

# H-Diplo | Robert Jervis International Security Studies Forum

## Review Essay 96

Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen, *Sinostan: China's Inadvertent Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780198857969.

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Based on fieldwork primarily conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic by Raffaello Pantucci and the late Alexandros Petersen,<sup>1</sup> this carefully written book is impressive. It calls for greater attention to the Eurasian landmass to account for the growing dominance of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) in six Central Asian countries" Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. In line with a stream of new works authored by Elizabeth Economy, John Fitzgerald, Hugo Meijer, Robert Spalding, and others,<sup>2</sup> it invites us to critically imagine what a world led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) entails. Pantucci and Petersen's extensive journalistic investigation highlights the need for the balancing policies of the US and its allies to reflect both the PRC's continental and maritime frontiers and approaches<sup>3</sup> under new circumstances: "Should Washington (and by extension its allies) become preoccupied solely with the so-called Indo-Pacific in its China policy, not only will it be missing the more profound manifestation of China's global posture, it could also quickly find it far more difficult to cultivate relationships with the countries of Central Asia and beyond, across a growing chunk of the Eurasian landmass" (277).

International coalitions across a broad spectrum of democracies and autocracies are at present mutating and consolidating. Professor Jin Canrong, who has played a role in formulating the foreign policy of the PRC, has commented that a military takeover of Taiwan would bestow a new international reputation on the PRC as the "new boss" (xin laoda新老大) that would rally a following of "opportunist" nation-states who "have no principles." Meanwhile, the "old boss," (lao laoda老老大), the United States, is "physically feeble," and "does nothing but making a lot of noise" in the great game of our century (shiji boyi世紀博弈).<sup>4</sup> The question is whether Central Asia or Eurasia, including Afghanistan and Russia, belongs to a club of nation-states, such as

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<sup>1</sup> Petersen was killed in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth C. Economy, *The World According to China* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022); John Fitzgerald, *Cadre Country: How China Became the Chinese Communist Party* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2022). Hugo Meijer, *Awakening to China's Rise: European Foreign and Security Policies toward the People's Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Robert Spalding, *Stealth War: How China Took over While America's Elite Slept* (New York: Portfolio, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> For a literature critique about the two frontiers of Qing China, see Dong Wang, "Between Tribute and Unequal Treaties: How China Saw the Sea World in the Early Nineteenth Century," *History: The Journal of Historical Association* 103, 355 (2018): 262-285.

<sup>4</sup> Voice of America (VOA, Chinese), May 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjRp18AWMJs&list=LL&index=3>, 17:48-18:30 (accessed on May 24, 2023). "Mainland Can Bring the Island [Taiwan] under its Control in a Week, Jin Canrong says." See Tsukasa Hadano, "China eyes 'armed unification' with Taiwan by 2027: Key Academic," *Nikkei Asia*, January 31, 2022, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-eyes-armed-unification-with-Taiwan-by-2027-key-academic> (accessed on October 3, 2023).

Cuba and others in Latin and South America and the South Pacific that are poised to be drawn into by the PRC's slipstream?<sup>5</sup>

Pantucci and Petersen's book offers first-hand insights into this region of rapidly growing importance. It was last systematically explored on a large scale more than a century ago by luminaries like Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1942) and Sven Hedin (1865–1952), with Owen Lattimore (1900–1989) providing the last comprehensive overview of the whole region's rich political, economic, ethnic and cultural diversity around the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> *Sinostan: China's Inadvertent Empire* is, accordingly, a timely contribution to a (re-)emerging field.<sup>7</sup>

The book's nine chapters center upon the PRC's recent presence in Central Asia including Afghanistan. Chapter 1 traces the westward expansion/colonization of Han and Tang China as well as the historical, ethnic, and religious links between Xinjiang (which is also known as Chinese Turkestan), Tibet, and their regional and Cold War contexts. The authors note that "China is a Central Asian power, and one whose history and peoples are interlinked with those of the Central Asian countries themselves" (38). Chapter 2 focuses on Xinjiang, whose Uyghur community stays close to other places in Central Asia which have shared ethnicity, culture, history and language. In this sense, Xinjiang makes the PRC a "Central Asian" country.<sup>8</sup> The chapter delineates the PRC's domestic security and industrialization development concerns which are key to understanding the Chinese push into all corners of Central Asia, as manifested in the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, forced labor and reeducation camps, phone chips, the internet firewalls, the officially organized westward migration of the Han Chinese population, which was roughly 6 percent of Xinjiang's population in 1953 and is over 40 percent today, among others (44).

