



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

Craig Rullman
Columnist

The new silk roads

A few summers ago, while lounging around the Munich Airport waiting for a flight to Reykjavik, I bought a book: "The Silk Roads: A New History of the World," by Peter Frankopan. Frankopan is a senior fellow at Oxford University, and has written a convincing reassessment of world history. It is also a poignant and extraordinarily well-considered forecast of our possible future as a broader, Western culture.

It's a good enough read that, while spending the weekend moving horse manure from one spot to another on one of the last American-made tractors, I kept coming back to Frankopan's ultimate conclusion: that what we are witnessing today, in the realms of business and geopolitics and the obvious confusion and impotence of Western foreign policy, is a dramatic shift in the center of gravity, a return of power to the places it resided for thousands of years — the ancient kingdoms and cultures along the old Silk Roads.

From China to Ukraine, from Russia to Iran, from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan, a new center of power, anchored by the availability and abundance of natural resources, the home-grown ability and willingness to exploit them — and with a military parity with the global powers not seen since the collapse of the Ottomans — is poised to reassert itself.

I would argue that power is already reasserting itself, and has been since the Iranian revolution and the fall of the Shah.

I don't know what this dramatic shift, which I believe is real — and which we can read in the tea-leaves of the world's headlines every day — portends. I doubt it is good, at least for those of us who have grown accustomed to the ease and convenience of modern Western living.

Which is, if we are being honest, all of us.

We have grown accustomed to having most

everything we want, when we want it, and we could afford that luxurious way of thinking because — for better or for worse — we controlled the resources and the energy, and backed that control with unparalleled military might.

Not so, anymore. In regions of the world that may well dominate the future, and how we live in that future, we have wildly, and repeatedly, misplayed our hand. We have misplayed it so badly, and so often — from Kiev to Beijing — we risk becoming entirely irrelevant as a respectable player, incapable of supporting our own interests, and held in perpetual contempt and disdain by entire regions of people who consider us liars and thieves.

Sadly, at this point, it doesn't even matter if they're right or if they're wrong.

At home, we are engaged in endless bouts of moralizing about energy consumption, even as we arrive at the latest protest du jour in our SUVs and \$300 puffy jackets, weighted down with

laptops and cellphones. It's no accident of irony that protestors of the Dakota Access pipeline left behind 24,000 tons of trash, mountains of human waste, dogs, puppies, cars, and dozens upon dozens of propane tanks. Law enforcement officers were even monitoring the garbage collection on the chance there might be dead humans hidden in the refuse. That's not an unplanned misfortune, excusable because the motives were sound: it's exactly who we have become, a kind of cultural split-personality, duplicitous to the point of absurdity.

Consider this: the proven crude reserves under the Caspian Sea are twice those of the entire United States. The Karachaganak reserve between Kazakhstan and Russia contains an estimated 42 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, liquefied gas, and crude oil. The Donbas basin in eastern Ukraine has 10 billion tons of extractable coal deposits, as well as 1.4 billion barrels of oil, 2.4 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and the earth

itself in southern Ukraine is so rich they dig it up and sell it to the tune of a billion a year. The Uzbek and Kyrgyz mines of the Tian Shan belt are second only to the Witwatersrand basin in gold deposits. In Kazakhstan are beryllium, dysprosium, and other rare-earth metals vital for the manufacture of mobile phones, laptops, and rechargeable batteries — not to mention uranium and plutonium for nuclear warheads.

There isn't a well-meaning environmental protest in the world that is going to stop those countries from exploiting their resources, growing tremendously wealthy from the pursuit, and wielding the fruits as both hard and soft power in the Great Game. And, disturbingly, they aren't likely to have even the remotest hint of democratic institutions in place to restrain their considerable ambitions.

Like it or not, the real history of the world has always been, and always will be, about resources.

Last year, in my favorite

outback bar in Nevada, I saw a sign hanging over the ranks of bourbon and rye on a dusty shelf. The sign read: "If it doesn't grow, it has to be mined." The sign was printed as a kind of sad protest, and pasted up by a disgruntled someone who was about to lose his job at the gypsum mine.

It didn't matter that the statement happens to be true, because truth in the 21st century has become increasingly obscure and elusive. And it didn't help either, because the more pressing and indisputable fact remained that he was losing his livelihood to someone on the other side of the world, to some other miner, in the heart of the New Silk Roads.

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