraqi and Armenian railroads.

Further, Turkey's railroad also connects to Georgian and Armenian railroads. It is essential to mention that the Southern Caucasus railroad system was

part of the old Soviet railroad. The Russian railroad is linked to the Caucasus by Georgia and Azerbaijan. In the current struggle for creating a new world order, the World Island concept has become more and more critical. At the same time, we witnessed the global competition in all three continents; Iran will serve as a link that produces significant strategic and economic power.

### **The Heartlands**

Mackinder has designed two different Heartlands. The Northern Heartland includes the Baltic Sea, the navigable Middle, Lower Danube, the Black Sea, Asia Minor, Armenia, Persia, Tibet, and Mongolia.<sup>31</sup> According to Mackinder, this region played a pivotal role in human history. At the same time, due to its human development, population, and natural resources, the region can dominate the World Island.

The domination of the World Island by the Landman would be the beginning of the end for the Seaman's world domination. In Mackinder's opinion, Eastern Europe played an essential role in determining the future of global dominance. During the Cold War, however, we witnessed how Soviet domination of Eastern Europe did not bring the inevitable collapse of the Seaman's dominance on the world stage. In contrast, in the post-Cold War era, we witnessed a trend wherein the domination of Eastern Europe by the Seaman has created serious security, military, and economic problems for the Heartland and its periphery.

In other words, Eastern European countries' inclusion into Seaman-dominated institutions such as NATO and the European Union had detrimental effects on the Heartland's capability to generate power on either the global or regional levels.

### **The Southern Heartland: Sub-Saharan Africa**

In the early twentieth century, the Southern Heartland, or the sub-Saharan African continent, which was formally part of the World Island, was under the Seaman's total domination. The Eurasian Landman did not have any influence in the region. However, during the postcolonial era, as African countries gained independence, the new political elite of Africa searched for an alternative to European imperial powers (i.e., Seaman domination). They found two options: the Soviet Union (Eurasian) and China (Monsoon/Rimland).

The Soviet Union actively pursued an ideological war against the West and armed African countries and groups against the continent's European domination if they adhered to Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism. The Western powers did not tolerate the Soviet Union's presence. We witnessed significant con-

flicts with roots in the global competition between the West and Eastern access points such as Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia.

In the case of China, the situation was different. First, at the global level, China had become part of the Western alliance against the Soviet Union. Based on political and economic considerations, the Western powers allowed China to expand its influence and commercial activities in the African continent. Second, at the regional level, China portrayed itself as a less problematic alternative to the Soviet Union.

In other words, China's involvement in African countries was based on building infrastructure and economics, and it did not propagate the ideological aspect of Chinese-style communism. One can conclude that China's expansion in the Southern Heartland took place under the Western powers' watchful eyes.

### **The Rise of German Geopolitics from the Opposite Side of Earth**

Part of the current China's Eurasian geopolitics echoes the German geopolitician Karl Haushofer's idea regarding the Eurasian alliance and the Asiatic Monsoon countries' importance in the sealing of Eurasia from Anglo-American invasion. Haushofer, who was the leading figure in German geopolitics, contended that "geopolitics formulates the scientific foundation of the art of political transactions in the struggle for political existence living forms on the living space of the earth."<sup>32</sup>

Haushofer also contrasted Germany's "Middle European" geography against the "Atlantic and the Pacific" as a major impediment to political growth. Of course, the anxiety over the former's landlocked geography as unfavorable to global commerce is a recurring motif in modern German political thought. But Haushofer's ambition was to offer a novel theory toward this historical concern, a new answer to an old question. In this sense, he constructed the "Indo-Pacific" theory in search of a place for landlocked Germany in the maritime space between states. Yet Haushofer's 'Indo-Pacific' theory went beyond the Weimar political agenda to call for a global anticolonial vision."<sup>33</sup>

Haushofer wanted to bring Eurasia under the German imperial order. That way, Germany would keep the sea powers out of the continental power struggle by waging a limited war against Great Britain and imposing a peace treaty that would fulfill the German plan to gain recognition as the master of the Eurasian landmass. According to Hagan: "In some manner, Germany, Russia, and Japan (occasionally China is included) would unite in the great overland area between the Rhine and the Amur and Yangtse."<sup>34</sup>



Source: Nicholas Spykman *Geography of Peace*, ed. Hellen P. Nicholl, First Edition (New York: Harcourt & Brace Co., 1944), 51. (Public Domain)

**Figure 2. The World According to Haushofer, from *Geography of Peace* by Nicholas Spykman.**

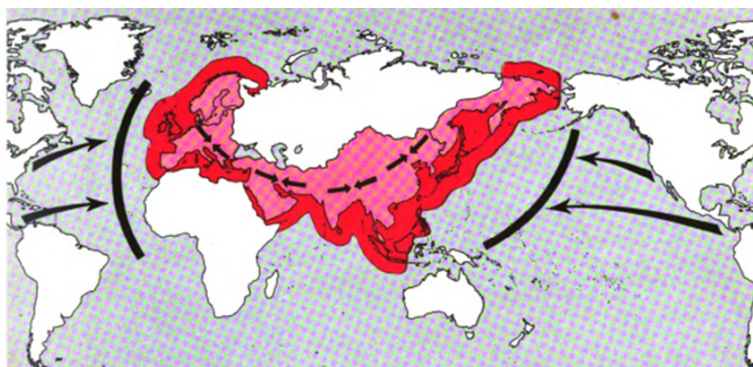
Haushofer gave special attention to the Monsoon countries. Those countries, “containing the two highest concentrations of humanity ever witnessed in the history of the world,” wrote Haushofer, “are beginning to stir and to rise.”<sup>35</sup> Also, in 1924, he wrote his most crucial geopolitical work, *The Geopolitics of the Pacific Ocean*. As Sampa described it, “In that book . . . Haushofer urged German leaders to align their country to the Indo-Pacific peoples of India, China, and Japan.”<sup>36</sup> Sampa further stated: “Haushofer hoped for a large transcontinental Eurasiatic bloc to fight Britain and the United States’ sea powers. Japan led the Asian sphere and Germany led the European area, and both forces collaborated with Russia.”<sup>37</sup>

