

# The Railroad and Land-Power Strategy: Historical Lessons Learned for the “Silk Road Economic Belt” Strategy<sup>\*</sup>

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The 2008 global financial crisis brought further changes in the balance of power in international politics. In order to respond to the rise of China, the United States adopted the strategy of a pivot to Asia, and began to push the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). This adjustment in the US strategy brought about a rapid deterioration in the environment surrounding China. Taking this opportunity, some of China's neighboring countries have intensified their territorial disputes with China in both the East China Sea and South China Sea. Facing the new external environment, China has made important changes in strategic thinking, policy design, and institutional building.

The major indicator of changes in strategic thinking is the adoption of the land-power strategy. This strategy advocates opening up toward the west, promoting Eurasian economic integration by developing infrastructure represented by railroads, developing a strategic hedge between sea power and land power at the global level, strengthening the collaborative relationship with

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rising powers, and gradually establishing a status in international affairs that matches China's national strength.<sup>1</sup> This geoeconomic strategy differs significantly from the traditional geopolitical strategy because it does not aim at controlling transportation corridors on the Eurasian continent by military force, rather it desires to bind China's interests with that of neighboring countries through economic cooperation and building the so-called shared-interest and joint-destiny communities. This geoeconomic strategy is designed to indirectly achieve the geopolitical goal of protecting strategic corridors west of China for trade, energy and resources.

The major indicator of changes in policy design is the proposal by the Chinese government of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (SREB) and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” (21CMSR) (abbreviated as “One Belt, One Road”). The SREB covers the Eurasian continent and north Africa, while the 21CMSR covers a large portion of the Asia-Pacific. Railroad construction is an important component in this strategy. It includes not only the cross-continental China-Europe railroad that is already in operation and the planned Moscow-Beijing high-speed rail, but also the planned China-Pakistan railroad that connects inland China with the Indian Ocean and the Pan-Asian railroad that connects China, India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Southeast Asia. This strategy essentially aims at improving the external environment for China's future development by changing various countries' perceptions of self-interest and related goals in geopolitics. The strategy develops new centers and corridors of economic growth through building transportation connectivity.

The major indicator of changes in institutional building is the establishment by China of a number of new multilateral and unilateral financial institutions, including the BRICS Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), each of which has an initial investment of US\$100 billion, and the Silk Road Fund with an initial investment of US\$40 billion. China has changed its practice in recent years of providing liquidity to the international economy by purchasing US debts under the so-called “second Bretton Woods system,” and begun to directly supply liquidity through various financial institutions established under

its own leadership. Additionally, in 2014 China pushed the agenda of formally starting discussions on the free trade agreement in the Asia-Pacific at the annual meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) held in Beijing, and established a forum to discuss security-related issues at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA summit) in Shanghai. These measures show that China has begun to identify itself as a major power, and actively participate in international affairs to shape the direction of the global politics and economy.

Some observers in the West worry that China and the United States currently face a situation identical to that of Germany and Britain before World War I. If the two countries cannot escape from the Thucydides Trap, history may repeat the tragedy of a hundred years ago.<sup>2</sup> Economic interdependence may not reduce the risk of war; on the contrary, the desperation resulting from a breakup of such interdependence will lead more easily to war. Since the real factors that bring countries into war are their trade expectations, they can easily go to war once they lose access to indispensable energy, resources, and markets. One of the most important reasons that Germany entered World War I was the economic containment against it imposed by other big powers.<sup>3</sup> Some conservative American strategists advocate remote blockage and a complete embargo against China when it becomes necessary,<sup>4</sup> which would certainly bring China to war if its trade path was blocked by the United States.

At the same time, some observers in China are also concerned that the country's opening up towards the west may lead the United States to pursue further containment against it because maintaining a balance of power on the Eurasian continent is a strategic interest for the United States. They are afraid that if China enters Central Asia, it would push Russia to ally with the United States against China, creating a situation in which China has to face enemies from both fronts since Central Asia is a strategic interest of Russia. They also contend that there is no single case in modern history of a land power succeeding in challenging the hegemony of a sea power, thus China's chance to be an exception is very low.<sup>5</sup>

Why should China develop land power? What can China learn

from other countries' lessons in history? In order to answer these questions, this article first analyzes the histories of the Russian construction of the Trans-Siberia Railway and the German construction of the Baghdad Railway in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It then discusses the similarities and differences between the Russian and German experiences and China's initiative of the Silk Road Economic Belt. This article points out that maintaining control over corridors to economic, energy, and resource centers is an important goal in geopolitics. The land powers, represented by Russia and Germany, in history engaged in military confrontation when they encountered strong strategic pressure from the sea powers in geopolitics. Both countries pursued a dual strategy of simultaneously developing both land power and sea power. Nevertheless, contrary to the conventional belief, the factor that ultimately led Russia to enter into war with Japan and Germany into war with Britain was not their pursuit for land power but that for sea power.

Both Russia and Germany tried to develop land power, overcome the geographical constraints on state action by constructing railroads, strengthen their strategic depth, and hedge against the strategic advantages of sea power, so as to improve their geopolitical environment. However, both failed to achieve their goals because they were unable to achieve one goal without losing another due to the diversion of resources resulting from their adoption of this dual strategy.

The major difference between the land-power strategy pursued by China and that pursued by Russia and Germany in late 19th century and early 20th century lies in the objective and goal when they are faced with strategic pressure from sea powers. Russia and Germany purported to acquire exclusive control over a strategic land corridor, and therefore they employed railroads as the means of military confrontation in geopolitics. In contrast, the major goal in China's land-power strategy is to build communities of shared interests and destinies to resolve contradictions and conflicts and ensure that strategic corridors are unobstructed, whereby the railroads are treated as a means of cooperation in geoeconomics. In addition, both the international and geographical environments of

China are significantly different from those of Russia and Germany. China has a better chance of developing land power and using it to hedge against challenges from sea powers, and sustain its own economic development.

