

Will world power pivot towards the Heartland in 2050?

What is the Heartland and why is it important?

Will world power pivot from the West towards Eurasia's Heartland in 2050? Given recent events, it is the question many are presently pondering. The question of a world power pivot to the Heartland dates back to a theory by British geographer, academic, and politician, Halford John Mackinder in 1904. Mackinder theorized a shift in world power to, and world domination by, the international power that controls the continental "pivot area" — Eurasia, and to some extent, Africa.

Mackinder's theory of a world power shift is known widely as the "Heartland Theory." It reflects the intricate dynamics of and relationships between geography, political power, and military strategy, interwoven with demography and economics. It is these dynamics and relationships, which Mackinder viewed as strengths, that characterize the Heartland and speak to its importance.

Geographically, the connected landmass of Europe, Asia, and Africa, what Mackinder called the "World Island," is centrally positioned in the world. To Mackinder, this geographic positioning meant that as a united force, the World Island could both project power in a way that demonstrated her global supremacy and protected her against external powers. He viewed the external powers in relation to the World Island as the offshore islands (mainly China, India, Turkey, Germany, and Austria) and the outlying islands (the rest of Europe, Australia, North America, South America, and South Africa). Thus, Mackinder saw three world-power systems as competing international forces, with the World Island at the forefront in geopolitical importance.

Mackinder maintained that the balance of global power favored the World Island, owing to her vast resources, including social capital, her distribution channels for exploiting or leveraging those resources to her advantage, and her land mobility. He surmised that her land mobility, 21 million square miles of continuous land stretching across Eurasia, technological changes, such as the continental dispersion of railway and communication networks, and also her social capital, a population size equal to two-thirds of the world's total population, gave her a strategic military advantage. Countries of the two other world-power systems can only advance their global military strategy, and thus, global political power, by sea. The World Island's resources, demography, and military advantages were important then and now in that it could give her an unmatched competitive advantage in these areas. Mackinder also deemed that her land mobility better supported commerce than does sea power, conceivably giving her a competitive advantage economically.

Mackinder believed that the Heartland's combined strengths fortified her as the pivot region of world politics. He also viewed Russia as the pivot state because of her central position to assert

power throughout the World Island despite her weaknesses. He felt that historical events leading to Russia's demographic evolution and widespread expansion engendered her as the logical Heartland pivot power.

Mackinder speculates that control over Eastern Europe would ensure control over the Heartland; control over the Heartland would ensure control over the World Island; and control over the World Island would solidify power over the world. Many have criticized the Heartland Theory for various reasons. However, others are reconsidering its plausibility and ongoing importance today.

The Heartland's perceived importance often has been reflected in the geopolitics of countries such as the United States, Russia, and China. These countries have either maintained, expanded, or adapted their foreign policies and geopolitics, depending on their resolve for affirming, reclaiming, or capturing global superpower status. As if playing a game of chess, they are advancing their geostrategies and positioning for a struggle to control, influence, or constrain power over the Heartland.

Globalization was once considered a game changer in closing the gap between international economies. For the World Island economies, it has provided an advantage to leverage their combined strengths and demonstrate a potentially unmatched power assertion. The Heartland's importance also seems connected to superpower positioning, and quite possibly a power pivot towards Eurasia.

What characterizes the Heartland today? What past and current events might shape Heartland power? Who will influence this power shift? How might it play out? What might be some implications of a power shift? What might signal how the future unfolds? Geostrategic moves over the Heartland are in play today.

What currently characterizes the Heartland?

Eurasia's Heartland is a complex system, which shapes the geopolitical environment by which it is itself shaped. To some degree, it is characterised by the interaction of demographic, socio-cultural, political, economic, and technological changes that impact the Heartland as a whole. It also is characterized by the impact it has on its geopolitical environment.

Demographically, the Heartland includes populations in Russia, twelve other Slavic East European countries, three other Caucasus countries, five Central Asian countries, Mongolia, and parts of Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China. Over 500 million people strong, the Heartland spans the spectrum of contrasting demographic trends. Low fertility rates, aging populations and workforces, and year-to-year improvements in education are matters of reality in some countries. By contrast, the realities of other countries exist as higher fertility rates, high mortality rates, and a decline in educational achievements. These and other demographic trends impact socio-cultural changes in the Heartland.

Socio-culturally, the Heartland is a system of complex diversity. Spoken languages include Slavic Indo-European dialects, Mongolic, Turkic, Arabic, and native Himalayan dialects. Heartland religions, those professed and or practiced, are Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Folk Religion, and atheism. Historical changes, from social migration patterns to the rise and fall of political empires, have fueled competing cultural preferences for Turkish clannism, Mongolic pastoralism, or Russian nationalism. There are efforts toward increased gender equality in Eastern Europe, and struggles between radicalization and social inclusion among youth in countries such as Afghanistan and Iran. These and other socio-cultural complexities could bring together Heartland nations to co-create desirable futures, yet impede transformation.

