

## Review – Empires of Eurasia

Written by Joseph MacKay

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### **Empires of Eurasia: How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security**

**By Jeffrey Mankoff**

**Yale University Press, 2022**

The Eurasian land mass once teemed with empires. Today, if our maps are to be believed, none remain, and the region is parceled out into nation states. Jeffrey Mankoff's new book takes issue with this assumption, focusing on Russia, Turkey, Iran, and China. The book maps patterns of imperial activity in the region—past, but also present.

Mankoff's core argument "is that these four states and their geopolitical ambitions remain indelibly shaped by their imperial pasts. Because they were once empires... [they] are not—and are unlikely to ever become—nation-states inhabiting a sharply delineated territory and with a population sharing a common ethnic or linguistic identity" (p.3). Put differently, their past imperial ambitions persist into the present. Mankoff rejects explanations drawn on authoritarian rule or Huntingtonian ideas about civilizations (p.5-6). Instead, he argues, the causes of that persistence are both historical and geographical or geopolitical. The broader Eurasian situation in which these four find themselves marks them off from other parts of the world.

Eurasia itself, then, is a central concept here. Citing Christopher Beckwith (2009, p.xx), Mankoff defines it expansively—stretching from the Yalu River west to the Danube, between taiga forests in the north and the Himalaya in the south. Stretching well beyond Central Asia, it takes in a loosely defined zone demarcated by Europe, East Asia, South Asia, and the subarctic. This is much of the Earth's inhabited land area we are talking about.

Rather than offering a historical narrative, the book comprises a relatively systematic survey. After some introductory theoretical remarks, it is structured in four sections, one for each country. The sections in turn are structured concentrically around each metropole: they get coverage of their imperial metropolitan identities, followed by their borderlands, followed in turn by each country's 'near abroad'. The first concerns itself with how past ideas about empire shape present identities and practices. The second deals with unsettled imperial residua, in the form of contested boundaries and disputed territories. In this last category, imperial ambitions spill over unambiguously into neighboring states.

Historically and empirically, the book is expansive: the depth and breadth of synthetic research here is significant. Eurasia is a continental patchwork of regions too rarely understood on its own terms by non-specialists. (Mankoff's own specialism seems to lie at one end of the region, in Russian-Polish diplomatic history.) Historical synthesis is hard to do well, and bad synthesis too often discredits the good. Doing it right requires both an investment in existing historical research and something new to say analytically. Mankoff clearly did the work—the coverage is broad and relatively deep—and the resulting book provides real added value in terms of analysis. It carefully avoids over-broad generalizations or simplification in the name of policy relevance. It draws conclusions cautiously, documents exceptions, marginal cases, and the like.

Perhaps unavoidably, much of the book is concerned with geography. These four states are empires *of* Eurasia in a specific, liminal sense. Each has relations with or footprints in Eurasia's edges or neighboring regions: China in Northeast Asia, Russia in Europe, Turkey and Iran in the greater Middle East and the broader Islamic world. This

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marks them off from the other polities that came to the region from wholly outside it. Countries like Britain, the US, and Japan, have at various times engaged in empire-building in Eurasia, but are now more or less departed from it—though the American exit from Afghanistan brings us very close indeed to the present. Still, Mankoff's four have outlasted most of these by decades. They have also outlasted by *centuries* other empires that emerged from the region itself—Chinggisid, Timurid, and others. No one speaks of a new Mongolian or Uzbek imperialism. Instead, this is an imperialism of edge cases: states with one foot in and one out of the region, as he defines it.

When the book moves from geography to geopolitics, it sometimes surfaces categories and mechanisms from classical geopolitical theory. At the outset, it invokes Halford Mackinder's account of Inner Asia as the "geographical pivot" of history (p.9). Later, the South Caucasus emerges as "a classic imperial shatter zone" (p.63)—a term he also uses to describe the Balkans, parts of the Middle East, and beyond (pp.9, 143, 267). It's not clear these and other geopolitical categories do much analytical work. This is perhaps best, as these ways of speaking are no longer well regarded (e.g., Ó Tuathail 1992; Hobson 2012, pp.123–29). The book is at its best then when it avoids these somewhat deterministic geopolitical categories.

Instead, the book's core analytical category is empire itself. Here, it does well. Mankoff taps into literatures in IR, historical sociology, and history that conceptualize empire in analytically useful ways. It is probably now common enough in popular analysis to recall the imperial roots of the modern Russian and Chinese states; perhaps less so with Iran and Turkey. The book aims to link these states' current actions and aspirations to the historical record, and often draws connections effectively.

The book centers Eurasia as uniquely prone to imperialism. The region is not just prone to imperialism, Markoff argues, but distinctively so. I am not so sure. Once we set geopolitics aside, Eurasia's patterns of imperialism begin to look surprisingly typical. That normality could be framed in either of two ways. On the one hand, these four, like Europe's former metropolises, may gradually shed their imperial attachments and ambitions. Empire would then fade from the scene, and Eurasia would be durably dominated by sovereign states. But on the other, Eurasia's persistent imperialism may be more typical than Mankoff lets on. Persistent imperial ambitions may not be wholly different from European colonial residua or the US's all-but-literally-global patchwork of territories, protectorates, client states, and military bases (Immerwahr 2019).

The book is also a bit thin on regional or local voices and agendas. In Central Asia, for example, we hear briefly about Kyrgyzstan's multiple revolutionary events (p.63), but most discussion of the country focuses on assorted military basing rights, membership in Russian-led regional organizations (p.75), attachments to China's Belt and Road Initiative (p.211), and the like. Mankoff ably links such matters to past influence and rule by the four in the region, but we hear few local views or preferences on these matters, let alone a sense of local influence in this stuff.

None of this is to say Mankoff's analysis is exactly wrong. He captures well the dynamics within the macro-region he focuses on. Instead, it is to say that it may capture something like the usual state of play, globally. The problem is more likely that we are all like this—or at least all of us with any reservoir of power and history of projecting it. Power matters, and Mankoff shows it at work.

Whatever we make of the book's geographical foci, the book seems likely to be read largely in light of the Russia's current invasion of Ukraine, which began only a few months before it appeared—and thus after the text must have been finalized. Mankoff discusses the 2014 Russian invasion of Crimea and the Ukrainian east—his coverage here is necessarily brief but solid. Mankoff locates the longer conflict in a useful survey of deeper Russian imperial history (pp.31–38). In any event, it is difficult to imagine anyone will doubt the characterization of Russia as imperial at this point. It was perhaps always the one of the four for which the claim of imperialism can be most strenuously made—whatever their other ambitions, the other three have not forcibly annexed their neighbors' territories in recent years.

The book concludes that the four will likely persist in their ambitions, and thus in resisting or diverging from the US-led "rules-based" international order" (p.271). They may well do so—though those ambitions seem likely to find limits—bloodily, as they have in Ukraine, or otherwise. But these paths seem aberrant only if we take as given a US

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role inherently different from theirs. Mankoff provides an able and effective survey of these dynamics in the region. Their shared enterprise of “making the world safe for empire” (p.271) seems distinctive only if we see others as doing something much different.

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