Australia and the New Silk Roads

In January 1904 Sir Halford Mackinder, the director of the London School of Economics, presented a paper to the Royal Geographical Society. The paper was entitled “The Geographical Pivot of History.” In his presentation to the Royal Geographical Society Mackinder described a future in which world power no longer lay in control of the great sea lanes of the planet, but in a unitary land mass that he called the “world island”, encompassing parts of Africa, Europe and Asia.

The “heartland” of this unitary land mass was, in Mackinder’s terminology, Euro-Asia. Who rules the heartland, he wrote, commands the world island, and who rules the world island commands the world.

In this geopolitical concept, Australia and the Americas were outlying “smaller islands”. Not small obviously in a physical sense, but smaller in being peripheral to the geopolitical centre of the world, Euro-Asia.

For the 400 years preceding Mackinder’s address to the RGS, the commanders of the world were those who, through the exercise of great naval power, controlled the key sea lanes of the world.

That meant, in 1904, the great European powers, in particular Spain, France and the United Kingdom, whose great naval fleets underwrote colonial conquest in Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Oceania. It was such a concept of naval power that dominated United States strategic thinking in the post 1945 era when the US superseded the UK as the world’s dominant naval power.

It led, for example, to the US establishing a string of naval and military bases around the world. Depending on how they are counted, those bases now total at least 750 and by some estimates more than 1000. One of the major goals of US strategic policy has been to be able to exercise control over the great “choke points” of maritime traffic, from Panama to the Persian Gulf, from the Malacca Straits to the Mediterranean.

The assertion of military power was accompanied by the ruthless enforcement of political will upon countries whose geography, resources or potential to threaten US hegemony caused them to be of strategic interest to the US.

Since 1945 the US has intervened, not always successfully, in the internal affairs of more than 70 countries. It has bombed, invaded, and overthrown the governments of literally dozens of nations. Tens of millions of people have died as a direct consequence. Millions more have been forced to flee, either internally or abroad. Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2012, and Syria in 2015 are only some of the better known and more recent examples.

There is no rational foundation for thinking that this is likely to change in the foreseeable future. It is probably not possible for the US to control Mackinder’s “heartland” although that is not for lack of trying. Rather, the geopolitical imperatives of US strategy have been directed at disruption and containment.

A prime illustration of disruption has been Operation Gladio, which operated in western, northern and southern Europe in the post world war 2 years. Its main objective was to prevent the rise of left wing governments, which might have threatened the “anti-communism” imperatives of US foreign policy. As Ganser and Cottrell have amply demonstrated, under the guise of being a rear guard against a Soviet invasion, covert forces carried out acts of overt terrorism, manipulated governments, and carried out a string of false flag attacks on civilian targets.
Operation Cyclone was another example of disruption tactics. It involved the training of Islamic militants in Pakistan, with the assistance of Osama bin Laden, for insertion into Afghanistan for the purpose of undermining its then left-leaning secular government. A primary goal, as President Carter’s chief foreign policy adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski explained, was to lure the Soviet Union to intervene and give the Soviet government “its own Vietnam”.

Afghanistan was not the only target for the Islamic militants trained in Pakistan with US and Saudi money. It was also aimed at the predominantly Islamic republics of the USSR to the north of Afghanistan and also the western region of China. Gladio B is the modern incarnation of this policy, with ISIS being a particularly prominent contemporary example.

That this process might destroy whole civil societies is met with a casual indifference by its progenitors. Zbigniew Brzezinski’s view that what were a “few stirred up Muslims” compared to the collapse of the Soviet Union is one example. Madeleine Albright’s view that half a million dead old people and children as a direct consequence of US sanctions and bombings in Iraq between 1991 and 2003 was “worth it” as a price for containing Saddam Hussein was another chilling illustration.

The phenomenal rise of Chinese economic and military power, particularly in the past thirty years, instead of being welcomed by the west, has led to a redoubling of efforts to constrain and limit Chinese influence. Because of China’s enormous trade and financial clout in western economies the attacks are more subtle than they have been, for example, on Russia which is currently undergoing a campaign of denigration and demonization in the western media that is unparalleled in modern times.

The tools for the attempted containment of China are many and varied. On one level it is the symbolically offensive, such as snubbing the 70th anniversary celebrations of China’s victory over Japan. That war commenced in 1931 with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and continued until 1945. Precise figures are impossible to ascertain, but China lost between 20 and 30 million people in that war, many times the total, military and civilian casualties of the western allies during world war two.

Only the Soviet Union, which lost between 25 and 30 million people fighting Hitler’s armies between 1941 and 1945 come close in terms of comparable losses. Russia’s 70th anniversary celebrations of the victory over Hitler and his allies was similarly snubbed by the western powers. That the Soviet Union and China, between them, bore the vast bulk of the fighting, suffered the greatest losses, and were almost certainly the reason German and Japanese fascism was defeated, is scarcely recognized in western accounts.