Haushofer’s concept of Eurasia was designed to unify the Eurasian landmass under the German Imperial order. Under Haushofer, Berlin would have become the central power. China’s geopolitics follow the same logic, but from Beijing. In reality, what the Chinese are trying to convey is very much the same as what the Germans were doing in the 1940s. They were looking to unify the Eurasian landmass under one political and economic leadership, and China did not forget to incorporate Monsoon countries in its geopolitical calculations. A strikingly different approach exists between the German and the Chinese strategy. Germany searched for military glory and power, whereas China did not use military might to establish dominance. China is trying to improve communications infrastructure in the region and incorporate Eurasia into Chinese industrial and commercial centers.



### The Rimland and Chinese Geopolitics

The concept of the Rimland and Haushofer's Monsoon area overlap. However, Spykman's Rimland covered a larger geography than Japan, China, and India.<sup>38</sup>



Source: Nicholas Spykman *Geography of Peace*, ed. Hellen P. Nicholl, First Edition (New York: Harcourt & Brace Co., 1944), 52.

**Figure 3. Rimland vs. Heartland of Eurasia, from *Geography of Peace* by Nicholas Spykman.**

Spykman, who described the physical and security issues of the Rimland, treated it as a separate entity. Later, he placed the Rimland within the context of the global quest for power and strategic competition among the major global powers. He considered the Rimland to be a geopolitical entity that can balance the world order in favor of the Seaman. He maintained that whoever “controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; [whoever] rules Eurasia controls the world’s destinies.”<sup>39</sup> In other words, according to Fox, “If any power were to dominate the whole of the Old World, it would soon be in a position to dominate the New World. Therefore, the United States can provide no security in perfecting inter-American defense arrangements so long as there is any prospect that an Old-World aggressor might become the undisputed master of Europe and Asia.”<sup>40</sup>

### China’s Role in this Equation: The BRI and the Future of Eurasian Geopolitics

To understand the nature of the current strategic rivalries and the Iranian role in this new global competition, one should remember that the dramatic change in the center of gravity, from Europe to the Pacific, has made it possible to see Iran as a strategic asset to any power vying in the global competition. Haushofer, according to Weigert, predicted China’s rise and the rest of the Pacific as follows:

“A giant space is expanding before our eyes, he wrote, with forces pouring into it which, in the cool matter-of-facts, await the dawn of the Pacific age, the successor to the aging Atlantic, the over-age Mediterranean, and the European era.”<sup>41</sup>

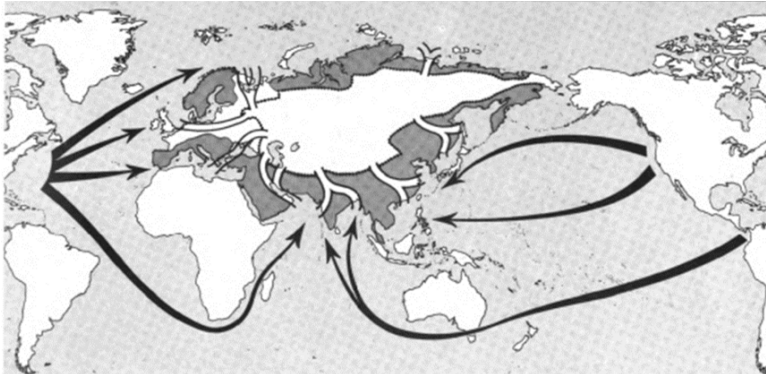
Haushofer’s prediction was correct; however, we have to understand how we reached this point. First, the British imperial dominance of the world and the North Atlantic’s strategic importance are critical. Second is the gradual diminishing of European world dominance and the reduction of the North Atlantic’s significance. Third is the dominance of the Pacific as an economic powerhouse on the global level.

Sir Eyre Crowe, as reported by Nicolson, described the North Atlantic’s geopolitical importance for the British Empire’s existence, and he mentioned the incontestable premise that British policy is determined by geography.<sup>42</sup> In the early 1980s, transpacific trade equaled transatlantic trade. The North Atlantic was no longer the single key to anything.<sup>43</sup> In the Cold War the redistribution of power had measurably shifted to the opposite end of Eurasia, where the spaces between the population’s principal nodes were maritime.<sup>44</sup> The other explanation for the distribution of power traces to two sources, according to Kupchan: “The secular diffusion over time and space of productive capabilities and material resources, and balancing these against the concentration of power motivated by fear of exploitation.”<sup>45</sup>

George Friedman opened the mystery of the current strategic rivalry when he was attending the Foreign and Security Conference Budapest 2018 at the Danube Institute. Friedman highlights a few different US foreign policy elements, which are crucial to understand the reasons behind the current stand-off. Indeed, what he described was not directly affecting Iran; in reality, Iran is the centerpiece of this new struggle.