### **The Trans-Siberia Railway**

The Russians began to discuss the construction of the Trans-Siberia Railway as early as in the 1870s. While its economic benefits were often mentioned in early discussions, they never convinced the Tsar or overcame bureaucratic resistance inside the Russian government. This was partly because of the scarcity of population east of Lake Baikal. The ultimate determining factor that led to the decision to build the Trans-Siberia Railway was geopolitics. From the very beginning, it was a military goal that drove the Russian construction of the Trans-Siberia Railway.

Threat from the then sea powers was the major dynamic power for Russia's adoption of the land-power strategy in the late 19th century. At the time, there was acute tension between Russia and Britain over the status of Primorye, the region that included Vladivostok. The Russians were very much worried that Britain would launch an attack on its Pacific coast. Britain, on the other hand, was afraid that the Russian expansion in Central Asia could eventually reach India. They came close to war a number of times in Afghanistan, the buffer zone between the Russian Empire and the British colony of India. From the Russian perspective, the development of navigation technology would enable sea powers, such as Britain, the United States, and Japan, to invade Russia's Far East and Siberia easier. The British threat to Russia's Far East became more imminent due to the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway which cut the journey from Britain to Japan through the Suez Canal from 52 to 37 days.<sup>6</sup>

Russia was also deeply concerned about the sea powers' expansion in Northeast China. Beginning in 1885, the Russian government received a number of alarming reports from Count Alexis P. Ignatyev, governor-general of Irkutsk Province and the brother of Nicholas Ignatyev, who negotiated the Treaty of Peking with China's Qing imperial court in 1860 that enabled Russia to

annex land from China. He warned that the Qing court appeared to be reorganizing its troops in Northeast China, laying telegraph lines, and building steam-powered river ships, and that British engineers were helping design a railroad from southern Manchuria to a point only 90 miles from Vladivostok. At the same time, Chinese trade with Britain and Canada was rapidly developing. Once the Panama Canal was completed, China's trade with the United States would also expand. He argued that, with help from these sea powers, China might be able to take back the territories it lost to Russia in 1858 and 1860.<sup>7</sup>

From its own and other countries' experience, Russia became keenly aware of the important role railways played in territorial control and war. It was pointed out that the railway network Britain built in India was essential for Britain's control over this colony. Had Canada failed to build the cross-continental Pacific Railway in North America, sparsely populated British Columbia could have become independent. In order to maintain effective control over Siberia and Russian Far East, a vast territory with a small population, Russia would have to rely on the Trans-Siberia Railway to move troops quickly to the territory in a military emergency. Moving troops efficiently with railways in the war with the Ottoman Empire and the battle against Afghan troops in Central Asia, and the humiliation of the Crimea War in which the defense of Sevastopol was made much harder by the lack of railways were all important reasons finally convincing Russia to build the Trans-Siberia Railway.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Russia's effort to develop land power by building the Trans-Siberia Railway was seriously undermined by its pursuit of sea power. Different from the Trans-Siberia Railway which was built mainly out of the consideration of defense, Russia's sea-power strategy was offensive. Due to its special geographical conditions, Russia's vigorous efforts to develop a navy were made to face simultaneously three powerful rivals at three fronts, i.e., Britain in the Baltic Sea, Germany in the Black Sea, and Japan in the Sea of Japan. A continuous debate went on and on domestically over the issue whether Russia should turn its primary attention to Europe or Asia, and the dominant opinion in the debate alternated frequently.



Industrial backwardness and an underdeveloped economy gave Russia insufficient fiscal power to support its hegemonic ambition. However, in disregard of such serious budget constraints, Russia kept pursuing its dual strategy, that is, developing both land power and sea power in both Europe and Asia at the same time.<sup>9</sup>

Attending one thing to the neglect of another in resource allocation made it impossible for Russia to achieve full development of either its land power or sea power. Although the navy budget increased 66 percent in the seven years prior to the Russo-Japanese War, its army budget only saw an increase of 12 percent, with the absolute amount of the former still being less than one-third of the latter by the time of the war.<sup>10</sup> The Russian navy was never able to recover after its defeat in the war. It was precisely because of this that Russia was no longer a threat to Britain, which turned out to be the basis for Russia to ally with Britain to fight Germany during World War I.

At the same time, the struggle between the military budget and the budget for the construction of the railway also slowed down construction of the railway. During the Russo-Japanese War, Russia had to send troops from Siberia and Russian Europe to the Far East. While the Trans-Siberia Railroad played a critical role in supporting the Russian military operations in the war, the capacity of its outer Lake Baikal and Eastern China sections was no more than four pairs of trains a day and that of its Southern Manchuria section, only three pairs a day. But, it needed 90-92 pairs of trains to move one single army to the front.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, it was impossible for Russia to move enough soldiers and munitions to the Far East at the time. By the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, Russia stationed in total no more than 120,000 troops in the Far East. In contrast, the Japanese had around 200,000 troops in China and Korea alone. The capacity and speed of moving troops was thus directly related to victory and defeat in the war.<sup>12</sup>

The Russian effort to obtain access to the ocean through the China-Changchun Railway<sup>13</sup> in Manchuria is considered an important reason for the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War. Despite the fact that the construction of the Trans-Siberia Railway to a certain extent alerted the Japanese about Russia's strategic

objectives, it was not the direct reason of the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War. Rather, the direct cause of the war was Russia's sea-power strategy. In 1897, by force Russia took Port Arthur which had been returned to China by Japan under pressure from the three powers after the Sino-Japanese War. Even after the Eight-Nation Alliance signed the Protocol of 1901 (also known as Boxer Protocol) and the troops of the eight powers began to pull out from Beijing, at the end of 1901, Ito Furobumi, a Japanese cabinet minister who was inclined to come to terms with Russia, visited Russia and proposed the following conditions for a compromise: Russia gave up all its interests in Korea to Japan, withdrew its troops from Manchuria, and adopted an open-door policy; in exchange, Japan would allow Russia to occupy the leased territory of Kwantung and extend the China-Changchun Railway to Port Arthur. However, Russia did not accept Ito Furobumi's proposal. Instead, it refused with a counter proposal. This speeded up British-Japan negotiations on an anti-Russian alliance.<sup>14</sup>