Politically, the Heartland is shaped by the opposing ideologies held by different countries. On one side of the political corridor is Russia, geographically situated on the continents of Europe and Asia. Neither identifying as belonging solely to one or the other, it culturally identifies with both. Adamantly against Westernization, Russia has pushed for Eurasianism. This ideology is premised on extending Russia's influence and power, while driving world dominance from the West to the East. On the other side are Eastern European countries that support Westernization and opportunities for knowledge sharing, trade, economic growth, and more. Between Russian Eurasianism and Eastern European Westernization is Turkish Western Eurasianism. Turkey is strategically positioned between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. She aligns her political or military agenda with Russia when cooperation works to its advantage, yet she is also a bridge to connecting the West and the Middle East. Some Heartland governments are authoritarian, while others are democratic. From one side to the other and in-between, political ideologies in the Heartland have shaped the competing economic systems of communism and capitalism, with influences of socialism from China.

Economically, the Heartland has systems that thrive and others that merely survive. Deposits of hydrocarbon, minerals, coal, and oil and natural gas reserves have supported the thriving economies of Russia, Poland, Kazakhstan, and others. These countries alone had GDP values worth over five percent of the world's economy in 2018. By contrast, the agrarian economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan reflect lower GDP values. Not only have they incurred rising amounts of external debt to survive, they also depend on income earned by citizens who work abroad and send money home. In the past, proximity to the old Silk Road trade routes boosted the economies of some Heartland countries. Today, China's New Silk Road or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and other technological advancements, could help many more nations across the Afro-Eurasian World Island to thrive.

Technological change in the Heartland's geopolitical environment is spurring multiple pathways of change. In addition to the BRI, developments in artificial intelligence, robotics, blockchain, advanced-tech agriculture, and green infrastructure could open up new possibilities. Such possibilities could include new job creation, more international cooperatives, improved trade relations, or increased drug-trafficking. Undoubtedly, these

developments could influence a future increasingly characterized by competition among world powers for power, control, or dominance.

The Heartland is a complex system. It is characterized by the interaction of changes to and the impact it has on its geopolitical environment. These demographic, socio-cultural, political, economic, and technological changes increasingly influence interconnected system impacts. Likewise, they could impact the Heartland's future, as they did her past.

What past events have shaped Heartland power?

Events over the past thirty years have shaped the current geopolitical environment of Eurasia's Heartland. From the collapse of the former Soviet Union to struggles for influence, power assertion, or empowerment following the Cold War, these events signal high stakes for Russia, the U.S., and China. They inform possibilities for a world-power pivot.

The collapse of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 ended the Cold War and left Russia trying to expand her influence throughout a fragmented Heartland. As some post-Soviet Eastern European countries pursued new visions of independence, Russia looked back to the former Soviet Empire's past glory. From the early 1990s, she organized or joined bilateral regional organizations to promote the security, economic, and or political interests of Eurasian member states. In 2008 and in later years, she supported separatist regions in other Heartland countries to ensure their dependence on her for their economic and political development. In 2014, she annexed Crimea from Ukraine, strengthening Russia's military influence through uninterrupted access to the Black Sea. Over time, Russia expanded her influence throughout the Heartland, though at the cost of leaving it fragmented.

Winning the Cold War propelled the U.S. forward with momentum to chase an elusive goal of fully asserting her power to leverage the Heartland's fragmentation. She waged a war on terror in Afghanistan in 2001 after the devastating 9/11 attacks on the U.S. She invaded Iraq in 2003 and overthrew Saddam Hussein when he continued to defy U.S. containment strategies intended to stop his ruthless dictatorship. She provided security and economic assistance to Central Asian countries in exchange for access to their military bases and air space. Yet, despite the interventions, containment strategies, and attempts to establish a long-term U.S. military presence in the region, the U.S. fell short of her goal. Unable to leverage the Heartland's fragmentation for a full power assertion, the U.S. lost much of her influence in the Middle East and in Central Asia.

China's Cold War pivot away from the former USSR and towards the U.S. empowered China to extend her reach into the Heartland. Aligning her economic interests with the U.S. gave rise to China's growth from foreign investment and trade. Undeterred by the global financial crisis of 2008, she looked to new possibilities for trading Chinese goods across Afro-Eurasia along a New Silk Road. Through increased investments in foreign infrastructure development, China began improving trade routes. Later, she announced plans for a One Belt One Road

international market system or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, revealing a competing interest in the Heartland. The 2015 announcement of her “Made in China 2025” strategic plan further revealed her ambitions for economic growth through technological capabilities. A high-speed rail system, for example, would support the BRI and an empowered China’s extended reach into the Heartland.

Post 20th-Century Cold War, the U.S. faces a high-stakes change in geopolitical power rivalry for the Heartland. Having lost her influence in Central Asia and the Middle East, the U.S. seemingly has conceded vying for Heartland control. Instead, her focus appears to be on containing Russia and China as these two civilizational states increasingly shape Heartland power. For Russia, it’s a matter of uniting Afro-Eurasia in Eurasian solidarity. For China, it’s a matter of integrating Central Asia and parts of the Middle East into her sphere of influence. Could these and other stakeholders influence a world-power pivot to the Heartland? Any number of possible futures could unfold.

Which stakeholders could influence a world-power pivot?

India, Iran, and Turkey are three regional powers being wooed as part of the U.S., Russia, and China’s different geopolitical agendas. How they align their aspirations with the civilizational values of the U.S., Russia, and China may upset the balance of power. One of these or other stakeholders could influence a world-power pivot to Eurasia’s Heartland.