Chapter 3 starts off with the Galkynysh Natural Gas Field near Ýolöten in Mary Province of Turkmenistan. The solitude of Turkmenistan's southeastern desert was "regularly broken by the rumble of Chinese truck convoys" carrying natural gas extraction equipment. In 2000, China's President Jiang Zemin (presidency 1993–2003) and Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov<sup>9</sup> signed an agreement to make Turkmen gas available to China. Later, the CNPC (China National Petroleum Corporation), Hyundai Engineering, and Petrofac were awarded the contracts to develop the field and build processing plants. Rather

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<sup>5</sup> For more analysis of power rivalry and speculations on the future in Eurasia, see Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009); "Five More Questions for Stephen Kotkin: Prigozhin Mutiny Edition," Hoover Institution, July 11, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5z5HUS4tmM> (accessed on October 3, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> During the nineteenth century, the rush of empires to control Central Asia was often referred to as "the Great Game." See Aurel Stein, *On Ancient Central-Asian Tracks: Brief Narrative of Three Expeditions in Innermost Asia and Northwestern China* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1933); Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. in 1940). For a collection of Lattimore's works from earlier times, see *Studies in Frontier History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Scott C. Levi, *The Bukharan Crisis: A Connected History of 18th-Century Central Asia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Dilip Hiro, *Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Iran* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2011); S. Frederick Starr, *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013); Eric Helleiner and Jonathan Kirshner, *The Great Wall of Money: Power and Politics in China's International Monetary Relations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014); Alexander A. Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017); Hyun Jin Kim, Frederik Juliaan Vervaeke, and Selim Ferruh Adali, eds., *Eurasian Empires in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); on energy diplomacy, see Anna Kuteleva, *China's Energy Security and Relations with Petrostates: Oil as an Idea* (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> The original reads: "China's piece of Central Asia is in many ways the sixth Central Asian state with a resident Uyghur community that is closer in ethnicity, culture, and language to the Central Asia countries it abuts than to what we traditionally think of as Han Chinese" (42).

<sup>9</sup> Saparmurat Atayevich Niyazov was in office in 1985–2006. Before 1991, he was also a Turkmen Communist Party leader.

than falling prey to Russia's divide-and-rule strategy, Central Asian leaders have been socializing under the banner of the PRC's new great game of "uniting" Eurasia and "rationalizing" the Central Asian energy network—the oil pipelines joining South Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan with the PRC—thereby subjecting themselves to PRC's terms and reducing Russia's influence by bolstering Kyrgyzstan's dependence on its neighbors (85-86). On the other hand, Pantucci and Petersen document how the Kazakhs, Turkmens, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz have sought to thwart the PRC's landgrabs, exploitative labor conditions, and the resultant environment damage at sub-national and local levels.

Chapter 4, "Silk Road or Synthetic Road?" explores Khorgos on the PRC-Kazakhstan border where trucks pass through the customs before distributing made-in-China goods to Eurasian markets. According to Pantucci and Petersen, while the PRC lacked real interest in other countries and peoples (107), its Belt and Road Initiative, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and trans-Eurasian railways have, despite local protests, offered both physical and virtual connectivity alternatives to other initiatives like Russia's Eurasian Economic Union and the United States' New Silk Road.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 5 features the Confucius Institutes (CI) in Jalalabad (Afghanistan), Dushanbe (Tajikistan), Bishkek and Osh (Kyrgyzstan), Astana (Kazakhstan), Tashkent (Uzbekistan), and Kabul (Afghanistan). The authors argue that security risks as well as the difficulties encountered by Chinese firms and the CI in offering quality products and service (to compete with Russian and Western language learning and geo-cultural organizations) indicate that the PRC still has a long way to go to improve its low image in Central Asia.