The geopolitical implications of building the Trans-Siberia Railway caused quite a great stir in Britain. Sir Halford John Mackinder, an English geographer, academic and politician, and one of the founding fathers of geopolitics and geostrategy, believed that this railway would produce a profound impact on the balance of power, because it would enable Russia to become a land power on the Eurasian continent to greatly threaten Britain's sea power. As he saw it, an interesting parallel could be drawn between the advance of sailors over the ocean from Western Europe and the advance in 1533 of Russian Cossacks across the steppes of the heartland, over the Ural Mountains into Siberia. Although it was unprecedented that in 1900 Britain could send a quarter of a million soldiers to the war with the Boers from a distance of 6,000 miles over the ocean, it was also remarkable that in 1904 Russia could place an army of more than a quarter of a million soldiers in battles against the Japanese in Manchuria from a distance of 4,000 miles by rail.<sup>15</sup> The British focus of attention at the time centered on its colonial interests in the Persian Gulf and India. If Russia went further south after expanding into Central Asia, it would threaten not only Iran and the Ottoman Empire but also the British interests in India.



Once the construction of the Trans-Siberia Railway was completed, the significance of Eastern Europe, southern part of Russia, Central Asia and China's Xinjiang area as the heartland of the world island would be highlighted, and whoever controlled the heartland of the world island would control the world.<sup>16</sup>

Although H. J. MacKinder's theory aroused people's attention to the significance of land power, it nevertheless also misled the evaluation of Russia's land-power strategy by later generations since most commentators have always applied H. J. MacKinder's criteria in assessing its effectiveness. In their opinion, the construction of the Trans-Siberia Railway was a failure because it had failed to help Russia control the Eurasian continent though it had helped Russia control the heartland of the world island. The point at issue here is that for Russia the original purpose of building the Trans-Siberia Railway was not to control the entire Eurasian continent, but to prevent potential British invasions from the Far East and Central Asia, and to protect its territories by strengthening its capacity to transport troops.

From a long-term perspective, since the Trans-Siberia Railway was built, no country has invaded the Far East and Siberia or dismembered Russia. After the October Revolution in 1917, the Trans-Siberia Railway served as an important tool for the Red Army to fight against White bandits. The industrialization sustained by it also provided the material base for the Soviet Union to defeat Germany in World War II. When Germany launched its full-scale invasion into the Soviet Union, the Trans-Siberia Railway helped move troops from the eastern part of the country and ship weapons produced by factories that had been moved to Siberia to the European theater.<sup>17</sup> During the Cold War and the post-Cold War time, the Trans-Siberia Railway has been used to carry land-based nuclear missiles to maintain nuclear deterrence to the US. If we assess the Russian land-power strategy by its original purpose, it has been rather successful to a great extent.

### **The Baghdad Railway**

The Germans also paid primary attention to the economic benefits in their early discussion about the construction of the

Baghdad Railway. Germany's rapid industrialization in the 1880s caused a quick increase in their demand for imported metals, minerals and foods. The Ottoman Empire was rich with lead, zinc, copper and chrome, all needed by modern industry.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the ultimate reason that promoted William II to decide the building of this railway was geopolitics. Soon after William II came to power, he changed Otton Von Bismarck's regional security strategy that prioritized balance of power in Europe and adopted the Weltpolitik (world policy) that aimed at transforming Germany through aggressive diplomacy, development of sea power, and acquisition of colonies overseas. William II aimed to bring Germany an international status matching the country's rising power. The building of the Baghdad Railway was taken as an important step for Germany to achieve a new sphere of influence by participating in the solution of the “Eastern problem,” which emerged as a result of the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire.

However, to properly evaluate the strategic significance of the Baghdad Railway, we need to contextualize it against the overall German strategic vision since its land-power strategy was treated as secondary in comparison to the country's focus on sea-power strategy. Germany also adopted a dual strategy of simultaneously developing sea power and land power. If the building of the Baghdad Railway exemplified Germany's land-power strategy, the development of its battleship fleet represented the cornerstone of its sea-power strategy.

In 1900, German Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz put forward his famous “risk theory.” According to this theory, Britain would not risk the danger of war with Germany but would make compromises with it in international politics and issues related to colonies so long as the German navy could seriously damage the British capacity of fighting against its other two major rivals — France and Russia, even if Britain could win a navy war with Germany.<sup>19</sup> Guided by this risk theory, Germany adopted a radical navy expansion plan.

As the prospect of military conflict quickly increased at the end of the 19th century, especially after other European powers instigated economic containment against Germany in 1896,<sup>20</sup>

Germany began to strengthen its land power by constructing the Baghdad Railway. What it valued most was the military implications of this railway, which traversed the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, to the potential German battles against the British and Russian empires on the Eurasian continent. Once the war among European powers erupted, the Austro-Hungarian Empire would help reduce the Russian pressure on the eastern front, and the Ottoman Empire, benefiting from its geographical location, would threaten both the Caucasus, the weak hinterland of the Russian Empire, and Egypt and the Suez Canal, the thoroughfares of the British Empire. Building a railway to the Near East was deemed a precondition for the Ottoman Empire to strengthen control over its peripheries.<sup>21</sup> Germany attempted to obtain access to the Persian Gulf through this railway, which passed through a vast region consisting of contemporary Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, and threaten British interests in India. At the same time, it made a detour to reach the Red Sea, helping Germany transport its troops to the areas around the Suez Canal.