To advance their respective civilizational values, the U.S., Russia, and China have extended their rivalry through India, Turkey, and Iran. The U.S., an ally to Israel, firmly defends the values of Western European civilization. She seeks to cozy up with India in Asia and desires Turkey to support her interests in the Middle East. Russia is a self-described Eurasian civilization state. She’s friendly with Iran, pursues an alliance with India, and is improving relations with Turkey. China has been characterized as a civilization state due to her historical heritage, religious diversity, and distinct cultural identity. Despite border disputes with India, she aims to preserve their cultural and economic exchange, dating back to the Old Silk Road. She sweetens relations with Turkey through increased trade and wants Iran as a strategic partner. These regional powers could play critical roles in shifting the balance of world power.

An aspiring emergent global superpower determined to safeguard her borders, India has civil relations with the U.S., Russia, and China. Her foreign-policy agenda is aligned with a multipolar power balance. Supposedly, India is moving away from some Western values — liberalism, individualism, and secularism — that conflict with traditional Indian culture. Yet, she often promotes U.S. and Japanese interests in Asia. India could counter China’s encroachment into Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Still, for her security, India will “make nice” with China, including joining China’s Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Recently, India purchased Russia’s S-400 missile defense system against strong U.S. objections and sanctions. Her bilateral relationship with Russia across mutual

interests likely will mean continued economic, political, security, and nuclear cooperation in the future.

Turkey is a wild card and complicates the rivalry between the U.S., Russia, and China with her own aspirations. A NATO member and Western ally against communism during the Cold War, she aspires to be a major regional power. Even so, she faces a Kurdish rebellion, Greek territorial disputes, and threatening Iranian power. Potentially, Turkey may stabilize the Middle East and contain Russia's expanding influence. Still, she defied U.S. expectations and joined Russia in backing rebels in the Syrian War. Having secured Russia's S-400 missile defense system, she is abandoning Western liberal democracy and embracing authoritarian rule. Her plan to connect Turkey's Middle Corridor transportation network with the BRI supports China's trade ambitions in Eurasia. But how they address a bilateral trade deficit that favors China could better or sour their relationship.

Supported by Russia and China, Iran seemingly has hegemonic aspirations of being the central regional power in the Middle East and Central Asia. However, her increased involvement in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria has incited Israel's military opposition. She rejects westernization and strategizes to limit U.S. influence in Central Asia. Trade with Russia is Iran's saving grace, given the destabilizing impacts of U.S. economic sanctions to deter her from amassing nuclear weapons. Yet, despite their reciprocal friendliness, Russia has refused Iran's request for an S-400 missile defense system. While Iran sought but was denied full membership in the SCO, she will likely stay connected to China through economic and cultural exchanges along the BRI. Their bilateral relationship could solidify Iran as China's strategic partner in the area.

India, Turkey, and Iran add to the complex rivalry between the U.S., Russia, and China. Will these regional powers or other stakeholders influence a world-power pivot to Eurasia's Heartland? Understanding the forces that could drive or block change is key to reducing uncertainty.

What are the drivers of change?

The question of a plausible world power shift from the West to Eurasia's Heartland in 2050 necessitates an understanding of the trends driving change in today's geopolitical landscape. Geopolitical positioning by the U.S., Russia, and China could continue the status quo. However, trends of increasing geo-economic strategies, geo-technological warfare, and geo-cultural identity suggest possible disruptions to the current world order. These drivers of change could influence alternative ways in which the future unfolds.

Continued geopolitical positioning by the U.S., Russia, and China to exploit Heartland power is driving change from a unipolar to a multipolar international system. Following the Cold War, the U.S. moved forward, unchallenged as the sole superpower in a world order characterized by unipolarity. America extended her assumed "greatness" and sought to spread her influence throughout Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East directly or indirectly through

regional partners and global institutions. Russia and China did likewise, albeit more gradually and astutely. All three's tendency to leverage the Heartland to their own advantage shows a pattern of promoting and protecting their geopolitical agendas and interests in the region. Presently, the U.S. hints at purchasing Greenland, whether to block China from establishing a Polar Silk Road or contain Russia's growing presence on the island. As Russia, China, and other stakeholders increasingly drive a multipolar world order, with the U.S. promoting an "America First" policy, America's greatness is diminishing.

Russia and China's foreign-policy shifts toward geo-economic commerce are disrupting the U.S.' extension of power. Russia expanded her foreign policy, desiring partnerships with Muslim majority countries and other non-traditional partners in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. Beyond political, military, and or security cooperation, Russia organizes international commerce with them through trade and energy imports-exports. China became the manufacturing hub for American companies pursuing competitive advantages through inexpensive labor. She adapted her foreign policy to support state-controlled capitalism and could become the economic superpower by 2050. Ideally, China's Belt and Road Initiative will facilitate international commerce across Afro-Eurasia through connectivity. However, India and other stakeholders perceive it as a precursor to economic colonialism in the Heartland. Russia and China's foreign-policy shifts along with their embrace of geo-economic commerce have the U.S. scrambling to "Make America Great Again." This change driver signals increasing disruption to U.S. power abroad. Still, China's handling of COVID-19 may disrupt her superpower dream.

