

Power shift

Glyn Ford
on China

Great Game On: The Contest for Central Asia and Global Supremacy
Geoff Raby
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Australia's former flamboyant, if not to say eccentric, ambassador to China has a challenging take on the geopolitics of central Asia. It's a world of churn and change. For him Washington's headlong retreat from Afghanistan that turned into a rout has changed the rules of the game. That shambles eliminated America as a player, leaving the prize of Central Asia - Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, plus Afghanistan and Mongolia - to a contest between Beijing and Moscow. That is on hold for the moment, as both have other fish to fry - Moscow with Ukraine and Beijing with Washington. But it leads to the need for a fundamental reappraisal of China's strategic objectives and Europe-China relations, independent of Washington.

Raby is as scornful of China's threat to Europe as he is dismissive of the Russia threat in the Victorian era to the British Empire. Both illustrate the deliberate suspension of critical faculties. The Russians showed little inclination to invade India. If they had, they were woefully short of the capacity to do so. That didn't stop either New South Wales building pre-emptive fortifications, or the 1903 British invasion of Tibet. Today China's the stand-in. He puts it in British terms - but the same would be true of the EU. There is no war between Britain and China, North Korea or Iran that Britain doesn't choose to enter or which the US doesn't choose for it. Why persist in swimming towards a sinking ship? Defending Britain is easy; what is much more expensive and dangerous is persisting with a military posture designed for expeditionary deployment. The dual standards are brazen. Beijing's failure to admonish Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine is mirrored by Delhi.

Yet while the first is rightly condemned, the second only sees Britain, the EU and US competing to make Modi's day with soft trade deals.

Great Game On more controversially argues China's case in Xinjiang. Beijing has a well-founded fear of an Islamic fundamentalism insurrection in the province. The East Turkestan Independence Movement and Islamic State - Khorasan, the Central Asia offshoot of Islamic State, are recognised by the UN as terrorist organisations. Beijing is grappling with a real and diffi-

it, 'One hears footsteps without seeing anyone coming down the stairs'. China long and loudly denounced the 'Unequal Treaties' a weak Beijing was forced to sign with the West in the Nineteenth Century. The British, Japanese and Germans all restored the status quo ante. Unfinished business rests only with Russia. China's territorial disputes with India and Japan - even Taiwan - are a mere nothing compared to the million square kilometres Moscow wrested from Beijing in that series of predatory Treaties in the 1800's. They too have had their skirmishes and been close to war comparatively recently. The 1972 Nixon trip to China was to exploit the Communist schism to undermine the Soviet Union. One result was, from the late 1970's up to the collapse of the Soviet Empire, joint US-Chinese listening posts in Xinjiang.

China is now in the end game consolidating the power shift between Beijing and Washington. When that is delivered the shift follows with Moscow. Russia has history on its side, with all - apart manifestly for Afghanistan - more Russian than Chinese. Beijing's counter is resources. Its Belt and Road Initiative is the financial equivalent of Washington's 1947 post-war Marshall Plan for Western Europe. The offer of tens of billions of euros for physical and virtual infrastructure is highly seductive for those Central Asia states lack-

ing oil and gas and with untapped mineral resources. This is an ante Moscow just can't up. Cash talks louder than culture, even if some end falling into a debt trap. The double problem for Moscow is the whole process undermines not just influence, but infrastructure. China's compass is East-West, not South-North. A railway from China through Afghanistan to Pakistan's ports, like a number of similar projects, loses Russia's Trans-Siberian custom and strategic value. If Raby is right, we will increasingly live in interesting times.



cult question - like Britain was in the early 1970's when they introduced internment without trial in Northern Ireland in an attempt to combat the IRA - but, like London, offering entirely the wrong answer.

For Raby, the February 2022 Xi-Putin statement that the China-Russia relationship was a friendship 'without limits' was a twenty-first century Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as agreed by Hitler and Stalin in 1939. The question is who's going to launch Operation Barbarossa and when? Both will be watchful. As Mao put