The German land-power strategy, sustained by the construction of the Baghdad Railway, exerted direct impact on the regional order. Different from the Russian Trans-Siberia Railway, the Baghdad Railway had to pass through the then Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. Because of that, Germany needed allies to carry out its land-power strategy. In the process of Germany's geopolitical expansion, the Islamic world became its primary target for recruiting allies. In an effort to access the strategic corridor to the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, Germany actively built alliances with the Ottoman Empire. In August 1914, the two sides published a joint announcement in Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Tartan. This official document launched a massive propaganda campaign in the Islamic world, urging Muslims to join the jihad against the Allies. Germany and the Ottoman Empire used many pan-Islamic slogans in this document in an effort to mobilize Muslim communities in North Africa, the Middle East, Russia, and India.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, one consequences of Germany's dual strategy was a shortage of funds financing its land-power strategy. The

construction of the Baghdad Railway was much slower than expected. Unlike Russia's construction of the Trans-Siberia Railway which depended completely on its own funding, Germany could in no way finance the project on its own; yet, it refused the participation of other countries. The construction of the railway was interrupted for three whole years due to the dispute between Germany and the Ottoman Empire over the route and the failure of the section that was first completed and put into traffic to make a profit. German engineers encountered a major technological challenge when the tunnel at Taurus Mountain was dug. Moreover, Germany also met some problems in its diplomacy in relation to this project. Due to these factors, over 900 kilometers were still unfinished when World War I broke out in 1914; and by the end of 1915, there were 480 kilometers still unfinished.<sup>23</sup>

The construction of the Baghdad Railway by the Germans pushed its two major rivals — Britain and Russia — to suspend their earlier enmity and join hands to fight Germany. The railway represented German interests in southeast Europe and the Middle East; its construction threatened Britain and intimidated Russia, making it easier for Russia to accept the British proposal to ally against Germany. In other words, German land-power strategy altered the former relations among European powers and brought an unfavorable outcome to German interests.<sup>24</sup>

Some analysts hold that construction of the Baghdad Railway served as the fuse for World War I. This view is only partly correct at most. Although the Baghdad Railway had certain military significance, in the eyes of the British the intense naval race between Britain and Germany was the bigger threat.<sup>25</sup> Even if the Baghdad Railway was a fuse of World War I, it was only one of multiple fuses. Had Germany not engaged in the development of a powerful battleship fleet that directly challenged the British maritime hegemony, Britain may have been more hesitant to launch an all-out showdown against Germany. In fact, before Germany went all out in developing its battleship fleet, Britain had considered Germany, a land power, as a natural ally against France and Russia. Even in the period between 1898 and 1901 Britain tried three times to ally with Germany. However, William II was indifferent to

the British proposals since he was deeply affected by the Mahan theory of sea power and jealous of British sea power. In this sense, it was Germany's strategy of developing a strong navy that sent the country into a confrontation with Britain. That in turn forced Britain to ally with its former rivals France and Russia.<sup>26</sup>

For the same reason, the construction of the Baghdad Railway was not the whole reason that Russia engaged in a showdown with Germany. Had Germany renewed its mutual protection treaty of the Bismarck era after William II came to power in 1890, Russia would not have distrusted Germany to the point that it quickly made peace with its long-time rival France in 1894. This foreshadowed the later alliance between these two powers against Germany. Comparatively speaking, Germany's dual strategy and its mistake of making enemies in all directions contributed more to the outbreak of World War I than the construction of the Baghdad Railway.

Although Germany spent huge amounts of money to develop sea power by building up its battleship fleet, the strength of its navy was still far behind that of Britain. Despite the tactical victory the German Imperial Navy won in the battle of Jutland over the British Royal Navy, the British navy succeeded essentially in blocking the German battleships within the German ports for the remainder of World War I. Under the historical conditions at the time, the chance was slim for Germany to successfully build a dominant sea power. The basic assumption of risk theory, the theoretical foundation underlying Germany's sea-power strategy, was that Britain would not take a self-defeating path. Yet, the British chose to fight a war against Germany and defeat it, and turned out to be the victor in World War I, even at the cost of witnessing a rapid decline of its own hegemonic status and being irreversibly replaced by the United States in the international arena.

From a fiscal perspective, Germany's dual strategy seriously diverted its financial resources. If Germany had concentrated its budget in developing land power instead of sea power, the construction of the Baghdad Railway would not have been frozen for three years due to the shortage of capital. If Germany had been able to utilize these three years, the history of World War I might

have been rewritten. Some historians believe that, if Germany could have finished the project at the end of 1916 instead of August 1918, it still could have launched a deadly attack on the Suez Canal, which would have seriously threatened the lifeline of the British Empire, forcing it to make political compromises in the war. Germany would thus have emerged as a strong power exerting great impact on the Near East.<sup>27</sup>

The Treaty of Versailles of 1919 divided German interests in the Baghdad Railway and turned them over to Britain, France, and Turkey. After it became independent in 1932 Iraq purchased the part of the railway within its territory from Britain. The section of the railway between Constantinople and Baghdad was only completed and opened for traffic in 1940.

Although Germany's efforts to develop land power failed, its understanding of the importance of land power further developed after World War I. This is best exemplified by German geopolitical strategy in the period between the wars and during World War II. Karl Haushofer was the major representative of German geopolitical thinking at the time. He considered H. J. MacKinder to be the godfather of the field of geopolitics, and he himself invented the concept of living space. Haushofer affected the strategic thinking of Germany via one of his students, Rudolf Hess, an important figure within the Nazi regime.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, German understanding of the strategic significance of the Middle East and its strategy of allying the Islamic world against sea-power countries continued to play important roles in World War II.<sup>29</sup> Even during World War I, Germany's defeat was due more to its mistake of attacking multiple enemies in all directions than to its land-power strategy.

### **The New Silk Road**

Although China's land-power strategy shares some similarities with that of Russia and Germany, it fundamentally differs from them. The similarities are observable: they are all subject to strategic pressure from sea powers. For instance, China is also vigorously developing its navy, yet it is impossible to match the United States in this regard in the foreseeable future; despite the fact that the



rise of China is accompanied by a relative decline of the United States in overall national strength, China is still far behind in terms of per-capita GDP and military power; and similar to Russia and Germany in the past, China also attempts to develop land power through building railroads to strengthen its capacity to respond to the challenge from sea power.

Back in history, Russia built the Trans-Siberia Railway completely on its own territory and Germany built the Baghdad Railway that only ran across the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. In contrast, China faces many more difficulties in building railways along the ancient Silk Road on the Eurasian continent which will pass through quite more countries. Meanwhile, China's westward opening can in no way steer clear the Islamic world, but, it has not yet developed a clear and effective policy toward Muslims as Germany did, partly because China still faces many internal challenges in its religious and ethnic relations.

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The fundamental differences between the Chinese land-power strategy and that of Russia and Germany provide a far better chance for China to succeed. The major difference lies in the fact that the Russian and German land-power strategies were based on principles of geopolitics.

