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China's Growing Influence in Central Asia and the Middle East Will Lead to Further US Decline

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China's increasing presence on the international scene is an undeniable threat to the US-led world order. Critical to China's emergence as a major power this century, has been its widening influence in the Central Asian states. Central Asia, rich in mineral reserves, is among the earth's most strategically important regions. Control over Central Asia ensures access to raw materials such as oil or gas, while it stands as a "guardpost" against US hegemony over the Persian Gulf further south.

Considerably bigger in size than India, Central Asia consists of five nations, by far the largest is Kazakhstan followed by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Central Asia remains sparsely populated with just over 70 million people in total; this is mainly because 60% of its land mass comprises of desert terrain; yet it is studded also with little known, towering peaks and vast, treeless steppes. Central Asia is bordered by Russia and China to the north and east; to the west lies the Caucasus and Caspian Sea; while the energy laden Middle East is not far to the south-west.

Then **US Secretary of State Colin Powell** had said as early as February 2002,

> "America will have a continuing interest and presence in Central Asia of a kind that we could not have dreamed of before [9/11]".

Indeed, 9/11 was an ideal pretext to be exploited in order to further Washington's aims for global supremacy. However, the dream that Powell spoke of regarding Central Asia ended six years ago. In July 2014, the Pentagon was compelled to leave its last remaining Central Asian base in Kyrgyzstan – which US forces were utilising for over 12 years – after the Kyrgyz parliament voted in favour of evicting US forces.

In December 2001 the American military had taken over the Manas Air Base in northern Kyrgyzstan, located near the capital Bishkek, in order to assist operations in the illegal war it was waging in Afghanistan a few hundreds miles south (1). The Kyrgyzstani government preferred instead pursuing closer relations with Russia and China. Much of the thinking behind the US presence in Kyrgyzstan, was to provide a platform for commanding oil or gas reserves in surrounding areas, along with curbing Chinese and Russian designs in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan is strategically situated; it shares a 660 mile frontier with Xinjiang, China's crucially significant north-western province.

Contrary to what was often claimed, the October 2001 US-run invasion of Afghanistan had been planned months before the 9/11 attacks. In mid-July 2001 American officials told Pakistan's former Foreign Secretary, **Niaz Naik**, that the Pentagon was preparing an attack on Afghanistan, scheduled to be launched in October of that year (2). It takes longer than four weeks to prepare an invasion of a sizeable country, let alone one on the other side of the world. Afghanistan, which lies adjacent to the Middle East, was viewed by Western politicians and their corporate executive bosses as a major pipeline route; through which natural resources could be sent originating from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. Among the real reasons for the "war on terror" was to reinforce US hegemony over crucial territories, along with command over the raw materials of the Middle East, Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

American dominance of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, both formerly part of the USSR, further weakened Russia and was seen moreover as important to the "success" of the war in Afghanistan. The South Caucasus states, Georgia and Azerbaijan, were pawns in the transport of heavy US weaponry and NATO troops bound for Afghanistan. Azerbaijan, bordering Iran, could be used also as a launchpad for US forces should they get the green light to invade Iran.

The prominent Polish-American diplomat, **Zbigniew Brzezinski**, recognised that mastery over Central Asia is pivotal to holding sway over encompassing areas (3). China's pre-eminence today in Central Asia would therefore have caused considerable concern for Brzezinski. Beijing is gradually constructing a 21st century Silk Road, with the intent not only to increasingly draw Central Asia under Chinese influence, but of extending its clout to the Middle East, Europe and the Mediterranean. China is already the largest investor in Central Asia and now the Middle East.