Chapter 6 examines the reach of PRC's long arm, which extends into Central Asia, and indeed, into Russia, and which involves institutions such as the SCO, security and military personnel, military aid and training, and large firms including Huawei, ZTE (Zhongxing Telecommunications Equipment), Beidou satellites, Alibaba and Jingdong. China's projection, in Pantucci's and Petersen's opinion, continues to severely impinge on Sino-Russian relations, which lack real trust. The Tajik government invited Chinese soldiers to Tajikistan to help build military bases and border posts on the Tajik-Afghanistan border and train border guards as well. Chinese soldiers even on occasion replaced Tajik soldiers along the Afghanistan border. In the Mekong Delta, PRC military and border controls also conducted joint patrols together with Myanmar, Thai, and Lao forces. Surveillance systems and facial recognition technologies, military and police training of central Asian country men all pointed to intensified collaboration.

The emerging "Pax Sinica" is a "slow process but nonetheless on a permanently upward trajectory" (201). "Beijing has little need ultimately to snub Moscow publicly about its activity in the region, as Russia has shown little ability to control it. Nor necessarily does Russia have contradictory long-term interests, beyond a fear of Chinese dominance and influence" (201).

Chapter 7, "The New Great Wall," discusses PRC's gradually ascendant security and military relations with Central Asia where Kyrgyz officers trained in PRC cities speak Mandarin Chinese—a dimension of PRC presence that goes beyond trade and economics and intrudes into traditional Russian turfs in the region. This involves not only security at home but also overseas along and across the long overland frontier of the People's Republic. But it remains an open question how, for example, Uyghur groups in Syria and Russia fare in their interactions with the PRC.

Chapter 8 focuses on Afghanistan. The PRC has, particularly since the mid-2010s, slowly and patiently taken on the challenge to control and change the situation in and around Afghanistan at bilateral and multilateral levels, including dealing with Uyghur and other militants. These renewed PRC activities in the 2010s ranged

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<sup>10</sup> US State Department, "The New Silk Road initiative was first envisioned in 2011 as a means for Afghanistan to integrate further into the region by resuming traditional trading routes and reconstructing significant infrastructure links broken by decades of conflict." <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/> (accessed on October 11, 2023).

from the presence of large Chinese companies such as the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) pumping oil out of Afghanistan and building oil refinery; the Metallurgical Corporation of China and Jiangxi Copper Corporation's mining, railway and road projects in Logar Province (Mes Aynak), allegedly building pipelines and airbases; ZTE and Huawei in installing telecommunications lines, to PRC small and individual traders in the commercial, hospitality, and extractive industries, including mining and exporting precious stones from Afghanistan. They also involved brokering peace talks and discussions among the Taliban, Pakistan, the President Hamid Karzai (2002/2004–2014), President Ashraf Ghani (2014–2021) government in Kabul, and the United States, in an effort to keep the United States, India, and other interested countries and militant groups on the PRC borders at bay. Whether the BRI projects and infrastructure investments could link up Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Europe remains a fluid vision.

Chapter 9 connects all the dots on the ground to make sense of the PRC's grand strategy to physically link up the world with the PRC and Xinjiang as the thoroughfare of choice for Central Asian goods and commodities to get to Chinese coastal cities, and from there to South and Southeast Asia and Europe and South America. The PRC is more and more associating itself with one-person rulership. It props up, supplies, and socializes with corrupt elites who opt to play the game under the PRC auspices to counter the American New Silk Road vision, that then secretary of state Hillary Clinton in Chennai in October 2011 articulated to link the five Central Asian countries with the United States. The PRC squared it off with its own BRI, a "Community of Shared Destiny," and a westward movement to match the American industrialization push in the mid-19th century.

One weakness of the book is that it appears to rely mostly on English-language publications and translations by the authors' local interpreters in Euroasia. The authors do not demonstrate abilities in any of those Central Asian languages. The book, therefore, would have benefited from substantive non-English sources that go beyond journalistic observations.