Nevertheless, the fundamental differences between China's land-power strategy and that of Russia and Germany are more likely to make it a success. Of them, the topmost one is that the Russian and German land-power strategies were based on the principles of geopolitics. The main objective for Russia to build the Trans-Siberia Railway and for Germany to build the Baghdad Railway was military confrontation with the sea powers. In contrast, the main goal for China to build railways in the neighbouring countries on the Eurasian continent is based on geoeconomics, aiming mainly to strengthen economic cooperation with them by increasing transportation connectivity. Geopolitics highlights conflicts of interest among countries

and tends to take a zero-sum view in international affairs, while geoeconomics focuses on the intersection of interests among countries and tends to reduce and manage conflict by strengthening cooperation and bundling interests together. By adopting the geoeconomic strategy in developing land power, it indicates China has accomplished the transformation in the mindset of handling international affairs characteristic of inland countries to one unique to maritime countries, which enables it to rid off the zero-sum mindset plunging Russia and Germany into the quagmire, and even transcend the US, a maritime power that has the tradition to always allow the geopolitical factor impact its trade policies ever since WWII. This geoeconomic strategy of China better fits the post-Cold War international environment.

The mindset of a country in handling foreign economic relations can be classified into the oceanic and inland types, depending on whether it is open or conservative. The oceanic type is open and cooperative in character, more often seen for maritime countries. Maritime countries include both island countries and rim countries that have direct access to oceans. For a mild climate and a sufficient amount of rainfall, it is easier for maritime countries to communicate with countries that are locked by geographical conditions. They trade more actively and enjoy ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity because of immigration. They are more apt to involve in the international division of labor and trade of merchandise with other countries brings them more political freedom.

In contrast, the mindset often seen in an inland country is characteristic of seclusion and conservativeness because they usually suffer from harsh climatic conditions and are far from the seas. Blocked by mountains, deserts or plateaus, inland countries have less communication with other countries. Historically, their economies were of autarky ones. Due to the lack of impact of new ideas, their political systems tend to be more authoritarian in nature.<sup>30</sup>

Although a causal linkage can be built between geographical conditions and such mindsets, the relationship between the two is not always fixed or one dimensional; we can often observe

more complicated combinations. For example, despite the fact that Russia, Germany and China all possess coastlines and direct accesses to the sea, Russia and Germany in history and China before its reform and opening-up drive were all dominated by the mindset of inland countries. Even today, the mindset in Russia is still inclined to that of an inland country. Japan is an island country, yet it was closed to the outside world during the Tokugawa era.

Under the conditions of the closed planned economy, China distanced itself from an international division of labor and regarded external economic contacts as threats. During the three decades and more of reform and opening up, the most profound change witnessed in China's mindset was the transformation from the one characteristic of an inland country to that of a maritime country regarding economic relations. China has taken proactive attitude in introducing foreign investments, opening up its domestic market, getting deeply involved in the global production system, and quickly shifting from pure inter-industry trade to intra-industry and intra-firm trade.

At the same time, the mindset of a country can be defined as one driven by geopolitics or one by geoeconomics, depending on which of the two plays the dominant role. Although the literature on international political economy often highlights the openness of the multilateral trade system represented by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the World Trade Organization led by the United States in the post-war era, it often neglects the fact that the United States, while supporting free trade, has not only practiced asymmetric cooperation in international trade with its allies, allowing them to export their products to the US market while keeping their domestic markets closed to American exports,<sup>31</sup> but also continued to use economic sanctions and embargos as a geopolitical means in both the Cold War era and the post-Cold War period.

In contrast, China has rarely been constrained by geopolitical factors in its efforts to promote cooperation and economic regionalization. Both the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road aim at developing communities of

shared interests and destinies by way of encouraging free trade and bundling various interests. China does not let geopolitical factors affect the regional economic cooperation programs it advocates, such as 10 plus 1, China-Japan-South Korea economic cooperation, and 10 plus 6, in which all countries concerned in the region can participate in disregard of their different political systems. As the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road published by China's National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce points out, although this land-power strategy based on geoeconomics is initiated by China, the principle of “jointly built through consultation to meet the interests of all” is to be observed to promote “alignment and coordination of the development strategies of various countries along the Belt and Road.”<sup>32</sup> A good example of replacing the geopolitical mindset with geoeconomical one is the joint communiqué issued by the Chinese and Russian governments in May 2015, which announced the docking of the Silk Road Economic Belt with the Eurasian Economic Union.

On the part of the US, it excludes China, the No. 1 trading country on earth, from the Trans-Pacific Economic Partnership. When addressing the US Congress, President Barack Obama repeatedly highlighted the geopolitical implications of the TPP. Recently, the United States tried hard to dissuade its allies from joining the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank initiated by China. The fact that Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Australia and South Korea — all allies of the US — had joined this bank despite pressure from the US clearly indicates that the US practice of using geopolitical principles to guide regional economic cooperation is outdated, while the Chinese geoeconomical strategy turns out to be more appealing.

The Chinese geoeconomical mindset is a product of in-depth participation in the global production system of the post-Cold War era. In this era of globalization, multinational corporations have turned out to be the major pushing hands for globalization and the intra-firm trade within them has gradually eroded the share of inter-industry trade.<sup>33</sup> In this new economic form, the interest

boundaries of nation-states have become increasingly blurred and given rise to overlapped interests. As increasingly involved in the international division of labor, China has become more and more open in its view about foreign economic cooperation, and has come to firmly believe that conflicts of interest among different countries can be resolved through economic cooperation.<sup>34</sup> In the post-Cold War era, it becomes irrational to use geopolitical means to intervene in regional economic cooperation. Regardless of the political system of a country, so long as it participates in regional economic cooperation it will enjoy an expanded market. These complements brought about by such economic cooperation will transcend the limitations of political systems and ideology.