On an altogether more dangerous level is the American encouragement of Japanese rearmament and the recently authorization by the Japanese parliament of the right of Japanese forces to operate outside Japanese territorial waters.

The tools for containment of China even extend, one might think with astonishing chutzpah, to the Americans endeavouring to enlist Vietnam in their anti-China embrace. The Vietnamese are unlikely to welcome this manifestly self-serving policy, knowing all too well the consequences of the last American intervention in their country. Millions dead and an ongoing environmental catastrophe are not lessons easily forgotten or overlooked.

The two major “trade” treaties currently under negotiation, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), exemplify the “soft power” attempted containment of Russia and China. The former covers the Atlantic and Pacific countries, but equally pointedly excludes China. The latter is centred on Pacific and Asian countries, but equally pointedly excludes China.

To describe them as “trade treaties” is a complete misnomer. They have two fundamental aims: a consolidation of American power, both corporate and political, and the isolation of Russia and China.

The schizophrenic nature of Australia’s trade and foreign policy is encapsulated by its membership of the secretive TPP discussions on the one hand, and its desperation on the other hand to complete a free trade agreement (signed but not yet ratified) with its largest trading partner by far, the Peoples Republic of China.

China and Russia, for their part, have responded to the blatant provocations and threats of the US by forging an entirely different set of alliances. Polices that, in fact, are bringing to fruition Mackinder’s vision of a heartland that dominates and controls the “world island”. Moreover, they are doing it by peaceful means, by building the greatest infrastructure program the world has ever seen.

The Russian component has two major elements. The first of these was the establishment of the Eurasian Economic
Union (EEU), signed on 29 May 2014. The initial members were Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan later joined them. At the present time the member countries have a total population of approximately 183 million people and a total gross domestic product (GDP) of over US$4 trillion.

The second element of the Russian strategy has been to forge an ever increasingly close alliance with China. Links already existed between the two great powers through the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) organization established in 2009 following several years of informal negotiations.

In 2015 the BRICS nations accounted for over three billion people or more than 40 percent of the world’s total population and a combined GDP of more than US$6 trillion (about 20% of the world total). That GDP is expected to double in the next ten years.

The continued eastward expansion of NATO, contrary to assurances given to the Russians at the time of the unification of Germany, has naturally been a major concern of the Russian leadership. They rightly see those moves, the bellicose rhetoric from Washington, and the US financed and organized coup in Ukraine, as a threat to their sovereignty and indeed their very existence as a nation.

The strident misrepresentation in the western media of the realities of the Ukrainian situation, the shooting down of MH17 by Ukrainian forces, and the sanctions imposed upon Russia under the ludicrous pretext of Russian “aggression” by the US and its acolytes in Europe and Australia, are seen as a forerunner of worse events.

Had the Russians reacted as the Americans plainly hoped to the provocations of MH17, the Ukrainian coup and the civil war raging in Eastern Ukraine, there was a very high likelihood, as the astute American commentator Stephen Cohen has pointed out, of a third world war. The unthinkable consequences of such a war appear not to trouble the neocon elite pushing such policies in Washington. American “exceptionalism” appears in their eyes to extend to immunity from the consequences of their policies. Upon such a dangerous idiocy may the world very well end.

Instead of reacting as hoped by the Americans, the Russian government has pursued a very different set of priorities. They have absorbed without complaint, for example, more than one million Ukrainian refugees across their common border. That has received virtually zero coverage in the western media whose preferred focus is upon the refugees fleeing Iraq, Syria, Libya and elsewhere into Europe. Ironically, the fundamental cause of both types of refugee exodus is the same: interference and regime change, actual or attempted, in all the countries mentioned. The common denominator again, is American foreign policy.

There are some faint glimmers of hope in the Ukrainian context. The Russian government, with the co-operation of the French and the Germans, has sought, through the Minsk agreements, a peaceful resolution of the Ukrainian crisis. It is significant that the US is not a party to those settlement talks between the four countries. It is even more significant that the French and the Germans now recognize that Ukraine’s almost complete disregard for the terms of the Minsk agreements, at the instigation of the Americans, is seriously hurting not only their own economies through prolonging the sanctions imposed on Russia, but also endangers the hard won post world war 2 relative peace in Europe.

Even more important to the Russians than the BRICS alliance is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), initially a six member grouping of nations consisting of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but joined by India and Pakistan in July 2015. Other nations, including Iran and Mongolia have observer status and are likely to become full members sooner rather than later.

When one looks at a map it is immediately obvious that the combined membership of BRICS, the EEU and the SCO cover the vast majority of Mackinder’s “heartland.”

