
China's Asian Dream: Quiet Empire Building Along the New Silk Road

By Tom Miller

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Written as an outcome of two years of wandering around China's border regions and far-away parts of Asia, *China's Asian Dream* is an interesting book covering a very contemporary issue. Although it seems much more related to Asia and the Euro-Asian world, China's rising economic power is indeed worrying many nations. The big ones are worried that they are going to lose their current economic and consequently political and military power, while the small countries need to think about the trade-off they face between the economic and commercial benefits that are presented by China in gold plates which cannot be resisted, and their autonomy, which China is possibly going to take over quiescently.

This book consists of six chapters. It starts with a frightening thought experiment that describes the world in 2050, a world in which China—once the greatest civilization in the world—is the new global superpower. The author gives information about China's history which helps to situate China's current position in the world and its ambitions to regain what it has lost. The author discusses the instruments with which China tries to attract its neighbours and the countries in the region to take part in its goal of reviving and modernizing the ancient silk road. According to Miller, the main problem is indeed not the silk road itself but the hegemony that



the People's Republic of China aims to achieve in the region and in the world.

Chapter one discusses the financing of the new silk road project. The very rapid founding of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the establishment

of the Silk Road Fund are presented as evidence of China's deepening strategic ambitions in Asia. China provides cheap loans to build closer relationships with the countries in the region and in exchange, it expects them to respect its 'core interests,' a move Beijing calls 'win-win diplomacy.' Born as a consequence of the 'Chinese Dream' which prioritizes China's economic leadership in Asia, the New Silk road aims to connect the South China Sea through Central Asia to Europe. Although it was first named the 'New Silk Road,' China's President Xi proposed building a 'Silk Road Economic Belt' at a speech in Kazakhstan in 2013, and a month later, he mentioned creating a '21st Century Maritime Silk Road,' a web of sea lanes connecting China to the rest of the world. Now it is officially called the 'One Belt, One Road Initiative.' Although China emphasizes that it is a common initiative built on mutual trust, equality, inclusiveness and mutual learning, the author claims that it is very much a Chinese project. This chapter provides comprehensive explanations of the establishment of the AIIB and Silk Road Fund, situating these endeavors in re-

lation to China's passive position in existing institutions such as the Asian Development Bank, the IMF and the World Bank. It further explains the supportive role of the China Development Bank and the China Exim Bank in financing China's ambitious projects in the country and overseas. After reading about these activities, the reader unavoidably thinks that the AIIB and Silk Road Funds are just the tip of the iceberg and that the main part of banking activities is hidden within China itself.

The next chapter, entitled "Marching West," examines China's Central Asian policy and geopolitical position in Central Asia. With its vast natural resources of oil, uranium, gas and minerals, Central Asia remains just as attractive for China as it is for Russia, which has long considered the region as its own backyard. Although Russian firms have long been unable to compete with Chinese firms that can easily fund their own projects and rapidly construct them, Central Asia still remains traditionally Russian, according to the author's observations of the region. The people of Central Asia view China's economic activities as inevitable, but dangerous for their future. They neither tend to learn or speak Chinese, nor do they like Chinese investors and immigrants in their countries. The author describes a growing public resistance to Chinese involvement in their countries and to the relationship established by their leaders with China. Miller argues that China lacks soft power instruments in Central Asia, which leads to perceptions in the region that China is only a cash cow to milk. It would be in China's great interest to gain public support in the countries in which it operates, rather than only working with the elites, who are mostly corrupt. The author presents Myanmar as a good example of this problem, which arguably poses the biggest challenge to China

—even bigger than the unrest felt by the U.S.—if it is to realize its Asian dream. There is no public sympathy towards China in its neighboring countries; its soft power is very weak, even negative in some instances.

The following chapters comprehensively examine China's recent and historical relations with its neighboring countries, as well as those countries' processes of democratization. Indeed, there appears a room for improvement in China's relations with its neighbors in realizing its construction projects. In most cases, China imports Chinese workers for its projects, meaning that these projects have only minimal impact on local employment. Moreover, the materials and all necessary equipment are also provided by Chinese companies. In this respect, it is worth discussing the real and potential economic impact of the huge construction projects China conducts in the underdeveloped or developing world. One should also take into account the unknown and for the time being unestimated environmental impact of these projects. Although China lays emphasis on promoting 'win-win' relationships with its neighbours, when it comes to trade figures, many countries seem to depend heavily on China while their exports to China remain negligible. Another problem raised in the book about China's funding abroad is that it has no concerns about democracy, human rights, or principles of the state of law. Western donors and development banks shorten or withdraw their funds in the case of human rights abuses; however, these autocratic regimes can easily borrow money from China, as in the case of Cambodia. China is seen as an 'insurance policy against allegations of war crimes' in such countries as Sri Lanka (p. 189).

The last two chapters of the book discuss China's claims and interests in the Indian

Ocean and South China Sea, and the conflicts stewing with India, the U.S., and other interested parties. While China seeks to secure its import and export routes, other parties look to their security and autonomy, or the superpower status they have maintained for decades. The authorities in many countries find the idea of a Maritime Silk Road very good—if it is only about building infrastructure and boosting transport efficiency.

The first chapters focus heavily on the Silk Road Project, while in the second part of the book the author provides mostly geopolitical and historical information about the countries that will be included in the Silk Road or whose interests will be challenged by this project. The reader at times loses connection to the Silk Road in these sections. Miller argues that as China grows more in economic terms, it is inevitable for it to intervene in the foreign affairs of others. The dilemma in Asia is that China wants to work for or be the provider of Asian security, which it claims 'should be left to Asians,' meaning that the role of the U.S. in the region must diminish. However, there are only a few countries in the region who wish that to happen. The U.S.

is seen as maintaining the balance of power in Asia.

The author suggests that the fact of an 'ever-growing China' must be accepted, and that new strategies need to be developed that neither ignore nor underestimate it, but that instead admit its real and potential power. The Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road are expected to improve infrastructure and trade figures in Asia. Their impact is surely going to spill over into the world, but whether they really form a part of China's Empire Building Project will remain an open question for the time being.

China's Asian Dream makes the reader very aware of the fact of China's enormous economic rise, and sometimes even scares the reader about this rise. In the end, it makes us believe that as a natural consequence of China's economic growth, this country must protect its interests abroad. The volume could be recommended to journalists, practitioners, policy makers and academicians, those who have dealings with China, and ordinary people who are interested in China as an emerging power.