Even in terms of technology, China's effort to promote the development of a transportation infrastructure, such as railways, was much better when compared with the problems Russia and Germany undertook at the time. High-speed rail technology has greatly changed man's understanding of space and time. The planned Beijing-Moscow high-speed rail is a first step. If the cross-continental high-speed railroad can be completed, one would travel from Beijing to London in three or four days. Eurasian regional economic integration would no longer be a remote dream, but a reality.

Compared to 100 years ago, the international environment now is more favorable to the Chinese pursuit of geoeconomics-based land-power strategy.

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Compared to 100 years ago, the current international environment is more favorable to the Chinese pursuit of geoeconomics-based land-power strategy.

The origin of World War I involved the British containment of Germany and the resulting German desperation in an era in which Western countries all practiced imperialism. After the War, the US deeply reflected on this historical lesson and sponsored the establishment of a new international economic order based on a multilateral regime of free trade. Although the US is hedging against the rise of China, at least it has not yet come to a direct

confrontation with China to date. As in any other country, there is more than one voice in the US. Some Americans advocate a confrontation with China. The key here, however, is whether this argument can become a persistent national policy paradigm. Moreover, the US option in regard to its China policy also hinges on how China responds to the US challenge. The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, plus the steps China adopted to strengthen cooperation with Russia in the past two years have produced a hedging effect against the US strategy of pivot to Asia and the TPP driven by geopolitics.<sup>35</sup> Now, the US has already started negotiations with China for a mutual investment protection treaty, and some American think tanks have even proposed that the two countries start negotiations on a bilateral free trade agreement.<sup>36</sup> Compared to the relations between Russia and Japan, and between Germany and Britain in the old time, the multi-level communication mechanisms so far established between China and the US are conducive for reducing strategic misjudgments.

There is no fundamental conflict between China and the US-led international economic order. Over the past 35 years of reform and opening up, China has relied on the multilateral free trade regime sustained by the US sea power. China's current effort to develop land power means a hedge against the risk of being excluded from this regime for geopolitical reasons. The China-driven Eurasian economic integration does not mean to confront the TPP led by the United States, but to show to the US the cost of excluding China from this multilateral free trade regime and thus urging it to accept China in trans-Pacific economic integration. When the US welcomes China to the trans-Pacific economic integration, China would also vigorously push the Eurasian continent to open to the United States, and bring the United States into the regional economic cooperation sustained by the alignment and coordination between the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union. This Chinese position differs significantly from the Russian and German positions in the past that rejected proposals for compromise and alliance with Japan and Britain, single-mindedly focusing on confrontation.



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Differences in geographical location also provide China with better chances than Russia and Germany to succeed in developing geoeconomics-based land-power strategy.

Differences in geographical location also provide China with better chances than Russia and Germany to succeed in developing geoeconomics-based land-power strategy.

China boasts both long coastlines and numerous unfrozen ports, as well as extensive strategic depth on land.<sup>37</sup> China can shift its strategic focus between sea power and land power, while neither Russia nor Germany had such geographical advantages. Similar to the Silk Road Economic Belt, the

21st Century Silk Road it initiates serves also as a geoeconomics-based sea-power strategy. China is taking advantage of geographical conditions to simultaneously pursue both sea power and land power, both sustained by geoeconomics. Now, countries involved in the Eurasian economic integration differ significantly from those in the trans-Pacific economic integration. The former includes mainly inland and rim countries, such as China, Russia, the European Union, India, Iran and Turkey, plus Central Asia, part of the Middle East, and East-Central Europe. In contrast, the latter primarily involves maritime countries, such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and some Southeast Asian countries. The overlap between the two groups is small. If China succeeds in building multiple routes of land bridges on the Eurasian continent, it will establish an effective strategic hedge against trans-Pacific economic integration.

### Discussion

To what extent is the current situation faced by China and the United States identical to that faced by Germany and Britain before World War I? What lessons can China learn from Russian and German experiences in history?

Similar to Russia and Germany's situations, China, as a rising power, has now come to the stage in which its interests may collide with those of the existing hegemonic sea power of the United States,

and faced strategic pressure from the United States. At the same time, China is also taking its advantages as a land power, building up its strength in the competition with sea power by attempting to lift the geographical restraints on geopolitics with the new important technology of railway transportation.

Even if a rising power does not develop its land power, it will not be easy to make peace with a sea power country. Even if Russia and Germany had not pursued land power by building the Trans-Siberia Railway and the Baghdad Railway, it was still likely that Britain would threaten Siberia and the Far East of Russia through Central Asia and Northeast China. It could still seal the German navy in the North Sea. One of the important reasons for the outbreak of World War I was that all the parties concerned shared the belief that war was the only solution to the geopolitical problem and was thus inevitable.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, as the United States adopted the "pivot to Asia" strategy and China's external environments quickly deteriorated, China could experience strong domestic reactions from nationalism and completely lose control over the situation if it failed to develop effective measures to respond to external challenges. Liberalist diplomacy cannot always safeguard peace, while appeasement often leads to war. Russia paid a heavy price in the early 1990s. If China fails to build the Silk Road Economic Belt, the chance for it to head toward a collision of interests with the United States will be higher.

China's land-power strategy aiming at cooperation in geoeconomics is fundamentally different from that adopted by Russia and Germany, which aimed at military confrontation in geopolitics. China's land-power strategy represents a position of realist liberalism.

The realist liberalism exemplified in China's land-power strategy partially accepts the basic assumption of realism about international relations, i.e., conflicts of interest exist among nation-states. However, different from realism's biased focus on conflict and confrontation, realist liberalism holds that overlaps of interest also exist among nation-states, and whether the conflict of interest or the overlap of interest will be dominant depends on the strategic interactions among the nation-states. Both realist liberalism and

liberalism lay great store by cooperation; the major difference between them lies in the means to pursue cooperation. Liberalism highlights the benefits of cooperation; its only response to counterbalance from other countries is to give them more benefits. In contrast, when responding to a similar situation realist liberalism will highlight the cost of noncooperation. Its hedging strategy aims at luring the opposing parties back to cooperation by demonstrating the cost and loss of interest of noncooperation. At the same time, this hedging strategy also prepares the practicing country with countermeasures in case the opposing parties refuse to cooperate.<sup>39</sup>