Friedman described the US foreign policy as relentless, ruthless, and having continuity. He stated that North America is an island, and the United States maintains absolute control over that island’s territorial waters. Friedman also stressed that the United States cannot allow any one power to consolidate both the European peninsula and Russian Mainland.<sup>46</sup>

The first part of the US strategy is to control the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and maintain a significant presence on both sides of the North American continental island. The second part is more critical, and he clarified the US position toward the Eurasian landmass. US foreign policy still follows Spykman’s theory that the rise of any significant Eurasian power will undermine the Western Hemisphere’s security, especially that of the United States.



Source: Nicholas Spykman *Geography of Peace*, ed. Hellen P. Nicholl, First Edition (New York: Harcourt & Brace Co., 1944), 50.

**Figure 4. The Gates of the Heartland, from *Geography of Peace* by Nicholas Spykman.**

From this perspective, one can understand US foreign policy's directions. Perhaps one of the essential issues is how to manage China's rise as a super-power that may unify not only the Eurasian landmass but also the World Island. This would bring together the natural resources and finances that Friedman was concerned about. In other words, China may become twice as dangerous to US national interest that anyone can imagine.<sup>47</sup>

Despite Friedman's concern about China's activities, Yadav makes an important contribution: "Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the more significant Pacific are increasing exponentially as a blue water navy is seemingly a prerequisite for Chinese ambitions."<sup>48</sup> The rise of Chinese naval power forced the formation of a new regional alliance capable of deterring China's growing maritime power. Friedman described the force structure that would allow the United States to stop the Chinese expansion on the sea and reported that the United States is attempting to build an alliance between Japan, Australia, India, and itself to oppose the Chinese navy.<sup>49</sup>

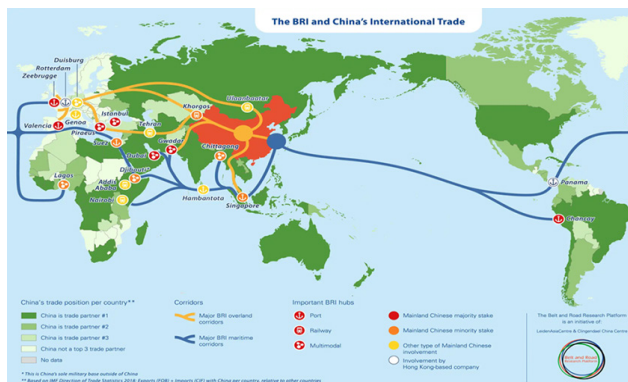
Based on Friedman's analysis of the situation and the alliance that the United States intended to create, it became clear that, regardless of how much money China spends on naval forces, its chance to expand in the South China Sea, the Pacific Ocean, and the Indian Ocean is minimal. The quadrilateral alliance may deny Chinese access to strategic areas, and India may seriously consider joining the coalition.

Another explanation for Chinese naval expansion is directly linked to the BRI, where China is protecting the sea lanes that provide access to Africa. Despite Chinese maritime progress, the Chinese navy is not comparable to

the United States, Japan, or Australian blue-water navies; therefore, going head-to-head on the sea is not a wise move from the Chinese perspective.

It is essential to mention that the Chinese political culture is different from ours. The Chinese are designing policies not for five or ten years but for decades and centuries. China is not in a hurry to become number one or rush into a confrontation with the United States and establish its hegemonic power like previous competitors did and lost. In contrast, the Chinese approach is long-term and very slow and deliberative.

It is vital to understand that the Chinese accept that the global structure is dominated by the United States, and that US dominance is likely to continue for decades more. Still, the Chinese see their country as rising to meet the United States.<sup>50</sup> To support its ascension, China has established a web of relationships with other states, while avoiding undue conflict with the United States.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, China has decided to expand where US forces will have minimal impact. The best options are the Eurasian heartland and the World Island. In the Eurasian landmass, countries such as Russia, Iran, India, and Pakistan play a crucial role in Chinese strategic thought.



Source: Netherland Institute of International Relations, <https://www.clingendael.org>. Copyright Netherland Institute of International Relations. (Open Source)

**Figure 5. The current BRI map.**

China's Belt and Road Initiative is the economic strategy to assert its hegemony over an extended period. As mentioned earlier, the Chinese strategists have learned and understand Mackinder, Spykman, and Haushofer. The concept of the BRI is a mixture of all those theories together.

The Chinese economic model that will unify Eurasian heartland, the Monsoon area, the World Island, and the Rimland follows separate directions. To understand the concept, we have to realize that "China divided the BRI into

two different structures first, the Silk Road Economic Belt, and the second, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.”<sup>52</sup> According to the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, “The first focuses on linking China to Europe through Central Asia and Russia connecting China with the Middle East through Central Asia and bringing together China and Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. The second focuses on using Chinese coastal ports to link China with Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean and connect China with the South Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea.”<sup>53</sup>

The Chinese strategists have clearly understood that having the Heartland is not enough to keep the Seaman out of Eurasia. They witnessed the Soviet experience and how the Soviets possessed most of Eurasia and Eastern Europe. However, the USSR still could not contain the Seaman’s access to the World Island and Rimland and therefore suffered a total, humiliating defeat on all fronts.