Geo-technological warfare supposedly waged by Russia, China, and Iran is progressively disrupting the international order. In this New Cold War era, they stand accused of cyberterrorism, cyber espionage, and cyberwarfare against Western targets. These digital tactics pose as serious a threat to the established international order — based on peace and cooperation — as nuclear weapons, although on a different scale. Election hacking is eroding people's trust in democracy. Fake news continues to damage the media's credibility. And thefts of intellectual property and trade secrets are costing businesses, inventors, and artists billions of dollars in unrealized revenues. As digital warfare increasingly undermines international law, disorients governments, threatens national security, and destabilizes societies, disruption to the international order is accelerating. Geo-technological warfare has Western targets concentrated on reactive policies and measures and distracted from Heartland strategies. It is a change driver that could threaten the U.S.' "Buy American, Deregulate, Innovate" domestic agenda.

Geo-cultural identity as a unifying ideology emphasized by Russia and increasingly adopted by her partners is disrupting Western influence in the Heartland. The underlying cultural spirit of Russia's foreign policy is expressed by Eurasianism. Identification with this ideology seemingly implies one's rejection of Western civilization and capitalism, acceptance of authoritarianism, and or value for unity. South Caucasus, North African, and Muslim majority countries in Central Asia identify with the ideology's inclusion of the Muslim community ("Ummah" in Arabic). Turkey adopted Eurasianism to symbolize her geopolitical reorientation

from the West to Eastern and Central Asia. However, growing resentment among Turkish citizens of Syrian refugees and migrants may disrupt Turkey's embrace of Eurasianist solidarity, especially if COVID-19 worsens. As Russia increasingly unites much of Afro-Eurasia around a geo-cultural worldview, Western influence in the Heartland is declining. This change driver could transform geopolitics, while Russia's "Ummah Pivot" (rebalance to Asia) may position the Heartland for a world-power shift to the East.

Will the geopolitical landscape be shaped by a continuation of the same? How might geo-economic strategies, geo-technological warfare, and or geo-cultural identity drive change toward alternative futures? Could world power shift to Eurasia's Heartland in 2050? These are the questions scenario stories will explore.

Eurasia's Heartland 2050: What is the Expected Future?

The expected future of Eurasia's Heartland in the year 2050 could play out as a scenario that reflects a continuation of current trends in geopolitics among the U.S., Russia, and China. As it was in 2020 and earlier decades, it is driven by geopolitical positioning through foreign policy. Characterized by a territorial approach to Heartland power and a unipolar international order, it is the future least likely to unfold.

By 2050 in this scenario, there is a grand chessboard of geopolitical positioning and a territorial power play between the U.S., Russia, and China. After all, the player that triumphs in achieving universal domination, according to Mackinder, will wield control over the earth's largest continental landmass by way of Heartland-centered power. From the Heartland, throughout the Afro-Eurasian continent, and across the globe by land, sea, air, and digital communications, it is a region unrivalled potential for economic growth and global impact.

In the Afro-Eurasian region, Eastern Europe is an emerging contributor to science and technological advancements in the production of vaccines and engineered therapeutics. Central Asia, now the green energy capital of the world, leads the way in providing access to affordable, reliable, and renewable energy for all its populations and selling the surplus to meet demand. The Middle East and African regions south of North Africa are exclusive suppliers of precious gemstones, mineral resources, popular metals, and stone.

Across the African continent are state-of-the-art manufacturing facilities, distribution warehouses, and production studios. They support talented producers of high-quality textiles and fashions, contemporary art, Afrobeat, Afro-jazz, and other rhythmic music, as well as award-winning documentaries and films. West, East, and South Africa stimulate growth through sustainable agriculture and tech-driven agribusinesses and dominate the market of plant-based pharmaceuticals. And the Congo has become the major supplier of freshwater for Africa and Europe. Despite escalating social and religious tensions in the region, the Afro-Eurasian continent, beginning with the Heartland, is the jackpot at stake in a winner-takes-all power struggle.

Russia and China's foreign policies involve a territorial approach to Heartland power. Russian foreign policy allows for land grabs in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. She considers it her right to protect the former Soviet States from further encroachment by China and Western influence. China's foreign policy is still multifaceted. She has partnered with Russia and Iran for green-energy developments in Central Asia. Likewise, through trade, foreign direct investment, and increased militarization to protect BRI infrastructure and all of her borders, she now has full influential reach into Central Asia and the Middle East. Separately, Russia and China are advancing their interests in Africa. They understand Africa's strategic importance to their geopolitical positioning.

The U.S. remains the sole superpower, always ready to defend a unipolar international order. Her geopolitical positioning is reflected in foreign policy aimed at containing Russia and China. She resorts to sanctions against Russia and Iran, a trade war with China, and threats of a stronger military presence in Central and Western Europe. Her containment strategies merely shadow her approach in 2020 to their expanding Heartland power and influence.

The expected future of Eurasia's Heartland in 2050 could resemble a continuation of geopolitical positioning between the U.S., Russia, and China. However, this makes it the least likely future to unfold. Disruptions are likely to change how things play out, and shape one of three alternative futures.

Eurasia's Heartland 2050: How Might a Collapse Scenario Play Out?

