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Kitap İncelemesi/Book Review

Sinostan: China's Inadvertent Empire

Reviewer: Mevlan TANRIKUT¹

Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen. (2022), *Sinostan: China's Inadvertent Empire*, Oxford University Press, 320 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-885796-9

Sinostan: China's Inadvertent Empire, authored by Raffaello Pantucci and the Alexandros Petersen, presents a comprehensive analysis of China's accelerating influence across Central Asia. The core thesis proposes that China, driven primarily by domestic concerns regarding the security and stability of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (p. 14), aka East Turkistan², has unintentionally engineered a powerful and dominant geopolitical position in Central Asia. This growing influence, which the authors term an "inadvertent empire," stems from a pragmatic combination of economic, security, and soft power engagement that lacks a singular, clear strategic blueprint emanating from Beijing (p. 15). Drawing on approximately a decade of fieldwork, the book provides a granular, bottom-up perspective on this geopolitical transformation.

The book makes a decisive intervention in ongoing geopolitical discussions by questioning the Western focus on China's naval power in the Pacific. The authors contend that China's most significant geopolitical ascent is occurring on land across Eurasia, the "heartland" in Sir Halford Mackinder's theory (p. 11). Furthermore, the book reframes the Belt and Road Initiative

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² In their book, the authors utilized the term "Xinjiang," while the reviewer preferred "East Turkistan," citing the region's historical and geographical context. Önerilen Atf: Tanrikut, M. (2026). Book Review: *Sinostan: China's Inadvertent Empire*. *Doğu Asya Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 9(16), 112-116.

(BRI), specifically the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), as a direct extension of China's urgent domestic strategy to ensure East Turkistan's economic prosperity and security (p. 15, 98). The reviewer finds *Sinostan* to be an essential, meticulously documented study that offers insights into the mechanisms and consequences of China's transformation of the region.

The volume is organized into nine chapters that detail the evolution and complexity of China's relationship with Central Asia. The Introduction establishes the framework through field notes from Kyrgyzstan, revealing the stark contrast between new, well-built Chinese infrastructure (like the border post at Irkeshtam) and the surrounding Central Asian environment (pp. 2–4). Chapter 1 provides a deep historical context, tracing links back to Zhang Qian in the 1st century BC and examining the legacy of conflicts such as the Battle of Talas in 751 AD, which continues to shape Central Asian perceptions of China as an external power (pp. 28–31).

Chapter 2 delineates the essential analytical link: China's policy towards Central Asia is a continuation of its domestic strategy to stabilize East Turkistan (pp. 41–48). The discussion covers economic development initiatives, such as the establishment of Economic Development Zones (EDZs), alongside the accelerating security crackdown involving mass re-education camps in the region. Chapters 3 and 4 analyze the economic mechanisms of China's rise. Chapter 3 examines the resource extraction sector, focusing heavily on major hydrocarbon deals, such as the Central Asia–China gas pipeline, anchored in Turkmenistan (pp. 69–72). Chapter 4 details the construction of trade infrastructure, dubbing the new logistical network the "Synthetic Road," which transports Chinese-manufactured goods into Central Asian markets (pp. 98, 100).

The second half of the book explores China's non-economic influence. Chapter 5 details China's soft power efforts, predominantly through Confucius Institutes, which attract students primarily motivated by practical employment opportunities (pp. 123–125). Chapter 6 critiques the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), arguing that despite high rhetoric about the "Shanghai Spirit," the organization remains severely lacking in institutional capacity and is often dismissed by Moscow (pp. 157, 162). Chapter 7 maps the expanding bilateral security footprint, noting China's provision of equipment and technology, such as "safe city" surveillance systems (p. 191), and the deployment of People's Armed Police (PAP) forces in border areas (pp. 185,

197). Chapter 8 addresses Afghanistan, viewed by Beijing as a security threat and America's "broken teapot," in which China hedges its bets while avoiding decisive responsibility (p. 206). Finally, Chapter 9 places all these activities within the context of the BRI, asserting that the Central Asian model has been globalized as China's defining foreign policy vision (p. 232).