China's realist liberalism is based on a clear understanding that cooperation between countries with conflicting interests in international politics often has to be backed up by strength. Because maintaining the balance of power on the Eurasian continent is a strategic interest of the US, the only way for China to effectively hedge against strategic pressure from the US is to develop its land power on the Eurasian continent. The Chinese pursuit of land power does not aim at challenging the US sea power; instead, it aims at demonstrating the cost of US actions to squeeze China's strategic space. If the US does not want to push China to ally with Russia, developing a new model of a major power relationship may be considered as an option. The US strategy of "pivot to Asia" and the TPP have already pushed China to promote Eurasian economic integration; the outcome of this strategy has already led to a direct challenge to the international order established by the US. When the traditional liberal and realist foreign policies fail to respond to serious external challenges, China has to attempt to lift geographical restraints on its geopolitical position by building a transportation infrastructure, making use of its unique strategic geographic advantage, and relying on geoeconomic means to dilute and divert strategic pressure from the US. This will not only enable China to maintain world peace and promote free trade, but also develop itself and build a status in the new international order that reflects its strength.

China should learn the lesson from the past experiences of Russia and Germany that it should never proceed from the zero-sum geopolitical approach to handle international relations,

blindly focusing on military confrontation. Historically, Russia and Germany adopted the land-power strategy to prepare solely for military confrontation in geopolitics. As discussed earlier, if they had not blindly pursued sea power, or had known when to compromise, they might not have made a thorough break in their relations with Japan and Britain respectively to head toward war. China's land-power strategy, which is based on geoeconomics rather than geopolitics, is essentially a hedging strategy in that it is never aimed at conflict and confrontation. Rather, it is tended to show to the other side the cost of non-cooperation and guide it back to cooperation.

Russia and Germany's pursuit of both maritime and land power produced a great negative impact on their land-power strategies. For both, their traditional advantages were on land. Yet, they vigorously developed their naval forces in an effort to compete with the sea powers. Due to the huge gaps between them and their rivals, they naturally failed to counterbalance the overwhelming superiority of their rival sea powers even though they both had tried their best.

China should get particularly revealing enlightenment from the German sea-power strategy adopted on the basis of the risk theory. This theory assumes that the existing sea power will behave rationally. One fundamental defect in it is that no existing sea power in the world would willingly back down from the arena of history even though confrontation with the rising sea power could speed up its decline. As Britain did in the past, the US may also succumb to emotion, ideology and pressure when making military decisions. In China, there are some people who voice opposition to the land-power strategy and hold that China should follow a sea-power strategy which they think is the only correct way out for China. However, the lessons of Russia and Germany indicate that radical development of sea power is highly possible to lead to a confrontation and even war with the existing sea power(s). China's active efforts in developing sea power in recent years have already caused fear in both big countries, such as the United States, Japan, India and Australia, and small countries in Southeast Asia, who have begun to ally against China. The definition of sea power in the West involves the exclusive control of all important sea-lanes in the

world by military force; the components of sea power involve not only aircraft carriers but also overseas military bases and multilateral military alliances.

China should develop its maritime military power to safeguard its sovereignty and rights. Both China's development of anti-access/area-denial capacity and its reclamation islands are defensive rather than offensive in nature. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that international politics always involves strategic interaction among countries. The ultimate determining factor in other countries' responses to China's sea-power strategy is other countries' perception of Chinese efforts to develop sea power, not the Chinese perception of these efforts. If China desires to avoid confrontation with the existing hegemonic sea power of the United States, it should avoid becoming a sea power that exclusively controls important sea-lanes in the world, adjust the rhythm and wait for proper opportunities and, at the same time, strengthen communication with other countries and make compromises when necessary. Now, it would be a big risk for China to assume, similar to what Germany believed back in history, that the US will not engage in a naval confrontation with China, to naively equate a couple of aircraft carriers to sea power, and to engage in an unwinnable sea war against the maritime allies led by the United States. Although the United States has not succeeded so far in bringing about any economic outcome with the TPP, it has succeeded in reactivating its overseas military bases of the Cold War era in the Asia-Pacific and formed a maritime alliance against China through its "pivot to Asia" strategy. Organizationally, the United States is ready for a sea war with China. Under these circumstances, if China still believes that the United States will not engage in a war with China, China may repeat the same mistake made by Germany in the past.

The strategic misjudgments between China and the United States may have serious consequences. On the one hand, many analysts in America believe that "Washington has already believed that the threat from China's reclamation islands in the South China Sea is already bigger than the Russian intervention in Ukraine, as far as the challenge to the postwar international order led by the United

States is concerned.”<sup>40</sup> On the other, many commentators in China hold that, in terms of criticality, none of the three claims made by the United States in the South China Sea — peace and stability, free passage of commerce, and military actions in economic zones — is a vital interest of the United States.<sup>41</sup> From the US perspective, the conflict of interest in the South China Sea has already signaled a potential policy paradigm shift in US policy toward China. From the Chinese perspective, however, these shifts seem to be nothing more than some variations in the periodic ups and downs. History will prove whether this cognitive gap will result in a heavy cost for both countries.

The decision-making process for big powers to engage in confrontation and war is always tortuous. Facing huge costs, a relatively strong anti-war inertia exists in every country regarding military confrontation. For the same reason, however, it is also difficult to reverse the path once big powers begin to seriously consider confrontation; the entire system leans toward the military option, and the mass media begins to advocate war as the only option for solving problems. In order to avoid falling into the Thucydides Trap, the biggest challenge for the Chinese in the next decade will be whether China is able to protect the sovereignty of its territory and meanwhile avoid stimulating the state apparatus of the existing hegemonic sea power of the United States to turn toward confrontation and war with China.

