

*China's Eurasian Dilemmas: Roads and Risks for a Sustainable Global Power*, by R. James Ferguson. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018. v+332 pp. £100.00 (cloth).

Is the twenty-first century a Chinese century or a Eurasian century? Both possibilities have been alluded to by some political observers. The land component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) passes through the Eurasian corridor, connecting China with Europe, and there is little doubt that China's engagement with Eurasia has become a new factor in the global political economy. In this book, R. James Ferguson offers a meticulous analysis of the major events unfolding across the Eurasian landmass in recent times.

At the outset, Ferguson observes that the book "provides a critical overview of China's engagement with Eurasia, focusing on major issues that are emerging in the 21st century—issues that will need careful management over the next two decades" (xii). His overview is thoughtfully presented, linking issues and making effective use of his knowledge of philosophy, culture, and sociology to produce a solid narrative. Along the way, he introduces new ideas such as "functional multipolarity" (xiii, 22).

To Ferguson, Eurasia is "a set of unfinished developmental agendas, a poorly coordinated integration process, and clashing 'grand strategies' that shape the lives of over four billion people" (1). Any great power trying to engage with Eurasia will therefore inevitably confront challenges such as development, integration, and geopolitics on a grand and complex scale. China proves to be no exception.

According to Ferguson, "China's dilemmas emerge from situations where clear choices are undermined by incompatible trade-offs, unintended outcomes that are hard to predict, social, psychological and political constraints on rational decision-making and policy optimization, and cross-impacts across different domains of activity" (20). On pages 22–23 he identifies five different dilemmas. To paraphrase, they are:

1. China needs to chart a path toward regional cooperation, policy convergence, and inclusive growth that draws in a wide range of players;
2. Movement toward cooperation and policy convergence has begun to some degree through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and parallel dialogues in which China has a major role;
3. China needs to engage creatively, and eventually co-shape, Russia's security and economic roles in Eurasia, without drifting into an entangling formal alliance;
4. China needs to engage multicivilizational, multireligious, and multiethnic perspectives when dealing with the complex cultural tapestry of Eurasia; and
5. Achievement of the above four goals will require relatively successful BRI implementation that not only bolsters China's economic transition but truly benefits partners across Eurasia in an equitable and predictable fashion.

These are aspirational goals of a tall order. Ferguson has narrowed down the goals to environmental, developmental, and strategic dilemmas, and he also emphasizes that a central dilemma facing China's leaders is how to transition to an open, modernizing economy without causing social turmoil and losing Communist Party control (20).

In chapter 2, Ferguson discusses the important organizations in Eurasia dealing with security matters. They are the Collective Security Treaty Organization led by Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, where China exercises more influence. In chapter 3, he points out the miscalculations committed by the great powers in central Asia, leading to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Chapters 4 and 5 are devoted to analyzing Sino-Russian relations. Chapter 6 focuses on the BRI, China's signature foreign policy initiative since 2013, and Chapter 7 extends the study to the European Union, a highly targeted destination of China's trade and infrastructure connectivity under the BRI. The last two chapters, 8 and 9, assess the outcomes of the political and economic processes discussed in previous chapters and ask whether China will become a sustainable global power or a dystopic state.

The BRI is relatively new. Six years into its implementation, there are many ongoing projects. As Ferguson rightly points out, the great complexity of actors, institutions, and interactions makes predictions about the future highly provisional, and they can rapidly be outdated (237). Much also depends on how China will handle the dilemmas it faces, whether it generates good will and cooperation with other countries, and how other states, big and small, respond to China's initiatives. The United States under President Trump has let it be known that it rejects the BRI, accusing China of conducting debt-trap diplomacy. The American efforts to contain China and Russia (the latter partly because of the Ukraine conflict and Russia's takeover of Crimea) have pushed these two major Eurasian powers to work more closely together against Western sanctions. Notwithstanding this, Ferguson finds reason to be optimistic that "China has begun a process of Eurasian cooperation that contributes to the beginnings of a sustainable global order" (237).

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