

# China Just Opened “the Suez Canal of Our Era”: China’s Eurasian Rail “Middle Corridor”

The Belt and Road Initiative comes to Turkey in a big way, but the West is too distracted to notice or care.

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*A hundred years from now, Donald Trump’s looming impeachment and Syria’s unending travails will be long forgotten. But just as we still celebrated the 150th anniversary of the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 without remembering who ruled Egypt at the time (Isma’il Pasha), China’s relentless and historically significant push to establish new trading links between East and West—links that promise to revolutionize the world trading system no less than the Suez Canal—will come to define our era.*

Two recent developments highlight how the new world is being invented by the Chinese—and how it will affect the Middle East and central Asia.

Last month, while Congress busied itself with impeachment hearings, a mammoth Chinese cargo train arrived in Turkey en route to the heart of Europe. It will be remembered as the first freight train to pass from China across central Asia and under the Bosphorus Strait, using the Marmaray tunnel as part of China’s historic Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Like the Suez Canal in its day, this “Iron Silk Road” through central Asia is a time saver, with the added bonus of circumventing sea routes now controlled by the West. It will reduce the transportation time between China and Turkey from one month to 12 days, while the entire journey from Xi’an to Prague in the heart of Europe will take only 18 days, half the time of a similar journey by sea and at similar cost.

The Chinese revival of a 21st-century Silk Road reflects the emerging transformation of the central Asian nations along this route, which have long been eclipsed by a Western trading and commercial system that China is now challenging.

Turkey has become a central link in this “middle corridor,” which connects its eastern terminus Beijing to central Europe and ultimately London.

While celebrated in China and Turkey, its inauguration received little attention elsewhere, including in an inward-looking United States [hypnotized by its own travails](#).

This lack of interest was certainly not the case on November 17, 1869, when the wife of Napoleon III, Princess Eugenie, journeyed to Egypt to celebrate the opening of a canal. This historic shortcut reduced the maritime route between Europe and India by 7,000 kilometers, linking what was popularly understood as Mediterranean civilization to the Far East. The

Canal revolutionized international trade and secured for its Western patrons—notably England—a century of imperial domination. It has been said, incorrectly it turns out, that Verdi composed an opera to memorialize the event. Even so, just the suggestion of such a linkage betrays the popular recognition of the significance of the new route.

When the Canal opened, China was the world's largest economy. By 1890, the United States topped the list. India, then a British colony, was second, and the mother country itself, which had never been counted among the world's richest nations, was third. This latter achievement was due in no small part to Suez, so important to Britain's fortunes as a maritime colonial and commercial power that in 1875 it seized control of the company operating the Canal before occupying the entire country itself in 1881. Britain was ousted from its control of Suez only in 1956, when Russia and the United States joined an ultimatum that an exhausted London could not defy.

Less than a week after the train's arrival last month in Istanbul, Chinese president Xi Jinping was in Greece, where Beijing's flagship investment in the port of Piraeus—the Mediterranean terminal point of China's quickly expanding "Maritime Silk Road"—was the centerpiece of a visit meant to advance a growing alliance between Beijing and Athens. China's ownership of the port and its growing operations reflects its determination to make the once sleepy locale the largest maritime facility on the continent and the European anchor for China's global network of trade and commerce.

China also sees its expanding relationship with Greece as a model for broader political and regional cooperation with what it calls the Central and eastern European Countries (CEECs).

"China will never ever seek hegemony and does not agree to a you-win-I-lose zero-sum game," promised Xi—assertions that Greece is advised to believe at its own peril.

Already two years ago, Greece, for the first time, blocked a European Union statement at the United Nations criticizing China's human rights record. When asked about Greece's actions, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said: "We express appreciation to the relevant EU country for upholding the correct position." [He added:](#) "We oppose the politicization of human rights and the use of human rights issues to interfere in other countries' domestic affairs."

These developments, and a host of similar Chinese initiatives around the globe, are not without their problems. The critiques of China's lending practices and its corruption ring true, all the more so because, like the Belt and Road Initiative itself, China is treading a path blazed numerous times throughout history by nations on the make. The complaints from Western capitals about the perils of being seduced by China's promises and cash may well be legitimate. Indeed it is only prudent to beware strangers—hailing from East or West—bearing gifts. The [warnings issued by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo](#) come clearly to mind in this context.

But such complaints, however valid, have the distinct odor of sour grapes from those whose reign is now being challenged by Beijing.

Indeed, while China is spending trillions to revolutionize and expand global trade, Washington, with Europe following, is mesmerized by policies that restrict and criminalize such trade. In its campaign against the foundations of an international trading system that's enabled its own preeminence, Washington has even even set its sights on Suez and the long

honored policy memorialized in the treaty of Constantinople guaranteeing unmolested passage through the Canal to all ships.

No nation has ever become great or cemented that greatness by destroying the foundations of the international system that enabled its ascendance. If this is to be Washington's legacy, then the 100th anniversary of China's Iron Silk Road will indeed be celebrated.

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