Having this experience, the Chinese understood the importance of the Rimland as a vital factor in their geopolitical calculations. They considered Rimland as a security zone or a buffer zone between the Landman of Eurasia and the Seaman. Consequently, to keep the Seaman on the sea without ports in the Rimland, they considered incorporating Spykman’s Rimland into Heartland geopolitics. Providing the Rimland with economic investment and building new infrastructure (i.e., the BRI) into the Eurasian landmass and the World Island will turn the business, innovation, and political development inward. Further, the improvement of railroad connectivity between different parts will also affect maritime trade one way or another. It will reduce the Seaman’s naval power to the extent that it may become irrelevant and incapable of generating a capacity to meet the moment.

The BRI is part of a more significant project that aims to institutionalize the multipolar world order. The main problem of the BRI is geographical connectivity that allows the Chinese project to move forward. This terrestrial connection of the Monsoon, Rimland, and World Island is Iran. Iran can link different parts of the BRI and strengthen the Chinese-Russian alliance beyond anyone’s imagination and finalize the multipolar system.

### **China’s First Steps Toward Formation of a Closed EURASIAN Circuit**

China’s first attempt to expand its influence and lock the gates of Eurasia to Seaman incursion has already occurred via the 2021 Iran–China 25-Year Cooperation Program/Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the People’s Republic of China. In the aftermath of this deal, it is important to question how China and Iran will expand their

cooperation and how they will influence the international system. The devil is in details, and we have very few.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry published a 14-page memorandum that discussed the crucial elements of the Sino-Iranian treaty, which was the same document revealed by the *New York Times* a year earlier. Analyzing each component of this treaty would be complicated and beyond the scope of this paper, but the draft detailed \$400 billion in Chinese investments across dozens of fields. In return China would receive a heavily discounted supply of Iranian oil.<sup>54</sup> The agreement also called for deepening military cooperation, including joint training and exercises, weapons development, and intelligence-sharing.<sup>55</sup>

In the “Fundamental Purposes” section, we see elements of cooperation. One has extraordinary importance from a strategic point of view, because it directly connects to the BRI: upgrading Iranian lines of communication to activate the southern part of the Eurasian communications networks, resulting in an even more regionally dominant Iran.<sup>56</sup> The second annex of the document discussed the Iranian and Chinese interests in implementing the BRI: to connect the region through shared interests and foster active participation in China’s BRI through Iran.<sup>57</sup>



Source: Siemens Signs Iranian Railway Memorandum of Understanding, <https://www.railwaygazette.com>. Permitted for nonprofit and educational purposes.

**Figure 6. Iranian railroad and road network.**

Iran’s ambition to connect regional railroads to its railroad network is not new. The Iranian News Agency (IRNA) has mentioned that Iran is interested in linking to the Iraqi railroad system. IRNA reported that the “short-term plan envisages a 60 km-long railroad between the cities of Khorramshahr in Iran and the southern Iraqi port of Basra. Another long-term project calls for

a railroad to be constructed from the western Iranian city of Kermanshah to the Iraqi province of Diyala.”<sup>58</sup> This railroad network allows China to have direct access to the regional countries while connecting the Caucasus, Russia, Turkey, Middle East, and Africa to the Chinese economy. There is another part to this rail net, which Iranians call the “Pilgrimage Railway Corridor,” which connects Pakistan’s railway network to the Iranian and consequently to Iraqi and Syrian railways.



Source: Islamic Republic of Iran Railways, <https://en.wikipedia.org>. Permitted for nonprofit and educational purposes.

**Figure 7. Pilgrimage railway corridor: Pakistan–Afghanistan–Iran–Iraq–Syria (aka Shia shrines pilgrimage).**

Theoretically, this railway would transfer Iranian and Pakistani Shia pilgrims to Karbala and Najaf in Iraq and to Shia holy shrines in Syria. This project will trigger religious nationalism or Shia internationalism in a way Shias create infrastructure that brings them closer together economically and politically. The other element of this project is purely geopolitical. A Pakistan connection creates a new geopolitical and geoeconomic environment from the Chinese perspective.<sup>59</sup> China will gain railroad access to Iran from two directions, either by the Central Asia railroad to Iran or through the Karakoram Railway.

Connecting the China, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria railroad systems will eventually bring the Lebanese and Jordanian railroad networks together. Consequently, China will reach the eastern Mediterranean Sea and the Suez Channel and become one of the leading players in Middle Eastern politics. Further, the eventual inclusion of Syria and Lebanon in the BRI project will allow China to access those countries and the port complex at Beirut, one of the most critical hubs for maritime transportation in the eastern Mediterranean.

The other part of the joint railroad project is the “completion of the East-West railway in Iran.”<sup>60</sup> The East–West railway is the missing link in the Iranian railroad system. It will connect the western and eastern parts of Iran and incorporate western Afghanistan into the network. In other words, the southern part of Eurasia will connect by roads and railroads. Iran is the key link to connect all those separate entities.

The other part of the agreement is discussing the possibility of producing electricity for neighboring countries, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Plans are for joint programs on the development of resources and energy, funded by the Silk Road Fund and other investments.<sup>61</sup> This regional cooperation model that Iran and China are implementing will allow China to enter into separate conversations with Syria and Iraq to join the BRI.