The book's principal strength lies in its decisive reorientation of geopolitical focus toward Eurasia, challenging Mahan's naval doctrine in favor of Mackinder's land-based theory of the "World Island" (pp. 11, 239). This viewpoint is based on extensive empirical evidence collected during numerous research expeditions to remote areas, resulting in vivid stories from Kyrgyz truck drivers, Chinese engineers, and local authorities. The meticulous compilation of data on pipelines, resource investments, and military training programs effectively illustrates China's comprehensive and long-term commitment to the region, demonstrating that China is the only power operating in this manner.

The reviewer finds the central argument that East Turkistan's domestic security fundamentally drives China's Central Asia policy needs to be a compelling framework, advancing scholarship by moving beyond simple "Great Game" narratives of resource grabs. However, one of the potential limitations is the frequent portrayal of Beijing's approach as lacking coherence, with Chinese leaders unsure how to effectively utilize their power (pp. 15, 69). While individual Chinese actors may lack central coordination, the overall effect is described as a coordinated surge with intensely local roots that systematically displaces Russian and Western influence (pp. 7, 32). This apparent paradox—simultaneously describing a highly effective, comprehensive geopolitical shift while insisting on its strategic incoherence—could be constructively viewed as highlighting a new style of "gradualist" Chinese statecraft, one that prefers flexible, cautious, consensus-driven advancement over rigid central planning.

The book also presents a contentious perspective by depicting China's growing regional influence as inadvertent. Historically, China has been a land power, and the Western Region (西域)—encompassing East Turkistan and Central Asia (Western Turkistan)—has consistently been a focal point for Chinese dynasties, particularly during periods of peak power. The Han, Tang, and Manchu Qing Dynasties serve as prominent examples, as they sought both economic control of the Silk Road and geopolitical creation of a buffer zone

against rival powers. China's persistent ambition to extend its influence is further evidenced by Chinese General and Political Commissar of the PLA National Defence University, Liu Yazhou's Theory on the Western Region (西部论), wherein he asserts that Chinese leaders, from Emperor Wu of Han to Zuo Zongtang, have consistently prioritized the Western Region, considering it the "lifeblood" of China (Liu, 2010). The initiation of the BRI can also be interpreted as China's strategic effort to enhance its influence in the greater Western Region, including Central Asia.

Furthermore, while the authors skillfully address the security crisis in East Turkistan, the material detailing the mass re-education camp system was naturally limited given the sensitivity and timeline of the research, meaning the most extreme human rights violations, such as forced sterilization, could only be included as reports that the authors struggled to verify independently (p. 64). Moreover, similar to numerous studies examining the conflict between the Chinese government and Uyghur and other Turkic people in East Turkistan, the authors of this book cited a series of attacks and clashes in the region without providing details, and they addressed the alleged security threat posed to China, particularly by Uyghur militants in Afghanistan. This narrative overlooks the dynamics of repression and reaction between the Chinese government and the Uyghurs (Tanrikut, 2026), potentially linking any Uyghur resistance to separatist, extremist, and terrorist activities. Besides this, the presence of Uyghur militants in Afghanistan, their capabilities, and particularly their network in East Turkistan, remain ambiguous and contentious. In this context, the inclusion of *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Campaign Against Xinjiang's Muslims* by Sean R. Roberts (2020) could have provided a more comprehensive and insightful analysis.

Sinostan: China's Inadvertent Empire is a critically important book for understanding the mechanics of 21st-century Chinese power. It is highly recommended reading for scholars of international relations, security, and economics, particularly those focused on Eurasia and the BRI. The policy relevance is clear: the book provides an early warning that China's rise in Central Asia functions as a "microcosm" or "model" of what Beijing's global footprint might ultimately look like. If external powers, especially the West, continue to treat the Eurasian heartland as a secondary concern, China's dominance will shift from "inadvertent" to inevitable, fundamentally reshaping the global order (p. 23).

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