

Bologna Institute for Policy Research

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Speaker: Daniel S. Markey, Director of Global Policy Program, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, US
Chair: Mark Gilbert, Professor of History and International Studies, Johns Hopkins University SAIS
Europe

“China’s Western Horizon”
Part of History of the Present Series

The discussion focused on China’s rise as a power in South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East and was based on the speaker’s new book “China’s Western Horizon.” The speaker/author premised his discussions on the three questions that he asks throughout the book: what is China up to, how is Eurasia responding, and how should the United States (and its allies and partners) respond?

To the first question, the author explained that China has new economic, security, and strategic ambitions for Eurasia and has pursued new initiatives in each of these areas. Economically, Beijing’s engagement is motivated by its incredible thirst for oil and gas to power its economy, and by the imperative to promote economic development in China’s relatively poorer western provinces. Politically, China has gradually shifted its external engagement from a baseline of “non-interference” toward a pattern of more “creative engagement,” for instance by playing a role in Sri Lanka’s civil war and, more recently, its domestic politics. China is consolidating its economic influence around the world and continues to develop new tools to further its objectives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure and Development Bank, and the China Development and Cooperation Agency. Furthermore, “In Eurasian states as elsewhere, China is often the principal creditor as well as the principal trading partner and consumer,” and these economic ties give Beijing political leverage. China’s aim to shape and inform perspectives in the region can also be seen through its investments in cultural influence such as Confucius Institutes, exchange programs, and state-run television networks.

The second question how is Eurasia responding? Broadly, the response is happening at two levels, within each society and among states in each region. Within Eurasian societies, some groups are more welcoming to Chinese involvement, while others oppose it. Across a number of the region’s illiberal states, ruling elites tend to see China as a partner against their domestic competitors, as well as a significant help in their ability to stave off threats from outside competitors and pressures, including from the United States. For example, China’s consumption of Iran’s oil provides a means for the Iranian regime to withstand US pressure.

How does the world respond to China’s activities? The United States, in particular, should keep its options open and recognize the importance of China’s actions in the region. Washington should not seek to compete with Beijing on infrastructure terms, as this will be a significant waste of needed resources, but should concentrate on those areas in which it has competitive advantage, such as initiatives focused on democratic accountability, free speech and the promotion of human rights. In some instances, the United States should also seek tactical cooperation with China to avoid conflict in a nuclear-armed region.