The Iran railroads and highways are one part of the southern Eurasian transportation system; another component of the BRI is equally important. Iranian ports provide strategic assets for China, Central Asian countries, Southern Caucasus, and Afghanistan, including access to the sea. Further, Iranian ports provide China easy access to East African ports. There are different reasons why these countries will become increasingly dependent on Iranian ports. Afghanistan is a landlocked country; it does not have cordial relations with Pakistan, and the only option is to use Iranian ports for imports and exports. Central Asian countries are in the same dilemma but have two practical options: Iranian ports, or Russian ports on the Black Sea. The Central Asian countries’ struggle is to create a balance of power between Russia and Iran.

Overdependence on Russia or Iran will have severe consequences. Therefore, it is essential to keep a delicate balance of power between Russia and Iran and keep options open. Perhaps the Chinese case is more delicate and vital than the rest. The possible closing of the South China Sea to Chinese merchant ships would force China to use the central Asian and Iranian railroad systems to reach Iranian ports and thence East African ports. Such access would allow China to use Iranian and Central Asian railroads for African exports if there is any problem in the Indian or Pacific Oceans.

The other part of the Sino-Iranian relationship worth mentioning is the wide range of military education and intelligence-sharing operations that may impact the regional balance of power. The Iranians will use Chinese expertise to improve the Iranian armed forces’ capabilities in the short term. In the mid-term, the Iranians will mix the Chinese military education with operational capabilities, allowing Iranian armed forces to evolve sophisticated operations. Perhaps the end state is to organize a defense force capable of facing a Western incursion and holding the line independently. In other words, the Chinese are training an army that would protect the gates of Eur-



asia. The improvement of the Iranian army will deny the possibility of a larger war between three global competitors.

### **Iran's Geopolitics and the New World Order**

One can assume that the BRI can successfully be implemented if Iran favors the basic premise of the project. The reason is straightforward: Iran has economic and strategic importance. The economic part of the equation is connected to energy production. As I have stated before, the connection between the two geopolitical and energy centers of the world, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea, holds sizeable strategic importance. The competition to manage the links between these two centers will lay the core of the future emerging global order as it evolves.<sup>62</sup>

The equation's strategic part is connected to geographical location and Iran's power to influence its surroundings. In reality, the battle for Iran is the battle for the Eurasian soul. Unhindered Iranian access to the Eurasian Heartland, the Caspian Sea, and Southern Caucasus creates a unique strategic opportunity for Iran to assume a more prominent role in the international political system. The future Iranian role in the global system depends on the types of policies implemented by the Iranian government.



Source: United States Central Intelligence Agency, The Caucasus and Central Asia [Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2000] Map, <https://www.loc.gov>.

**Figure 8. Iranian access to the Heartland by the Caucasus and Central Asia.**

The question of who gets access to those vital areas of Eurasia is a matter of great concern. Either Russia or China can protect their own interest in that part of the world—or the West can. If the United States transforms Iran into the Western infrastructure, both will assume a more significant role in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus.

Each of these scenarios can have severe impacts on the formation of the world order. The first scenario is based on the assumption that Russia and China will defend their self-interests in Eurasia. For China and Russia to do so, they desperately need Iran to stay the course that it has implemented since the revolution: as hostile to the US interest, and as a buffer zone to deny US incursion into the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The other equally important issue is that the Iranian railroad will play the same role that the Trans-Siberian Railroad is currently playing to connect China to Europe. One can consider the Trans-Siberian Railroad as a northern Eurasian connection and the Iranian railroad as a southern Eurasian connection.

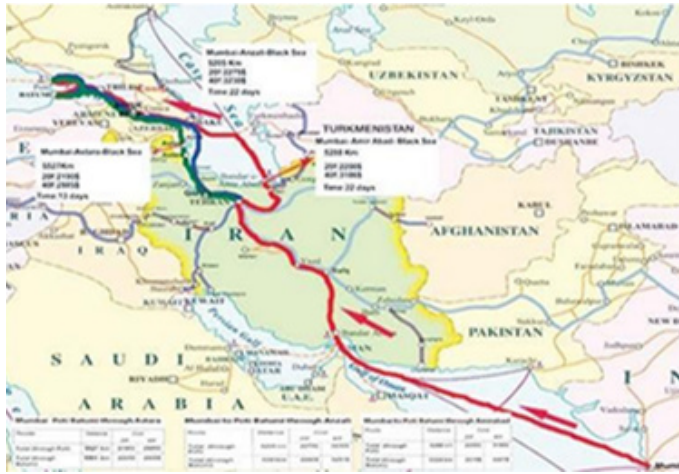
To understand the importance of this line of communication for Russian and Chinese strategic interests, one should remember that Iran is a link that connects all Middle Eastern railroads and communication lines to the Caucasus and Central Asia. It will eventually extend to Russia, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and by the sea to India and the South China Sea. In the longer run, Iran may be able to connect Southern Heartland lines of communication to Eurasia by its ports or by roads that connect Egypt to Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

These include:

The *North-South Corridor (Western Caspian Sea)*: “This corridor is 9389 KM (Finland to New Delhi). It starts from Helsinki and it passes Russia, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Iran. It continues to the South of the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean area, and South East Asia countries. The railroad is ready except for 372 KM that connects Qazvin-Rasht and Astara in Iran under construction.”<sup>63</sup>

The *East-West Corridor (Eurasia)*: “This corridor is carrying transit transportation between Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. There are three different directions for this corridor:

1. China-Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)-Iran, Iraq, and Syria and through the Mediterranean Sea to Greece and the rest of Europe. The other option is that the railroad will extend through Iran to Turkey.
2. China-Myanmar-Bangladesh-India-Pakistan-Iran-Iraq-Syria and Europe.
3. China-Kazakhstan-Kirgizstan-Tajikistan, Afghanistan-Iran-Turkey-Europe.”<sup>64</sup>



Source: Mumbai-Mediterranean Rail and Sea Corridor Agreed, <https://www.railwaygazette.com>. Permitted for nonprofit and educational purposes.