A collapse scenario concerning Eurasia's Heartland in the year 2050 could play out as a future in which opposing forces break down the geopolitical positioning by which the U.S. and Russia have historically situated themselves. Reflective of disruptive changes that derail expectations of the future, it is a scenario largely driven by geo-economic commerce. Characterized by China's commercialized approach to Heartland power and unipolar world order, it is one alternative future that could unfold.

By 2050 in this scenario, China has successfully rolled out the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and dominates the commercial space in Eurasia's Heartland and much of Afro-Eurasia. The owner of most BRI infrastructure and the regional leader along the BRI corridors, China fulfilled her dream of becoming the world's economic superpower. Her path to victory stems from a geopolitical strategy of geo-economic commerce. As China rose in power, a domino effect of disruptive changes brought about the decline of the U.S. and Russia. They are no longer positioned to influence the Heartland, now under China's control.

A weakened U.S., confronted by dysfunction and strong oppositional forces, has lost her superpower status and influence relative to the world order and the Heartland. Whether it involved failed policies against multiple pandemics, domestic social change, and an economic Cold War with China, or unvaried foreign policy towards the Middle East and terrorism, she

remained resolute in her course. However, crippling retaliatory policies and sanctions imposed on the U.S. by Britain, the European Union, Japan, and India in response to an “America First” stance that adversely impacted them have left the U.S. floundering and lacking their support.

Drawn into costly military conflicts in the Persian Gulf over Iran’s nuclear activities, and in the Mediterranean over Russia and China’s endless pursuit of Israel’s energy resources, the U.S. and her strength are divided. Widespread American public opinion is that she prioritizes recovery from a brutal economic depression. Accordingly, the U.S. has abandoned efforts to contain China’s commercialized dominance in the Heartland and throughout Afro-Eurasia.

Russia struggles against devastating instability and an oppositional force in the form of Chinese Eurasianism that has undermined her power and influence in the Heartland. Whether due to a longstanding closed economic system or the over-extension of aid to the former Soviet States, Russia sought a Chinese bailout. She accepted lender/borrower terms more like those China imposed on Central Asian countries for BRI infrastructure development than Eurozone bailouts.

Russia’s inability to repay the debt resulted in China’s ownership of state-owned Russian enterprises in the telecommunications, media, energy, aerospace and defense, and engineering sectors. These industries employ significant numbers of Chinese workers. Substantial revenue outflows support China’s unbounded growth and have contributed to Russia’s economic destabilization. Russia remains a Chinese ally. Yet, she begrudges China for usurping her geopolitical influence in former Soviet states. Russia has surrendered regional control of the Heartland and Afro-Eurasia to China.

BRI success for China, leader of a new unipolar world order, has evolved as commercial colonialism in the Heartland. While Central Asia initially welcomed the growth spurred by connected trade, later the region protested against this New Silk Road. Having defaulted on BRI loans, Central Asian countries lost all hope of self-governance. China’s ownership of BRI infrastructure in Central Asia ensured her economic dominance and rule over the region. A larger percentage of trade revenues flow out to China.

The overwhelming point of contention for Central Asia has involved sharing their lands with countless numbers of Chinese workers. Not only do these workers hold the best-paying jobs in the region, but they also brought with them a diversity of religious practices. Their values threaten the religio-cultural identity of Central Asian Muslims, many of whom are part of a resistance movement against China’s BRI.

This 2050 future in terms of Eurasia’s Heartland could play out as a collapse scenario in which the U.S. and Russia, suppressed by disruptive oppositional forces, concede their geopolitical power in the region to China. Although geo-economic commerce is the driving force by which

China has become the world's superpower, her commercialized approach to Heartland power, while successful, is not without some regional opposition to the BRI. Distinct from this scenario alternative is a future that reflects a new equilibrium in U.S., Russian, and Chinese geopolitics.

Eurasia's Heartland 2050: How Might a New Equilibrium Scenario Play Out?

A new equilibrium scenario could play out as a future in which geopolitical control in Eurasia's Heartland in 2050 among the U.S., Russia, and China is proportional to their alignment with pivotal Afro-Eurasian powers. In this alternative future, Continental Africa and Central Asia emerge as competing forces with enough economic brawn to disrupt the continuation of a unipolar world system. Along with India and Japan's foreign policy shifts, they bring about a redistribution of power that has kept the three civilizational states from dominating the Heartland. Characterized by a commercialized approach to Heartland and Afro-Eurasian power and a multipolar world order catalyzed by technological change, this scenario also considers geo-technological warfare as a change driver.

By 2050 in this scenario, India, Japan, and Africa have put the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) into operation in response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Eurasia's Heartland. Supported by Western Europe, parts of Eastern Europe, North America, much of Central and South America, and Australia, the AAGC and the Indo-African alliance has been key to Africa's economic rise. High-speed rail systems, Internet of Things (IoT) connected air travel, and joint militarized sea transport make it possible. AAGC success is attributable to foreign policy shifts by India and Japan and partnerships with Africa and Central Asia, enabling them to encroach on China's trade aspirations in Afro-Eurasia.

Free from colonial interference and economic subjugation but closely aligned, in foreign policy, with India, Japan, and the U.S., continental Africa is united. Having made the move to a singular digital currency backed by a robust cryptocurrency market, Africa is now a globally-competitive regional power. Her commercial economy, supported by artificial intelligence (AI) and rapid smartphone penetration elevated her as a pivotal international player. Despite clusters of religiopolitical extremism, Africa emerged as a pivotal disruptor to a US, Russian, or Chinese unipolar power position in the Heartland.

