



China, Israel, and a Return to the Cloverleaf World

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Abstract

In 1581, German Pastor and cartographer Heinrich Bünting wrote *Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae* (Travel Through Holy Scripture) and portrayed the world that mattered was comprised of the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, with each depicted as a cloverleaf. They converged in Jerusalem, and the rest of the world was irrelevant. Today, the cloverleaf world is converging with China's silk road integration project. With the post-Arab spring weakening of the Arab modern state such as Libya, Iraq and Syria, with Lebanon, Jordan and Yemen at risk of also becoming failing states, what is arising is the merging of the greater Middle East and the greater framework of the reawakened Mackinderian world order, and the Bünting map is likely the best depiction of the unfolding global geopolitical architecture of the 21st century.

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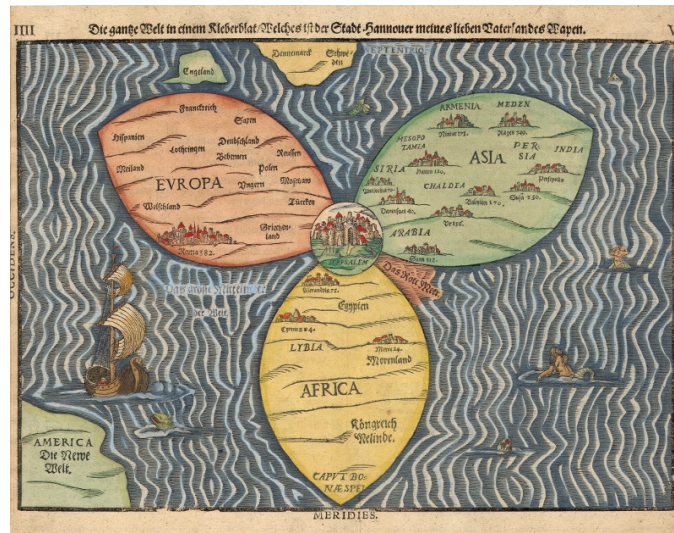
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Analysis

Counter-terror expert and senior editor of GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs Daily, Yossef Bodansky, wrote an insightful article in their September issue regarding the convergence of China's Afro-Eurasian integration project and Bunting's map of the world as a clover leaf.

Heinrich Bunting was a German Protestant pastor, theologian and cartographer, and in his masterpiece *Itinerarium Sacrae Scripturae* (Travel Through Holy Scripture) in 1581, he portrayed the world that mattered was comprised of the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, with each depicted as a cloverleaf. They converged in Jerusalem, and the rest of the world was irrelevant.



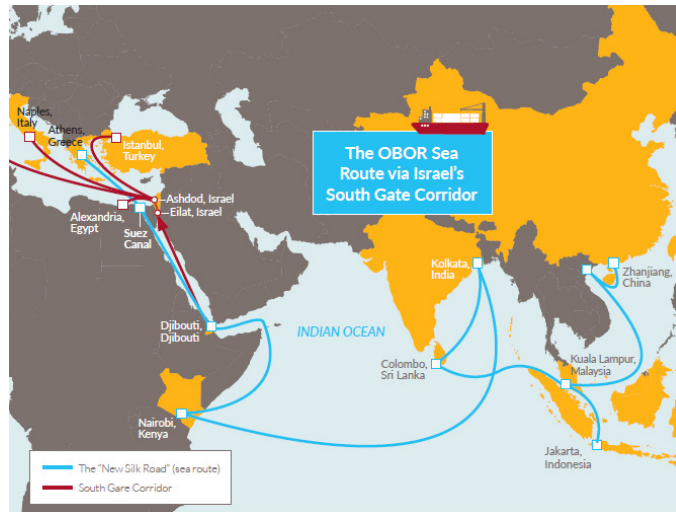
In his article entitled "The History of What's Next," Bodansky argued that the Bunting map is likely the best depiction of the unfolding global geopolitical architecture of the 21st century. With the post-Arab spring weakening of the Arab modern state such as Libya, Iraq and Syria, with Lebanon, Jordan and Yemen at risk of also becoming failing states, what is arising is the merging of the greater Middle East and the greater framework of the reawakened Mackinderian world order.

And, the clover leaf world centered on Jerusalem is converging with China's silk road integration project.

Silk road meets clover leaf in Jerusalem

With the rise of Salafi-jihadism in the Middle East increasingly threatening China's overseas citizens and assets, especially to their maritime trade via the Suez Canal, Israel is emerging as a strategic node on China's southern corridor on the New Silk Road.

Traditionally China has depended on the Suez Canal to reach its largest export market in Europe—with trade volume at €521 billion in 2015. However, the presence of ISIS, Al Qaeda and other Islamic extremist groups in the Sinai are threatening China's maritime trade. With over 95% of global trade being seaborne and China now as the world's largest trading state, this is a challenge for Beijing's continued economic development.