It is to this vast region, incorporating as it does 40% of the planet’s land surface, and 50% of its total population, as well as including some of the world’s most dynamic economies, that President Xi of China has directed his new economic development programs, commonly referred to as the “new silk roads”.

The details of this program are astonishing. Barely a week passes without fresh announcements. Within ten years from now, for example, high-speed rail links on three different routes will provide goods between Vladivostok and Moscow, Beijing to Berlin, and through a southern route via Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. Ancillary developments will link Pakistan with Iran, providing the latter with a port for exporting oil and gas to Europe without the vagaries and dangers of pipelines through south west Asian countries that are currently embroiled in the ISIS crisis.

When completed, within the next five years, the high speed rail will deliver goods from Beijing to Moscow in 48
hours, a tiny fraction of the time required to ship goods by traditional maritime routes patrolled by potentially hostile ships of the US fleets.

As part of Mr Xi’s “win-win” strategies, similar high-speed rail lines will link southern China with Laos, Thailand and Malaysia to Singapore. The economic benefits associated with these developments, southeast, south and west from China, will transform the lives of tens of millions of people along the construction routes. All of this without a shot being fired nor a single government threatened or overthrown.

China has also signed multiple deals with members of SCO and Mongolia to develop the enormous mineral resources that remain relatively untapped in the vast Eurasia region. This will have significant implications for traditional suppliers of raw materials to China, including Australia. The Australian government naively believes that it can continue to be an active and enthusiastic participant in US containment policies directed against China, and still maintain a favoured trade status.

Such is the dependence of Australian prosperity upon China’s purchases of its raw materials that even a slight faltering of Chinese demand for Australian minerals has seen Australia’s GDP growth plunge to its lowest level in 20 years.

Australia’s forthcoming Defence White Paper is expected to maintain the fiction that Australia can be militarily significant and a partner in future to US adventurism in the Asia-Pacific region and have that overlooked when China is looking at the pattern of its future sources of supply.

There are however some faint rays of hope that Australia may adopt policies toward the Eurasian developments that more realistically reflect its national interests.

The first of these is that Australia has joined with more than 50 other nations in becoming a foundation member of the Chinese initiated Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, a major vehicle through which the ambitious New Silk Roads projects will be partially funded. Moreover, Australia signing up to the AIIB, after much equivocation and demands that China ignored, was done in the face of strong opposition from the Americans. Only Japan, of the major Asian nations, succumbed to American blandishments not to join the AIIB.

American opposition to vehicles that will peacefully transform for the better the lives of a significant number of countries and people in Eurasia is itself a telling rebuttal to any benign claims made in respect of America’s so-called pivot to Asia.

What is happening with the economic, political and financial frameworks associated with BRICS, the SCO and the New Silk Roads is nothing short of a transformation of the world economy and geopolitical structure away from the Anglo-American dominance of the last 400 years to a wholly new model. Although not discussed in this article, the removal of the US dollar as the world’s sole reserve currency, a clear objective of Russian and Chinese policy, will do more to remove US hegemony than any other single factor. It is little wonder that the Americans seem prepared to take enormous risks to prevent that from happening.

The second promising sign for Australia is that it has a new Prime Minister. Malcolm Turnbull has made a number of positive remarks both before and since assuming the role on 14 September 2015. At a meeting of the Australia-China Business Council in August 2015, Mr Turnbull said:

“We are in the most exciting, creative, disruptive time of human history. China is a big part of it – perhaps the biggest single part of it- and we need to be as mindful as the Chinese of the need to rebalance our economy.”

On other occasions Mr Turnbull has acknowledged the central role of China and its constructive participation in the region as being essential to its continued peaceful rise.

Completely unlike his predecessor Tony Abbott, Mr Turnbull evinces a more nuanced and subtle approach to world affairs. One suspects there will be no threats to “shirt front” Mr Putin or anybody else for that matter under a Turnbull Prime Ministership.

Against that is the caveat always applicable to Australia’s political leadership and ably summarised by Australia’s former ambassador to China Stephen Fitzgerald in his recent book. Mr Fitzgerald had this warning:

“The dynamics of Asia will not let Australia just go away to some imagined Anglosphere heaven. Our interest and our benefit lie in accepting that we are part of this region, a part of Asia. But as Australia comes closer to Asia in the next decades, and more under the influence of powers with a different kind of history, it will also need to take great
care of these ideals and values and be uncompromising in their defence, at home, and from any encroachment from abroad. Which means we have to understand Asia at least as well as they understand us. I can be optimistic about the Australian people because they have shown themselves able to understand, and to change. But about the politicians....?

A singular hope for Australians is that the actions of the Turnbull government will match the promise of the rhetoric. A failure to grasp the opportunities presented by the transfer of power and economic influence manifest in the world being created by Chinese and Russian initiatives will likely condemn Australia to the marginal inconsequentiality that Mackinder so brilliantly set out more than a century ago.

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