Allied with the U.S., India, and Japan; and through reimagined commerce and industry, as well as the freedom to reinvest BRI trade revenues into her economy, Central Asia grew in global competitiveness. No longer indebted to China and irrespective of US alignment motives of containing China's commercialized Heartland domination, Central Asia is a liberalized, self-governing region. She chose regional sovereignty with Western allies over the pull to a resuscitated Soviet regime.

As the primary supplier of cutting-edge green mining and clean-energy resources, U.S.-backed Kazakhstan leads Central Asia. India-aligned Uzbekistan engages her military, intelligence, and counter-terror capabilities to protect the region against most threats. Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, mutually aligned with the U.S., India, and Japan, are market leaders in augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) tourism. Central Asia, an annoyance to Russia, also emerged as a pivotal disruptor to US, Russian, and Chinese unipolar power positioning in the Heartland.

As the US, Russia, and China navigate a multipolar world order marked by technological change, commercialization, and new regional competitors shaping Heartland power, they drive an environment of geo-technological warfare. The US preemptively protects her Afro-Eurasian interests through sabotages of critical Russian and Chinese infrastructure. In response, she incurs New Cold War assaults from Russia, China, and Iran. Suspected hacks by China of Africa's IoT and AI systems and profit-making linked to surveillance capitalism incites the US and India to launch discrediting campaigns against China.

Russia, aligned with the Caucasus, Mongolia, and multiple Eastern European countries, is often blamed for cyberattacks against Central Asia's BRI and AR/VR infrastructure. Such accusations provoke reciprocal attacks from the US and China and intensified conflict with a Western-allied Turkey. For the three civilization states, alignment with pivotal Afro-Eurasia powers for proportional geopolitical control has also meant protecting them against geo-technological threats.

In this 2050 new equilibrium scenario, India, Japan, Africa, and Central Asia have brought about a multipolar world system resulting in redistributed Afro-Eurasian power. While they have prevented the US, Russia, and China from dominating the Heartland, they accept the three's extended power in support of commercial-oriented, tech-based foreign-policy agendas. Aligning with these pivotal Afro-Eurasian powers has given the US, Russia, and China proportional control in the Heartland and incentives for initiating or responding to geo-technological warfare tactics to protect their interests. One other alternative future to US, Russian, and Chinese Heartland geopolitics is depicted in a transformation scenario.

How Might a Transformation Scenario Play Out?

A transformation scenario for Eurasia's Heartland in 2050 could play out as a future in which the U.S., Russia, and China abandon Mackinder's Heartland Theory for a new way forward. In this alternative future, the three powers shift from competitive geopolitical positioning for domination of the Heartland to cooperation to empower the Heartland. They also advance culturalization as a critical aspect of connected BRI trade. Characterized by a territorial approach to Heartland power and a multipolar world order with wins and losses, this scenario considers geo-cultural identity as a key change driver.

By 2050 in this scenario, the U.S., Russia, and China have come to terms with the futility of continued geopolitical positioning in Afro-Eurasia based on Mackinder's Heartland Theory. They accept that no power play to affect a geographical pivot to a Heartland power — neither the Crimean War, Nazi Germany, Cold War I, nor China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — resulted in realities that aligned with assumptions.

The BRI, while potentially profitable for China, remained fraught with contempt from the international community for two widely-known reasons. Infrastructure development loans either indebted disadvantaged countries to China or economically colonized them to bend to her influence. And though China may have assumed the BRI would position her as the world's next superpower, some believed she intended to expand as a great civilization state. However, the U.S., Russia, and India, as well as concerned regional stakeholders, regarded it as a play for dominance in and control of the Heartland.

Despite facilitating connected trade, the BRI amplified existing and provoked new geopolitical hostilities. Deadlier border conflicts over colonial-influenced territorial boundaries erupted between China and India and among the Caucasus over ethnic, cultural, and territorial disputes. Wars on various fronts intensified, some still motivated by disdain for U.S. and Russian interference in Middle Eastern affairs. Territorial turf wars exploded among Russia and former Soviet Eastern European states and ignited between Russia and China in Central Asia. These power struggles in and for the Heartland had devastatingly disruptive local, regional, and global impacts. They were condemned by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) as crimes against Heartland security.

For the U.S., Russia, and China, adhering to the ICJ's ruling in terms of Afro-Eurasia has meant abandoning Mackinder's Heartland Theory and embracing a transformational way forward. They have suspended competition for Heartland power. Instead, the three work cooperatively to assist local and regional areas in maintaining their cultural identities free from pressures toward or away from Westernization or Eurasianism. They also help stimulate growth that empowers Heartland countries through distributed power.

In response to the challenge of aging Heartland populations and to meet growing regional workforce demand, they attract, train, and negotiate employment for young African workers. These workers easily adapt to or adopt religious, language, and or local socio-cultural norms to fit in. They are a solution for countries opposed to high numbers of migrant Chinese workers and are not viewed as politically threatening.