As such, China is building a “steel canal”¹ of the Med-Red Railway through Israel to connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea that bypasses the Suez. In turn, the rise of Israel as a key node in China’s Silk Road grand strategy elevates Jerusalem in China’s strategic calculus, and as Jean Michel Valantin of The Red Team Analysis Society argued, also presents a potential new status of Israel from a “protected power” of the US to an “integrated regional power”², transforming Israel’s traditional narrative of seeking “protectors” to one of seeking partners.

The emergence of Israel as a Mediterranean energy player, its continued stability, robust military especially naval power in a neighborhood of unstable and weakening Arab states, and outreach to the eastern hemisphere by joining Turkey, Egypt and Syria to partner with the China-led Shanghai³ Cooperation Organization, is thus slowly creating a new regional and international systems of shared interest between Mideast countries and the Middle Kingdom.

China becomes a Mid-East player

With all eyes focused on the US-Russia standoff in Syria, there exists a blind spot regarding the emergence of the Chinese dragon in the Mediterranean Sea. China is poised to become an important player in the Mideast security scene, and is already asserting its role as a potential conflict mediator in the region following its participation in the P5+1 deal with Iran and now its present role in the Syrian crisis.

For a start, Beijing has a unique role in the current Saudi-Iran tension over Syria, given its “cleaner” scorecard than other permanent members of the UN Security Council. The US is seen as being pro-Israel and pro- Saudi, Russia is perceived to be backing Iran and Shia Muslims with its military operations in Syria, and Europe has colonial baggage in the Mideast region.

¹ <https://www.algemeiner.com/2014/03/24/israel-china-alliance-moves-forward-with-2-billion-red-med-freight-rail-link-alternative-to-suez-canal/>

² <https://www.redanalysis.org/2015/06/08/china-israel-new-silk-road/>

³ <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=683491>



In contrast, China enjoys good relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia—the largest crude oil supplier to China—as well as good relations with Israel. In fact, China contributed 1,000 peacekeeping troops in UNIFIL in Lebanon⁴ after the 2006 war at the request of Israel, given the Jewish state did not want Arab troops and requested Asian troops from China, South Korea, India, Malaysia that were viewed as more neutral in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Moreover, at a September conference at IDC Herzliya on Israel's China policy,⁵ some Israeli officials envision Beijing could play a role in pushing Jerusalem's Arab neighbors toward peace, by virtue of its increasing economic and diplomatic presence in the region. Capt. Yigal Maor, director general of the Transportation Ministry's Administration of Shipping and Ports, believes if China can invest in what he dubbed the Israel Gulf Economic Corridor (IGEC) that encompasses linking infrastructure projects in the Arab Gulf region with Israel and Jordan to transship Chinese goods, this could push Gulf countries into more formal ties with Israel.

Also, countries in the Eastern Mediterranean likely see the China-led Eurasian security bloc as a more effective anti-terror coalition to counter ISIS, Al Qaeda and other Salafi terrorist groups, while the US-led coalition is perceived to have a regime-change objective by supporting al Qaeda laced Salafist groups to overthrow secular governments considered unfriendly.

As former special operations veteran Jack Murphy revealed, CIA's Syria Task Force and the Counterterrorist Center/Syria-Iraq (CTC/SI) remain focused on overthrowing⁶ the Assad government rather than the terrorists. Indeed, counter-terror expert and Professor at Northeastern University, Max Abrahms,⁷ notes Egypt's President Sisi likely fears he is next in line for regime change after US removes President Assad, and is now forging bilateral counter-terrorism ties with Damascus.

If Israel and Egypt could somehow balance their status as traditional US "protectorates" with their emerging trajectory as "regional powers" with additional partners, and take stock not only of US interests but also legitimate interests of new Mideast actors such as China and Russia, it could perhaps help manage regional transition and maintain relative stability as the greater middle east continues merging with China's Afro-Eurasian integration project. And along with this, perhaps a resurrection of Bünting's Clover leaf world and a return to history.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article was first published by *Asia Times* on October 27, 2016.

⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5355128.stm>

⁵ <http://www.ipost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Could-Israel-become-a-linchpin-of-Chinas-trade-strategy-469093>

⁶ http://turcopolier.typepad.com/sic_semper_tyrannis/2016/09/us-special-forces-sabotage-white-house-policy-gone-disastrously-wrong-with-covert-ops-in-syria-ttg.html; <https://sofrep.com/63764/us-special-forces-sabotage-white-house-policy-gone-disastrously-wrong-with-covert-ops-in-syria/>

⁷ <https://twitter.com/MaxAbrahms/status/787986230504001536>



About the Author of this Issue

Dr. Christina Lin is a Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at SAIS-Johns Hopkins University where she specializes in China-Middle East/Mediterranean relations, and a research consultant for Jane's Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Intelligence Centre at IHS Jane's. She is the author of "The New Silk Road: China's Energy Strategy in the Greater Middle East" (The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), and a former director for China policy at the U.S. Department of Defense.



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