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China Moving Ahead of U.S. on Roads, Rails, Shipping: Cameron on Transportation

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Which is the number one country in the world for transportation? Certainly not the United States. Not even countries in the E.U. No, you have to look farther east, as Marco Polo did in 1271, to find the future — in China.

I'm so tired of ignorant Americans chanting "We're Number 1," when we are not. Not in healthcare, education and clearly not when it comes to using transportation to bolster our world trade.

Compare our crumbling interstate highway system, much of it built during the Eisenhower administration, to China's superhighways, twice the mileage of our own.

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Or look at our decaying railroads versus the 15,000 miles of high speed rail on the Chinese mainland, making Amtrak's Acela look like a toy train (145 mph vs. 220 mph, one train for 300 passengers per hour vs. China's 1000 passenger trains departing every 15 minutes).

We keep hearing of the Trump administration's plans for rebuilding our infrastructure, but nothing ever comes of it. We pay lip service to that crucial investment but never appropriate it as the priority it should be.

Meanwhile, China keeps spending \$300 billion a year on its roads, rails and ports — much of that money coming from bargain-loving American consumers. Crucially, part of that investment is focusing overseas, creating a new Silk Road to markets in Europe and Africa.

Beijing has promised \$8 trillion in loans to developing countries to build deep water ports and rail terminals to service China's 1000+ container ships delivering its products overseas. Compare that to the US's merchant marine fleet, just 175 American owned vessels.

China has invested heavily in the port city of Gwadar in Pakistan, linked to western China by rail. And in the tiny African nation of Djibouti, positioned strategically at the mouth of the Red Sea, China not only built and owns the super-port there but has established its first overseas military base there with 400 troops.

Djibouti itself is just a toe-hold in Africa, but the port is connected by a Chinese-built railroad to nearby land-locked Ethiopia, one of the wealthier countries in Africa and anxious to acquire Chinese-made products.

Of course, China is only doing what other empire-building countries like Great Britain and the U.S. did in the past, issuing loans to countries that they'll never be able to repay while providing lucrative markets for their products — kind of a lose-lose situation for the debtor markets. When Pakistan and Djibouti can't repay those Chinese loans, use your imagination to guess what they'll have to give up instead.

To protect those Chinese-built ports and mega-ships, China's People's Liberation Navy is enjoying rapid growth, soon to rival the U.S. Navy's capabilities in the Pacific. By 2030 they will have 530 warships and submarines.

Even the land route from China to Europe is being revived with rail. There are now three trains a day departing the industrial and technology hub at Xian traveling Marco Polo's old route west through Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia carrying containers filled with electronics and textiles.

The transcontinental journey takes about two weeks but is cheaper than air and faster than shipping. It's not a bullet train, just efficient low cost transportation through 60 countries with 5 billion potential customers.

So while the Trump administration battles China with tariffs and empty rhetoric (like calling COVID-19 "Kung Flu"), the Chinese leadership is playing the long game.

We are not only getting outspent by Beijing, but outsmarted.

Jim Cameron has been a Darien resident for more than 25 years. He is the founder of the [Commuter Action Group](#), sits on the [Merritt Parkway Conservancy](#) board and also serves on the Darien RTM and as program director for Darien TV79. The opinions expressed in this column, republished with permission of Hearst CT Media, are only his own. You can reach him at CommuterActionGroup@gmail.com.