*Sinostan* eerily echoes Owen Lattimore's works on Central Asia and frontier studies, no matter whether one agrees with his perceptions (formulated 90 years ago) of Qing China (1644–1912) and the Republic of China (1912–present in Taiwan): "Perhaps the most pregnant of all the theories in the catalogue has been the Theory of the Chineseness of China. This may seem a paradox; but the fact is that the China of Chinese history and culture, the China of the Chinese people, and the China which we call the Chinese Republic [The Republic of China] are not all the same things."<sup>11</sup>

Lattimore explained: "Whether Manchuria, Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan, and Tibet should or should not theoretically be considered 'integral parts' of China is now irrelevant. They are important, now, in their own right. They are no longer mere names, and the fact that we have not been taught to consider it important to know what Mongols and Tibetans think and feel about it all does not alter the fact that they are now in the forefront of historical events."<sup>12</sup>

To Lattimore, the American-British Open Door Policy played a role in subordinating places such as Manchuria, Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan and Tibet to Qing China and the Republic of China in the early twentieth century. He wrote, "they must be forced to deny their history and surrender their national and racial identities. 'Why', I have often been asked by Mongols, 'didn't President Wilson ever do anything about

<sup>11</sup> Owen Lattimore, "Open Door or Great Wall?" *Atlantic Monthly* 154, 1 (July 1934). Also in Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History: Collected papers, 1928–1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 75. Nicholas Ross Smith and Tracey Fallon, "The Importance of Bona Fide Friendships to International Politics: China's Quest for Friendships that Matter," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (March 2022): 1-22. Victor Carneiro Corrêa Vieira, "From Third World Theory to Belt and Road Initiative: International Aid as a Chinese Foreign Policy Tool," *Contexto Internacional* 41, no. 3 (Sep/Dec 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Owen Lattimore, "Open Door or Great Wall?" *Atlantic Monthly* 154, 1 (July 1934). Also in Owen Lattimore, *Studies in Frontier History: Collected papers, 1928–1958* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 84.

Mongolia? ‘Because’, I have always been forced to answer, ‘President Wilson looked across the sea, and saw nothing but China’.”<sup>13</sup>

*Sinostan: China’s Inadvertent Empire* thus skillfully rekindles our attention to an old conundrum: Is Central Asia “inadvertently” being absorbed into China’s empire? The book focuses our gaze on a complex, diverse, and important place beyond the PRC’s homogenizing empire.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lattimore, “Open Door or Great Wall?” 1934, 78. Alastair Lamb, the late British diplomatic historian, commented that Lattimore told the world, as the loner at the time, about the plight of the Mongols, in a language to which the Mongols themselves had no access. “Another requirement for the application of the Lattimore method is an understanding of the concept of social and historical evolution, of a process of structural change over time and space...In *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* Lattimore shows how China steadily expanded by a complex process of cultural diffusion in one direction (south and west) and violent challenge and response from the Asian land mass in another (north and north-west). The idea...remains as fundamental to the understanding of the foreign policy of modern Communist China as it does to the interpretation of the Inner Asian policies of the Han, Tang, Yuan, and Qing dynasties of China’s imperial past. There is a basic geopolitical Chinese attitude towards the outside world which is based on geographical fundamentals even though it might be expressed in the language of ideology.” Lamb, introduction to Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, viii-ix.

<sup>14</sup> For the conception of Chinas, see Jiang Yonglin, “Thinking About ‘Ming China’ Anew: The Ethnocultural Space in a Diverse Empire—with Special Reference to the ‘Miao Territory’,” *Journal of Chinese History* 2 (2018): 27-78. Valerie Hansen, *The Open Empire: A History of China to 1800* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1st ed. in 2000). Dong Wang, *Tse Tsan Tai (1872–1938): An Australian-Cantonese Opinion Maker in British Hong Kong* (South Beach, N.Y.: Lived Places Publishing, 2023), xiv, 56-57.