The three powers also reimagined the BRI in that it now prioritizes culturalization as a key aspect of trade. Producers and sellers only market quality culturally-appropriate goods, services, music, art, films, and technologies in each local economy. This includes those "Made

in America”, “Made in China”, “Made in Africa”, and “Made in India”. However, the Black Market for inappropriate content is rapidly expanding.

In an increasingly multipolar Heartland where neither the U.S., Russia, nor China dominate power, there are wins and losses. One win is the trade-off of geopolitics rooted in geographical power accumulation for foreign policies that recognize geo-cultural identity as a critical driver of change. Another includes culturally-connected trade. A loss on the part of the three powers involves declining territorial control. China, for instance, renegotiated BRI loans so that infrastructure ownership remains with borrowers. Another loss for the three entails diminishing revenues from Heartland exploitations. Thus, they have turned their geopolitical competitive interests to Greenland once again.

In this 2050 transformation scenario for Eurasia’s Heartland, the U.S., Russia, and China are navigating a new way forward that is not based on Mackinder’s Heartland Theory. They have suspended their competitive tendencies of amassing Heartland power through territorial control to work cooperatively to empower Heartland countries. As they integrate culturalization into connected BRI trade, they help shape an increasingly multipolar Heartland driven by geo-cultural identity.

What are the implications, strategic issues, and opportunities?

The question of whether world power will pivot from the West towards Eurasia’s Heartland in 2050 opens up a range of different future possibilities for understanding change in the geopolitical environment. Four such possibilities explored relationships mainly between the U.S., Russia, and China and the impacts of their foreign-policy approaches as responses to or driving forces of change. Typed as continuation, collapse, new equilibrium, and transformation scenarios, they inspire headlines that highlight the state of world power in the context of the East-West dichotomy. These headlines from the future indicate fundamental implications concerning the Heartland. Likewise, the scenarios underscore strategic issues and opportunities for the U.S., Russia, and China.

“A slow power shift from the West to the Heartland” is the 2050 headline for a continuation scenario characterized by unipolarity and a territorial approach to Heartland power. A future marked by the same historical geopolitics between the U.S., Russia, and China, it suggests that China and Russia will be joint pivot powers of Heartland power. A strategic issue for the U.S. is whether she will continue ineffective efforts of trying to contain Russia and China. A strategic issue for Russia is whether she will continue to restore her dominance in ways that amplify conflicts among rather than unite the former Soviet States. A strategic opportunity for China involves the continuation of a multifaceted foreign-policy approach for extending her global influential reach.

“A power shift from the West to the Heartland” is the 2050 headline for a collapse scenario characterized by unipolarity and a commercialized approach to Heartland power. A future driven by geo-economic commerce, it carries the implication of an expanded civilizational China as the Heartland pivot power. A strategic issue for the U.S. and Russia is whether they will decline due to implosion. A strategic opportunity for both is a 22nd-century geoeconomic foreign-policy approach to compete with China. A strategic issue for China is whether she will continue down the path of a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that could harm more than help the Heartland.

“Distributed power between the West and the East” is the 2050 headline for a new equilibrium scenario characterized by multipolarity and a commercialized approach to Heartland power. A future driven by geo-technological warfare, the implication it suggests is that Central Asia will be the Heartland pivot power. A strategic opportunity for the U.S. is to support continental Africa as a significant commercial powerhouse in Afro-Eurasia. A strategic issue for Russia is whether her assertive foreign-policy approach may one day be turned against her. The strategic opportunity for China involves connecting the BRI with India and Japan’s Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.

“A power shift from the West to the Heartland” is the 2050 headline for a transformation scenario characterized by multipolarity and a territorial approach to Heartland power. A future driven by geo-cultural identity, the implication it singles out is that of distributed Heartland power. A strategic issue for the U.S. is whether she will maintain or change her involvement in the security, development, and prosperity of Central Asia. A strategic opportunity for Russia could involve playing a more significant role in shaping the international world order. A strategic issue for China is whether she will accept sharing the superpower stage with the U.S. and Russia.

In three of the four headlines from 2050, power shifts from the West to the Heartland. The other headline implies that the balance of world power is distributed between the West and the East. While the implications and strategic issues and opportunities are not exhaustive, they reflect those that are most relevant to a world power pivot.

What Indicators Could Signal the Future that Might Emerge?

Uncertainties concerning the question of a world power pivot towards Eurasia’s Heartland in 2050 will inevitably be resolved as the future unfolds. Tracking current geopolitical trends may inform whether and how the future might align with a continuation scenario. Monitoring leading indicators of change may suggest whether and how the future might line up with a collapse, new equilibrium, or transformation scenario. Indicators such as emerging issues, events, and statistical data that illuminate geopolitical developments involving Heartland Stakeholders could reduce uncertainty and signal the future that might emerge.

Monitoring emerging issues involving the geopolitical agendas of the main powers in the region could signal the direction towards which the future is moving. Among other things, the U.S.' transition to a "Build Back Better" economy includes the U.S. rejoining the Paris Agreement for climate-change mitigation. How might a U.S. clean-energy agenda impact the U.S.' relations with former allies and presence in Central Asia? Considering China's renewables investments in the region and Russia's near-term pivot to clean hydrogen production, could it provoke long-term geopolitical tensions and indicate a new equilibrium scenario?