**Figure 9. Mumbai-Mediterranean rail and sea corridor.**

The *North-South Corridor (Eastern Caspian Sea)*: Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran (926km long): “Like the North-South Corridor in the Western Caspian Sea, this 926-kilometer-long corridor connects the Persian Gulf area, South-East Asian countries and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This corridor was open for use on December 3rd of 2014.”<sup>65</sup>

There is also a *new corridor*: “The new Corridor that will connect China-Kirgizstan-Tajikistan, Afghanistan-Iran and has 7984 KM length. This railroad links China and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to Iran, and Europe. This new link is in the process of construction in different sections.”<sup>66</sup>

## **Geopolitical Conflicts and Available Options**

Two different scenarios exist. The first scenario is preserving the status quo, which eventually will bring massive strategic global changes. The second scenario is to change the current status quo, which has unforeseen consequences.

### **Scenario One**

Based on the Iranian plans to join the Sino-Russian Eurasian projects, the Iranian element will discreetly stabilize the Caucasus (North and South) and Central Asia in favor of China and Russia. The undisputed Russo-Chinese supremacy in Eurasia will bring the unipolar system’s gradual death. It will encourage the rise of the multipolar system as a new order. In this case, we will

witness two different phenomena. First, Russian institutions will become competitive in the international scene. Second, the Chinese BRI project will become a geoeconomic and geopolitical power that can resist and flourish under stress and pressure. The worst nightmare according to Spykman and Friedman will become true: the rise of a capable power in Eurasia will undermine US security beyond repair. It is essential to mention that, in this scenario, there are some elements of preserving the status quo; conflicts and wars are very unlikely. At the same time, the traditional balance of power remains untouched.

## **Scenario Two**

The second scenario is a geopolitical nightmare beyond imagination. The reason is straightforward: states with roughly equal capabilities may engage in long-term strategic competition. It is an indisputable fact that the United States, Russia, and China will not get into a face-to-face conflict unless their vital interests are under heavy pressure. In the Iranian case, the situation may create severe geostrategic and geopolitical challenges for all three powers; Iran is the weakest link in this equation. Therefore, Iran may become a prime target and a battleground for this multilateral strategic competition (US-Iranian and US-Russo-Chinese alliance).

The West and especially the United States clearly understand that they would not have serious leverage in Eurasia without Iran. Therefore, the West has no other choice but to bring Iran into the Western alliance. Before worrying about Russia and China and how they are generating power in Eurasia and the World Island, we have to answer an important question: *How can aligning Iran with the West lead to institutions or alliances?*

The transformation of Iran into the Western political and economic infrastructure will drastically change the status quo and the global balance of power. Therefore, China and Russia will resist in any way possible and try to deny the Iranian transformation and finalization of the fate of Eurasia in favor of the Seaman.

The Iranian change of position will affect the Russo-Chinese alliance while affecting the very core of those states' survivability. The possibility of losing the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia (Heartland) is enough reason to go to war despite its long-term and destructive consequences for all participating parties. But the loss of Central Asia (Heartland) and the Southern Caucasus, which will dismantle both Russia and China as rising powers, is only one side of the story.



Source: Library of Congress, United States Department of State, Office of the Geographer, Administrative Divisions of Russia [Washington, DC: State INR/GE, 1993] Map, <https://www.loc.gov>.

**Figure 10. Possible zone of conflict in the North Caucasus.**

The other side is more dangerous and nightmarish for China and Russia. A US-Iranian alliance would have severe negative impacts on the Northern Caucasus and the potential rise of an Islamic insurgency in Russia to the extent that the rest of European Russia would become a battleground between Northern Caucasus separatists and Russian security forces. There is the possibility that we would witness a repeat of the Syrian model and infiltration of all types of jihadists in the area. The second part of the problem will arise in Tatarstan and Bashkirstan (Volga Basin). The unrest in these areas will undermine the Russian control of Siberia. In other words, Russia will have a significant problem in keeping the country unified.



Source: United States Central Intelligence Agency, Communist China Administrative Divisions [Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1967] Map, <https://www.loc.gov>.

**Figure 11. Possible zone of conflict in Western China–Tibet and Sinkiang.**

China is another matter. According to Arya: "In the Chinese case, we have the same situation and maybe even worse. The Chinese problem lies in its Western frontier. Strategically Tibet secures China's southern border and provides access to South Asia while Xinjiang does likewise for central Asia and Russia. The rim, thus, protects the Chinese heartland. Tibet also provides China access to the Arabian Sea (Sea of Oman) through Gigit Baltistan Kashmir."<sup>67</sup> Simultaneously, Tibet and Xinjiang are weak links in the Chinese polity and susceptible to manipulation by China's enemies. "China is particularly wary of ethnic unrest, especially after the Serbian province of Kosovo declared independence in 2008 with most Western governments' backing. Indeed, Beijing perceives Tibet and Xinjiang as potential Kosovos on its territory and will do all it can to suppress rebellion there."<sup>68</sup>

### **The Alignment of Iran into the Western Alliance**

Two different approaches exist regarding Iran. The first is to transform Iran at any cost, even if that means war and regime change in Tehran. The second is a peaceful and gradual process that eventually brings Iran within the Western alliance.