The United States has not launched a containment policy against China because of the latter’s westward opening policy. Strengthening its ties with Japan through the US-Japan Security Treaty and its relationships with Australia, India and ASEAN countries are the indispensable components of the “pivot to Asia” strategy. China’s westward opening policy has not contributed to the adoption of these measures. If we consider the US hardened position in 2015 on South China Sea issues as proof of strengthened containment against China, it was caused by China developing its sea power by building reclamation islands. This is not to argue that China should give up its efforts in building reclamation islands and developing its maritime military power; rather, China should adjust its rhythm, wait for proper opportunities, and move back



and forth. It should not run the risk of losing big for small gains. It is true that the United States has attempted to obstruct Chinese efforts in developing its geoeconomics-based land power; US efforts to persuade its allies to keep their distance from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is a good example. Nevertheless, the failure of these efforts shows that the probability of success for such endeavors has become increasingly slim, even if the United States attempts to strengthen economic containment against China's geoeconomic strategy. This is because other countries can easily identify their own interests in the Chinese "One Belt, One Road" Initiative.

This article holds that protecting the strategic corridors to economic, energy and resource centers is a major objective of geopolitics. Important transportation technologies, especially something like a railroad that spans national borders, directly bear on the interaction capacity of nation-states in the international system, a combination of capacity in transportation technology and commonly shared norms in the international system. Transportation technology directly affects human actions and the institutional arrangements that govern these actions, and the interaction capacity of the international system defines the extent and pattern of interaction among nation-states.<sup>42</sup> Although many technologies have changed the lives of human beings, only a few technologies have changed the way this world operates. The reason is simple: geography is static; only a few technologies can fundamentally change the interaction between human beings and geography, and still fewer technologies can change the pattern of interaction among nation-states. These technologies not only change the rules of interaction among nation-states but, more importantly, they also define the basic characteristics of our time.<sup>43</sup> China's initiative for constructing transportation infrastructure represented by railways and its geoeconomics-based land-power strategy may bring a new era of Eurasian economic integration while maintaining world peace and promoting free trade.

*The Railroad and Land-Power Strategy:  
Historical Lessons Learned for the “Silk Road Economic Belt” Strategy*

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5 Wu Zhengyu, “Xiang ‘yang’ haishi xiang ‘lu’? dui gaotie yu zhongguo 21shiji dazhanlue de zaisikao” (“Toward ‘Land’ or Toward ‘Sea’?: Reflection on the High-Speed Rail and China’s Grand Strategy in the 21st Century”), *Ershiyi Shiji* (*The 21st Century*), February 2013, pp. 105-113; Wu Zhengyu, “Toward ‘Land’ or Toward ‘Sea’? The High Speed Rail and China’s Grand Strategy,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 66, No. 3, 2013, pp. 53-66; Zhang Wenmu, “Sichou zhilu yu zhongguo xiyu anquan” (“The Silk Road and the Security of Western China”), March 29, 2014, available at: [http://www.guancha.cn/ZhangWenMu/2014\\_03\\_29\\_217863.shtml](http://www.guancha.cn/ZhangWenMu/2014_03_29_217863.shtml), May 1, 2015. The strategy of advancing westward advocated by Wang Jisi differs from my argument of the hedging strategy. See Wang Jisi, “‘Xijin,’ zhongguo diyuan zhanlue de zaipingheng” (“Advancing Westward, the Rebalance of China’s Geopolitical Strategy”), *Huanqiuwan*, October 17, 2012, available at: [http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion\\_world/2012-10/3193760.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2012-10/3193760.html), May 1, 2015. Wu Zhengyu points out in note 2 of his English-language article: The logic he uses to criticize my argument could also be applied to criticize Wang Jisi’s argument. Nevertheless, the relationships among our views on the impact of China’s westward opening on China-US relations are more complicated. First, I believe that the most important strategic interest of the United States is to maintain its hegemonic position in sea power, especially in the Asia-Pacific region; this is the primary reason for the US adoption of the “pivot to Asia” strategy. Wang Jisi also holds that the competition between China and the United States in the Asia-Pacific region has become a zero-sum game. If China continues to strengthen its naval expansion in the Asia-Pacific region, it will significantly increase the chances of a collision with US interests. In contrast, Wu Zhengyu contends that the primary strategic interest of the United States is to maintain the balance of power on the Eurasian continent. He argues that the United States is not concerned with China “pursuing maritime development” because this will strengthen China’s dependence on the international order led by the United States. Wu Zhengyu advocates that from now on China should concentrate on maritime expansion; however, he avoids using the phrase “sea power” but instead uses the phrase “pursuing maritime development,” which does not have a clear connotation. If “pursuing maritime development” refers to the concept of sea power with the clear meaning of developing military strength, it immediately reveals the self-contradiction of this phrase: it is unlikely that the United States will welcome the development of Chinese naval power since that will directly undermine US hegemonic sea power. If “pursuing maritime development” does not refer to sea power in the military sense, this immediately demonstrates the self-contradiction of Wu’s own argument because his entire

article is a discussion of geopolitical strategy. Second, I argue that maintaining the balance of power on the Eurasian continent is a strategic interest of the United States that could be negatively affected by China's westward opening. Because of this, China could rely on its land power resulting from the westward opening to hedge against strategic pressure from the sea power of the United States. In other words, the primary goal of the westward opening is to hedge. In contrast, Wang Jisi believes that US strategic interest is relatively weak. The primary goal for China's strategy of advancing westward is to avoid bilateral conflict and create opportunities for cooperation. The important difference between my argument and that of Wu Zhengyu lies not in the understanding of the impact of China's westward opening on US strategic interests, but in the next step in the reasoning: I argue that, because China's westward opening brings negative impact on US strategic interests, it is possible for China to establish its land power to hedge against US sea power, demonstrate to the United States the price it may pay for noncooperation, and thus bring the United States back to a state of cooperation. Needless to say, the precondition for China to achieve this goal is to make sure that a hedging strategy does not change to a confrontation strategy when designing and implementing specific policies. In contrast, Wu Zhengyu believes that the development of Chinese interests on the Eurasian continent will negatively affect US interests, and the United States will strengthen its containment against China.

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10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 The China-Changchun Railway refers to both the primary route of the Chinese Eastern Railway from Manzhouli to Shuifenhe with a length of 1,481 kilometers and the branch route from Harbin to Dalian via Changchun with a length of 987 kilometers. After World War II it was controlled by the Soviet Union. In September 1952, the Chinese government and the Soviet government announced that ownership of the China-Changchun Railway to be officially turned over to China.

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