This latter region, the Middle East, contains 48% of the planet's known oil reserves and 43% of all natural gas sources (4). It has long been highly prized. In April 1941, British prime minister Winston Churchill outlined in a directive to the war cabinet that "the loss of Egypt and the Middle East would be a disaster of the first magnitude for Great Britain, second only to successful invasion and final conquest [of the UK]" (5). US planners believed that ascendancy over the Middle East would grant a nation "substantial control of the world", as noted in May 1951 by Adolf Berle, president Franklin Roosevelt's former close adviser; Berle's opinion was supported by **General Dwight Eisenhower**, soon to be president, who called the Middle East "the most strategically important area in the world". (6)

The US State Department previously identified Saudi Arabia and its oil as “one of the greatest material prizes in world history” (7). In February 1944, Roosevelt himself informed the British ambassador to the US, **Lord Halifax**, that the oil of Iran “is yours. We share the oil of Iraq and Kuwait. As for Saudi Arabian oil, it’s ours”.

Nearby resource rich Iran, of similar importance to Saudi Arabia, has remained outside of US domination since 1979 and consequently is classed as a menace; despite the fact that Saudi human rights abuses are much worse in comparison to Iran. China has been Iran’s largest trading partner for years. In 2019 for example, Iranian investments with China amounted to at least $20 billion and Beijing is the top purchaser of crude oil from Iran. At the root of the ongoing shrill criticisms by the West pertaining to Chinese policies, is down to Beijing’s growing challenge to US power which is under pressure across the globe.

Over the past decade Beijing has completed expansive infrastructure in Central Asia, such as the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, that is over 2,200 miles long. It stretches across Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan before reaching its destination in China’s Xinjiang province. Turkmenistan contains the fourth biggest natural gas reserves in the world, and is the greatest supplier of that resource to China. Turkmenistan’s largest investor by far is China, and last year almost 90% of her exports were sold to Beijing (8). While Washington was wielding its sledgehammer this century, China has engineered ambitious financial projects and the development of alliances on a grand scale.

Beijing is aware of the historical and strategic importance of Central Asia to its neighbour Russia, and has treaded carefully. Since the Soviet Union’s demise in 1991, Chinese strategies in Central Asia have largely been complimentary and cooperative with Moscow (9). Successful early efforts to overcome border disputes was a factor behind Beijing founding the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 1996 alongside Russia – with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan likewise joining this association at its outset, in their stated goals of tackling terrorism and separatism. The CIA and Pentagon were already supporting covert operations by extremist networks with links to Osama bin Laden in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Balkans; Washington was in addition using foreign operatives to promote instability in Central Asia. (10)

For one of the major powers, it is striking that China has very little history of committing armed aggression, i.e., attacks on other countries, proxy wars, and so on. This stands in contrast to its Western rivals such as the United States, which initiated a number of destructive invasions within the past 60 years: In Vietnam and Indochina, along with the more recent assaults on Iraq (twice), Afghanistan and Libya. China’s refusal to engage in large-scale military offensives has been such that the prominent US strategic analysts, John Steinbruner and Nancy Gallagher, early this century called on an alliance of peace-loving

nations – led by China – to be formed so as to counter American militarism. (11)

A generation ago, Washington could scarcely believe its luck as the Soviet Union disintegrated without a single shot fired. Soviet Russia's economy had been stagnating since the 1970s, partly because of efforts in matching the vast arms expenditure of the wealthier US. For Western policy makers, the Soviet Union's existence had blocked the way to the tantalising mineral resources of the Caucasus, Caspian Sea and Central Asia. President Bill Clinton's Secretary of Energy, Bill Richardson, said frankly in 1998 that the one-time Soviet republics were "all about America's energy security. We would like to see them reliant on Western commercial and political investment in the Caspian, and it's very important to us that the pipeline map and the politics come out right". (12)

In September 1997, the Pentagon dispatched hundreds of its troops by parachute to the deserts of Kazakhstan, Central Asia's most influential country. It was a provocative move and statement of intent, reputed to be the longest airborne operation in military history at the time. By February 2002, Washington had established military bases in all of the Central Asian countries, and at that stage controlled the region. The US was seeking also to undermine and destabilise China, as it is today, by fostering separatist movements who wish to detach territories like Xinjiang from the rest of China. This would leave China a fractured nation but it is highly unlikely to occur.