#### **The First Approach: Transformation of Iran into the Western Alliance at Any Cost**

This approach assumes that the Western powers should bring Iran into Western alliance as soon as possible to deny Russia and China strategic advancements in the Eurasian landmass. To do so, the West has two options: (1) military action against and occupation of Iran either for a short period or extended period; and (2) regime change.

**Military Action.** Three treaties have governed the international status of Iran. The first is the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907: Afghanistan was recognized as a buffer zone, and Iran was divided into three different geographical areas. North Iran was exclusively the Russian zone; Southeast was the British zone; and Southwest Iran was a free zone.



Source: Fabian Khan, Qajar Iran-Map of Iran under the Qajar Dynasty in the 19th Century, <https://en.wikipedia.org>. Permitted for nonprofit and educational purposes. (Public Domain)

**Figure 12. The Sino-Russian zone of influence based on the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907.**

The second treaty is the Soviet-Persian Treaty of 1921. Articles V and VI enabled the Soviet Union and its heir, the Russian Federation, to directly interfere in Iran to repel a hostile third party, namely the United States.<sup>69</sup> The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 and the Soviet-Persian Treaty of 1921 have been used in the past, especially during World War II, when the two treaties governed the occupation of Iran by Allied forces. The Allied forces forced the Germans out of Iran. At the same time, Russia had a firmer legal basis under the 1921 agreement, and Iran was temporarily partitioned by Allied forces based on the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907.

The third treaty is a bilateral security pact signed in Ankara between the United States and Iran on 5 March 1959, which stipulates that the US government has a military obligation to promote “Peace and Stability” and to assist the government of Iran at its request.<sup>70</sup> The third treaty cannot be valid while both signatories of the settlement are in a hostile position. The 1908 and 1921 treaties are different: both provide a legal basis for Russia and China to interfere in Iran.





The second option is a mixture of diplomatic activities and military threats. If Russia and China can use the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 and the Soviet-Persian Treaty of 1921 successfully as diplomatic tools to limit the US military operations in Iran, then we could witness the practical partition of Iran into North and South. North Iran would become a Sino-Russian buffer zone and seal the Caucasus and Central Asia from any direct or indirect incursion by the West. Georgia's and Armenia's futures as democratic states would hang in the balance. In essence, we would give Russia carte blanche to create a Soviet Union 2.0 or further Russia's integration within the Chinese power structure.

The third option is the failure of diplomatic efforts and the inevitability of war between the great powers. If the United States pushes into northern Iran and into the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, we would witness the inevitable Russo-Chinese military intervention in the region and the beginning of another unpopular world war—a new Thucydide's Trap.

**Regime Change.** The world saw regime change in Iran in 1953. It was a very successful operation; the Iranian monarch stayed in power and the stable flow of oil continued to Western economies. However, we did not calculate the secondary and tertiary consequences. We gained fuel and strengthened our position at the regional and global levels, but lost the Iranian people and their aspirations for creating a secular and democratic state. After 25 years, we witnessed a revolution that ended the monarchy, and at the same time Iran became the Mecca of antimodernist and reactionary forces. Tehran's mullahs have changed the geostrategics and geopolitics of the Middle East beyond recognition.

In Iran today, we do not have a friendly government in Tehran. Still, the population is deeply modernist, pro-American (Westernized), and highly educated, and very few people share the Iranian theocratic regimes' views about the West. The Iranian people are searching for the missed opportunity of 1953: they want to build a democratic and secular state by themselves. Any forced regime change will change the Iranian people's positive feelings toward the United States forever, and hostility toward the United States will deepen to the point of no return. It is essential to mention that any installed regime in Tehran will not last longer than the deeply rooted imperial tradition of Persian nationalism that the House of Pahlavi represented.

There is no viable opposition in the current Iranian political landscape that will quickly change Iran without raising serious domestic or regional problems or legitimacy issues. In building consensus and alliances, we grew closer to an organization that calls itself Mujahedin e Khalq of Iran (MEK). This organization is not able to perform well in any circumstance due to its questionable ideology and legitimacy. On the domestic level, MEK cannot force

democratic reform because their ideology is deeply rooted in Islam and Marxism–Leninism. The other issue is their credibility among the Iranian people. They lost credibility when they collaborated with Iraq against Iran during the Iran–Iraq War. MEK as a replacement to the current regime will not help anyone. It would just serve to deepen the rift and destabilize the country, leading to civil war and maybe the total disintegration of the state.

### **The Second Approach: Diplomatic Action**

The peaceful alignment of Iran with a Western alliance must be performed through diplomacy rather than war. Diplomacy will take longer and will be more time-consuming than conflict, but diplomatic activities can offer better solutions than confrontation in the longer run. In the Iranian case, we have no choice but to undertake negotiations with Iran to avoid less favorable options.

