FOUR HUNDRED YEARS AGO, THE FIRST GENUINELY INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM OF STATES IN HUMAN HISTORY EMERGED. Prior to that time, there were regional geopolitical systems such as the various Chinese dynasties interacting with neighboring kingdoms. But there were no genuinely international systems. The Westphalian system created something quite new when nation states emerged. Personal loyalties were transferred from fealty to a king to a national identity and commitment to a state. The era also witnessed new organizational concepts, such as limited-liability corporations that broadly mobilized capital to focus it on targeted mercantilist ventures.

These European nation states sought to compete by creating globe-spanning empires to generate riches to support metropolitan centers. An international geopolitical system was born, centered in Europe, based on balance of power as an operating modality and grounded on mercantilist principles.

But there was a collateral consequence of this development. European empires sought commercial outposts around the world. The economic dynamism of this system pulled entrepreneurial impulses in Asia and Africa to the coastline. Naval transportation became the foundation of global commerce, giving rise to the great cities of Asia located on coastlines and along key waterways. And for the past 400 years, the geopolitical focus in Asia centered on the littoral.

Prior to this time, commerce and geopolitics in Asia were internal to the Eurasian continent. Interstate commerce coursed along the so-called "silk routes." Today, this 400-year epoch of Asian geopolitics focused on the littoral is changing. The great Eurasian
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The new silk route narrative has been in circulation for many years. Over half of the "new silk route" entries in a web search trace back to Turkey and reflect Turkish commercial interests. There is no doubt that OBOR has geopolitical dimensions, but failing to see the underlying commercial dynamics would distort our analysis. The most efficient way to connect Asian producers to European markets in recent memory has been via sea transport. But overland rail links could easily cut transportation times by a factor of two or three. Cutting transit times dramatically would lower working capital demands by significantly reducing time when invested capital is unproductive.

The U.S. government is ill equipped to assess this macro-development. From a bureaucratic standpoint, we divide the world in ways that block clearer vision. The State Department divides this space into four bureaus—East Asia and Pacific Affairs, European and Eurasian Affairs, Near Eastern Affairs, and South and Central Asian Affairs. The Defense Department divides itself into a Pacific Command that includes China in its area of responsibility, but the Central Command and the European Command are responsible for other portions of Greater Asia.

Bureaucratic institutions channel creative thinking. We are ill equipped to perceive a mega-trend when we look at it from four different perspectives, seeing the attributes of a new dynamic only through distant historic filters.

It would be a huge mistake to ignore the significance of the reconnecting of Eurasia. It would be equally dangerous to cast it as a geopolitical threat to the United States. We have a limited role in shaping this mega-development, but we certainly could alienate ourselves from the central actors involved in it. We have time to assess this objectively. It should be on any agenda for the next presidency.