Seemingly, Russia has gained ground as an arbiter of peace between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Could her accomplishment of deploying the Russian military to Azerbaijan escalate tensions with Turkey? Given Turkey's agenda of gaining influence in the South Caucasus, could Russia's win push Turkey to re-align with the West? Could this too signal a new equilibrium scenario?

Presumably, China's role in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), shift to a "dual circulation" economy, and introduction of Buddhism in Africa align with a multidimensional superpower approach. What might the RCEP — a multilateral trade agreement among 15 nations that includes Japan and Australia and excludes the U.S. and India — mean for the future of the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor? If China pursues a hegemonic strategy of civilizational expansion into Central Asia and or full domestic supply-chain capability consistent with limited imports but limitless exports, how might it impact Russia? Could a Chinese Buddhist orphanage in Malawi suggest the rise of Afro-communism, and how might it affect Africa's culture and a united African continent? Could these emerging issues point to a collapse scenario?

Monitoring the geopolitical activities of certain Heartland stakeholders for circumstances that could trigger future-shocking events may reveal signals of the emerging future. The U.S. will likely seek to rejoin the Iran Nuclear Deal amid U.S. sanctions against Iran and the suspected sale of U.S. military weapons to Iran's enemies. Russia may irrevocably lose face with China after deporting and banning Chinese nationals from Russia during the coronavirus pandemic. China and Iran are becoming closer allies in the Middle East, something the pro-Israeli U.S. and a U.S.-leaning India may see as a threat. Could these geopolitical moves underpin the launch of a multilateral nuclear attack against the U.S., a regional war between Russia and China, or World War 3? Might they be signposts of a collapse scenario?

Monitoring statistical data involving Heartland stakeholders and regarding systemic future-shaping geopolitical factors could signal the future that is coming. The U.S is ranked 5th in projected GDP per-capita in 2020. However, China is expected to surpass 56 countries in per-capita income by 2025 and rank 70th in the world, while Turkmenistan may rise above 58 other countries. Could China's economic rise bring the U.S., Russia, and India together as allies to contain her power? By 2050 four in every ten children will be born in Africa, positioning her to meet labor demands in Heartland countries faced with aging populations. Could African

migration to Eurasia impact Heartland pivot power? Might these statistical developments signal a transformation scenario?

Emerging issues, events, and statistical data about geopolitical developments concerning Eurasia's Heartland may suggest how the future might unfold. Monitoring these leading indicators of change could reduce uncertainty about a possible world power pivot to Eurasia's Heartland in 2050. They could signal whether the emerging future aligns with a collapse, new equilibrium, or transformation scenario.

Will World Power Pivot to Eurasia's Heartland in 2050?

In 1904 British geographer, academic, and politician Halford John Mackinder theorized the likelihood of a world-power pivot to Eurasia's Heartland, with Russia as the pivot state of power. Widely known for his "Heartland Theory," Mackinder assumed that geographic positioning along with political influence, military capability, demography, and economic strength would establish a dominant regional authority. He suggested it would be that authority that would control the Heartland and rule the world. Several nations tried and failed to gain hold of the Heartland in the 20th Century.

Following the Cold War and the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, the U.S. shaped a unipolar world order. Decades ago, it signalled the possibility of a major U.S. influence in the Heartland. However, her unwelcomed military involvement in the Middle East, escalating conflict with Iran, declining relationship with Turkey, and unwanted presence in Central Asia have brought about a different reality.

Not only has the U.S. lost much of her influence in the region, but she has also watched Russia and China gain increasing sway in regional developments. Russia has advanced her geopolitical Heartland strategy by gaining influence in Eastern Europe, by becoming involved in South Caucasus affairs and allying herself with China. By leveraging capitalistic globalization, driving the Belt and Road Initiative and related investments in Central Asia and beyond, and securing strategic partners in the Middle East, China has done likewise. Although the U.S. has maintained her status as the world's superpower, she cannot deny the shift to a multipolar world order and the rise of China as a strong competitor, with Russia as a partner.

As the U.S., Russia, and China compete in a three-way tug-of-war to assert their respective influence in the Heartland, they find support or opposition from India, Iran, and Turkey. These three regional stakeholders have foreign-policy agendas consistent with a multipolar orientation in which they too could become centers of power. How they align their geopolitical aspirations with the U.S., Russia or China may determine how power is distributed in the Heartland. How all Heartland stakeholders respond to or drive disruptive change — geo-economic commerce, geo-technological warfare, or geo-cultural identity — could open up a range of different future possibilities for Afro-Eurasia as a whole.

Though uncertainties exist, the future of Eurasia’s Heartland could align with a collapse, new equilibrium, or transformation scenario. Whether characterized by unipolarity or multipolarity, a territorial or a commercialized approach to Heartland power, the scenarios suggest two clear headlines from the future. One communicates a world power shift from the West to the Heartland in 2050. The other speaks to distributed power between the West and the East. All four headlines point to geopolitical implications primarily for the U.S., Russia and China, depending on how the future unfolds.

Will world power pivot to Eurasia’s Heartland in 2050? Monitoring leading indicators of change — emerging issues, events, and statistical data — could reduce uncertainty and signal the future the might emerge. Will the future align with Mackinder’s Heartland Theory? This is a question Heartland stakeholders and others may continue to ask and try to answer in the years to come.

Kimberly “Kay” Daniels