The West and Iran share many cultural and social mores. We have to remember that Iran belongs to the Western cultural heritage and has no real connection to the Slavic, Mongolian, or Chinese cultures. Iran is part of the Heartland of Eurasia, and Iranian culture does not belong to the steppe culture of the same Heartland. “The Iranians watch our movies, read our books, and listen to our music. They have taken to the Internet and modern technology with an obsession equal to our own. Today Persian is the most common language on the Internet after English and Mandarin Chinese.”<sup>73</sup>

Besides the fact that Iran culturally does not belong to Eurasia, the contemporary Iranian people are a Westernized population. Ayatollahs will not determine Iran’s future; the Iranian clerical aristocratic class belongs to the past. Iranian modernization starts with secularization and rejects political Islam. Iran, as an Islamic country, is on the verge of a tremendous civilizational transformation. The transformation from a religious Shia state to a more liberal and egalitarian state would eventually secularize all aspects of Iranian society and politics. The forces of modernism and globalization will ultimately force this transformation. Further, the Iranian state’s secularization is parallel to the globalization and collapse of Shiism as a state ideology. I refer to this as “post-Islamism”: “In this state of affairs, religious forces are losing their ideological strength. The people will gradually undermine the state’s spiritual structure to such a point that it prepares the country for peaceful transformation from an Islamic state to a more democratic and secular government.”<sup>74</sup>

The current Iranian sociopolitical and economic positions will allow Iranian societal change to happen sooner or later. Still, the primary question is: Are we ready for this massive change in the Middle East’s political landscape? These fundamental sociopolitical changes will allow Iranians to build a dem-

ocratic and legitimate government. A future democratically Iranian government with a strong mandate from the Iranian people will be inevitably pro-Western and a close ally of the United States in the region. In other words, we win both the government and the people simultaneously. The Iranian government's internal legitimacy will allow us to bring Iran into the Western alliance without getting into a dangerous confrontation with Russia or China.

The formation of mutually beneficial relations between the United States and Iran will bring fundamental geopolitical changes. It will strengthen the Western position via Russia and China, but it will not drastically change the geography. While democratic Iran should have close economic and political relations with Russia and China, it will not try to change the region's geopolitical map to undermine the Sino-Russian interests in the Caucasus or Central Asia.

Iran will pull out from the Eurasian integration process, and Russia and China lose easy access to the Iranian railroad system. As mentioned earlier, without active Iranian participation, the multipolar system will not be established very quickly. The lack of Iranian involvement will make it difficult for Moscow and Beijing, but not impossible. At the same time, they will maintain reliable control of Central Asia and the Northern Caucasus and to some extent the Southern Caucasus republics. In other words, they preserve their geographical integrity, but economically they will not grow very fast as long as the southern link in Eurasia does not exist. Iran and the United States can annex the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia through economics rather than geopolitical conflicts. The economic annexation of the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia will finalize the future of Eurasia in favor of the Seaman.

## **Conclusion**

The question of Iranian geopolitics and its influence on world affairs is an undeniable fact. The irony of history is that all three superpowers, regardless of their economical size or military power, are dependent on Iran's geography to generate power in Eurasia and the World Island. Regardless of who wins or loses the strategic competition, Iran may survive as a dominant power in the region.

In China's case, the BRI is progressing and changing the balance of power worldwide. The Sino-Iranian comprehensive strategic partnership will change the political and economic landscape of the Middle East for years to come. In the bigger picture, China will be able to integrate northern and southern Eurasia by improving the means of communication. The BRI may help establish Chinese influence in Eurasia; however, this will not be the end of the story. This paper analyzes the triangular geopolitical conflict and the Iranian role;

however, an economic implication should be deeply studied. The issue will be following how this long-term global alliance may affect Chinese economic activities. Or how should China would react to a demand by participating BRI countries to access the Chinese market for their goods and services.

The question of Iran is an important issue that we must answer. A forceful regime change will have the opposite effect, and Iranian people will resist pressure. One of the apparent effects will be further Iranian integration into Eurasian programs, postponing Iranian democratization for the foreseeable future. The engines of democratic change in Iran will be dismantled very quickly under the guise of fighting against the toxic foreign influence. In the case of war and foreign armies in the country, it will cause hatred and dismay beyond imagination.

The Iranian people openly hate their government for various reasons, but they will not tolerate foreign invasion. Any government established by foreign forces will fade away after the end of occupation. The next government will not be friendly to our interests, and it will turn to China and Russia to form an alliance that will seal the West's fate in Eurasia and the World Island. In a word, regime change or overthrowing the Iranian government by military operation will not solve any problem. In contrast, it will cause problems that we are not aware of yet.

In that scenario, we will lose the state and the people simultaneously. The long-term democratic option is the best opportunity. The Iranian theocratic regime may survive foreign pressures and economic sanctions; however, the indigenous Iranians' quest for democratic changes will eventually dismantle the system for good. A self-respected, democratic, and legitimate Iranian government is the best option for the Western alliance. The future democratic Iranian government cannot be pro-Russian or pro-Chinese while the state's nature is democratic. Therefore, it would not form deep relations with authoritarian countries.

Iranian democratization will have multiple effects in the greater Middle East. A democratic Iran would affect the process of modernization throughout the Middle East, and it would be the force behind the secularization of societies and their political systems. In Eurasia, Iran will damage or stop Russo-Chinese activities.

In summary, an Iranian democratic state is the only viable option for the United States and the Western alliance. Despite the current strategic competition at the global level, I would like to highlight that, with the technological advances we witness every day, the current international state of affairs will not last long. New frontiers are opening in front of us, which are much more attractive than what we are currently interested in. The fight for natural resources on the earth is losing steam. The next frontier is space.

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