Xinjiang, China's biggest province, is pivotal to Beijing's aspirations. Throughout this century, Xinjiang has been the second largest oil producing area of China, behind Heilongjiang province. Xinjiang furthermore is China's main entry point into Central Asia, while there are long-held plans by Beijing to connect the city of Kashgar, in western Xinjiang, over a thousand miles south towards the Arabian Sea, at Pakistan's port of Gwadar. The proposed Gwadar-Kashgar oil pipeline is currently undergoing assessment, and expected to receive approval for a length of 2,414 kilometres, equivalent to 1,400 miles (13). The Chinese government desires its commencement as quickly as possible, and construction may start by the year 2023. Gwadar lies a short distance from the Strait of Hormuz and Persian Gulf, some of the most vital oil shipping lanes. Yet logistics for the Gwadar-Kashgar pipeline will be arduous, as it must bypass rocky areas and high mountain passes.

China's maritime deliveries, which account for about 80% of its oil imports, travel over round-about distances of up to 10,000 miles. These shipments take between eight to 12 weeks to arrive at the port of Shanghai in eastern China. A Chinese pipeline to Gwadar would reduce this distance to less than 2,000 miles, and allow Beijing to avoid waters patrolled by US destroyers. Most significantly, the Gwadar-Kashgar pipeline would assist China in continuing to broaden its scope in the Middle East. Were this to be achieved, further US global decline could only unfold. American power in the Middle East has regressed this century, in large part self-inflicted because of its invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Middle East is central to the progress of China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese have advanced again here through non-military means, and with caution, outlining to their war weary Middle East counterparts that they wish to pursue policies of dialogue and financial investments. Beijing has steered clear of regional hostilities in the Middle East, in order not to stoke more unrest in a land greatly destabilised by the US-led wars and spawning of terrorist organisations. In January 2020 Yasser Elnaggar, an experienced Egyptian diplomat and scholar, noted that, "the economies of the Middle East are shifting

away from their longstanding ties with the US toward economically powerful China – a move that may have long-term implications for the economic and political dynamics of the region" (14). Elnaggar discerned that the Middle East and North African nations "welcomed China and its financing models with open arms".

Various leaders in the Middle East have visited Beijing on more than one occasion since 2014. Many of the trips involved the ratification of significant economic agreements, connected to the Belt and Road Initiative. The Americans have been notable in their absence from these deals. A number of the contracts signed relate to clean energy projects, as the Middle East and North African states align their development plans with the Belt and Road, exploring alternatives to fossil fuels. Elnaggar writes that, "China, and not the US, is emerging as a leader in this field and is actively seeking to promote green development" while "China has become the largest investor" in the Middle East "and the most sought after".

US involvement in the Middle East has of course primarily been concerned with oil. This was one of the reasons, often conveniently forgotten, that Washington had previously supported Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator; that is, when Saddam was amenable to their interests. That relationship had changed by the beginning of the 21st century.

Moniz Bandeira, the Brazilian historian and intellectual, wrote that,

> "Iraq didn't threaten the United States or any other country of the West. Instead, it threatened American and British oil companies. Saddam Hussein had signed contracts with the large Russian company Lukoil, was in negotiations with Total from France, and had begun to replace the dollar by the euro as the currency for oil transactions. His removal would make room for the entry of British and American firms such as Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell and British Petroleum". (15)

This received scant mention, and pro-war mainstream press coverage was an important factor in the US invasion going ahead on 20 March 2003. Moniz Bandeira recalled how "a massive disinformation campaign to tie Saddam Hussein to the September 11 attacks" ensued, while "the invasion of Iraq was sold to the public through a complicit media".

Secret documents from March 2001 – which the US Department of Commerce was forced to declassify in the summer of 2003 – reveals that an "energy task force" headed by **Dick Cheney**, the US vice-president, had developed two extensive maps pertaining to Iraq: Sketching the oil fields, pipelines, refineries and terminals they would oversee there (16). Cheney had close ties to the oil industry, and two other maps were drawn up by his task force, detailing the projects and companies that wanted to manage the oil in Iraq. This was planned two years before the actual invasion of that country and, it can be added, prior also to 9/11.

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Notes

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