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Week One

Discussing Our Reading: Chapter 1



What observations and/or questions about Chapter 1 do you have?

Quick write: What are today's major trade networks?

How are goods transported?

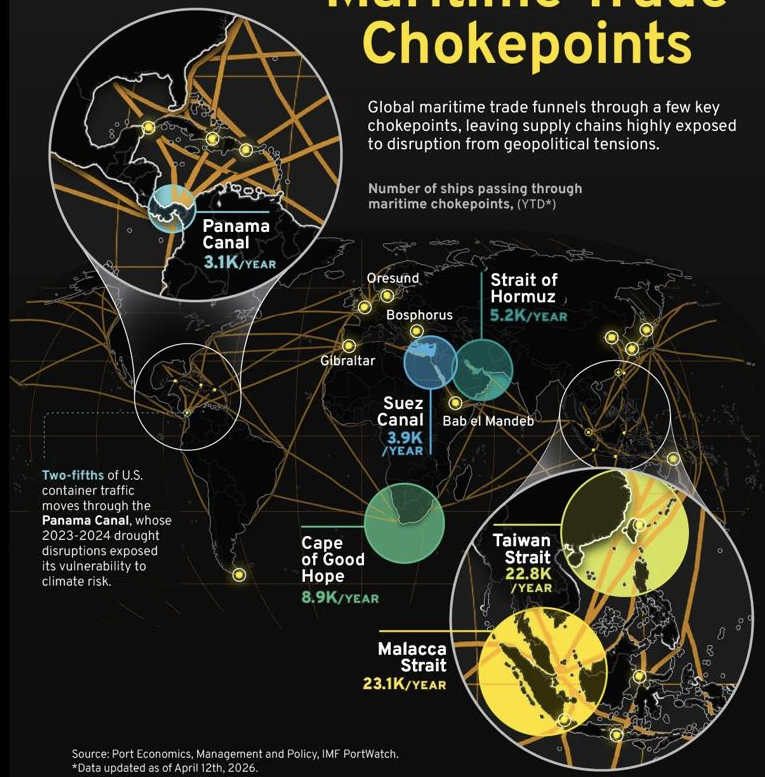
Who controls the major trade routes?

To what extent do negotiation, sanctions, and violence affect global trade?

The World's Key Maritime Trade Chokepoints

Global maritime trade funnels through a few key chokepoints, leaving supply chains highly exposed to disruption from geopolitical tensions.

Number of ships passing through maritime chokepoints, (YTD*)



Two-fifths of U.S. container traffic moves through the **Panama Canal**, whose 2023-2024 drought disruptions exposed its vulnerability to climate risk.

Source: Port Economics, Management and Policy, IMF PortWatch.
*Data updated as of April 12th, 2026.

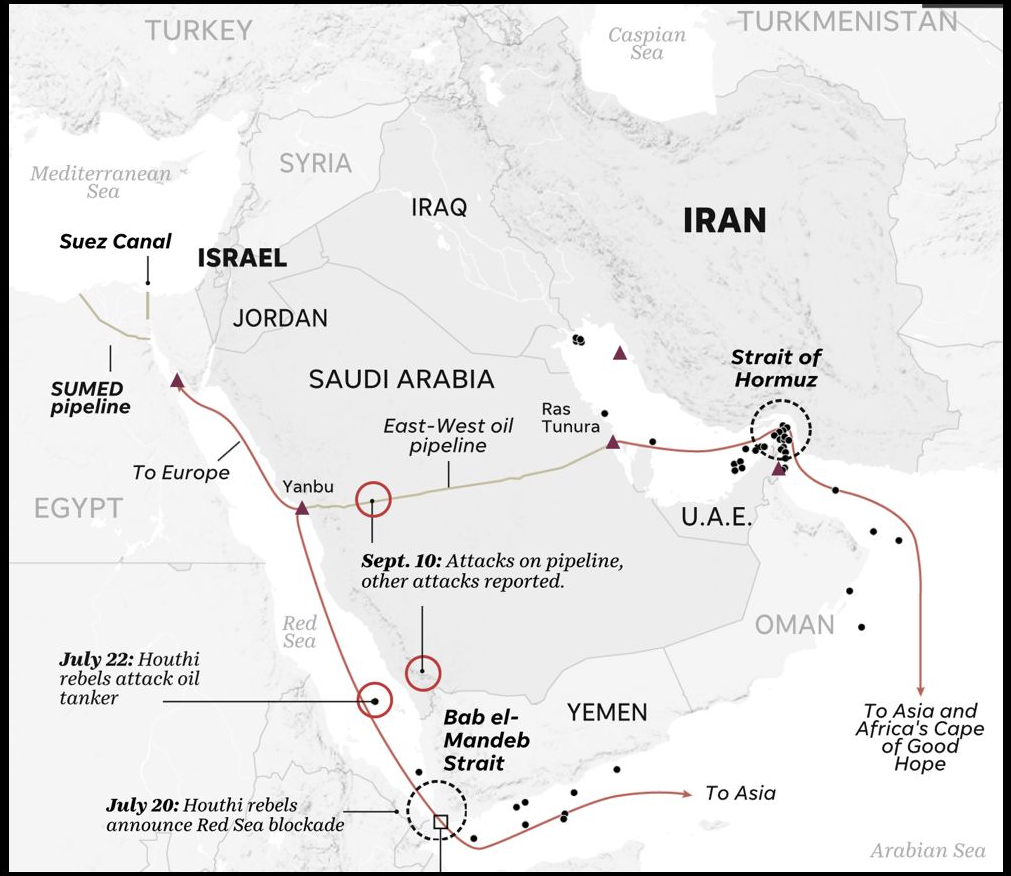
With modern supply chains reliant on a handful of chokepoints, local disruptions can turn into global losses.

Explore a Data-Driven View of Risk

VISUAL CAPITALIST

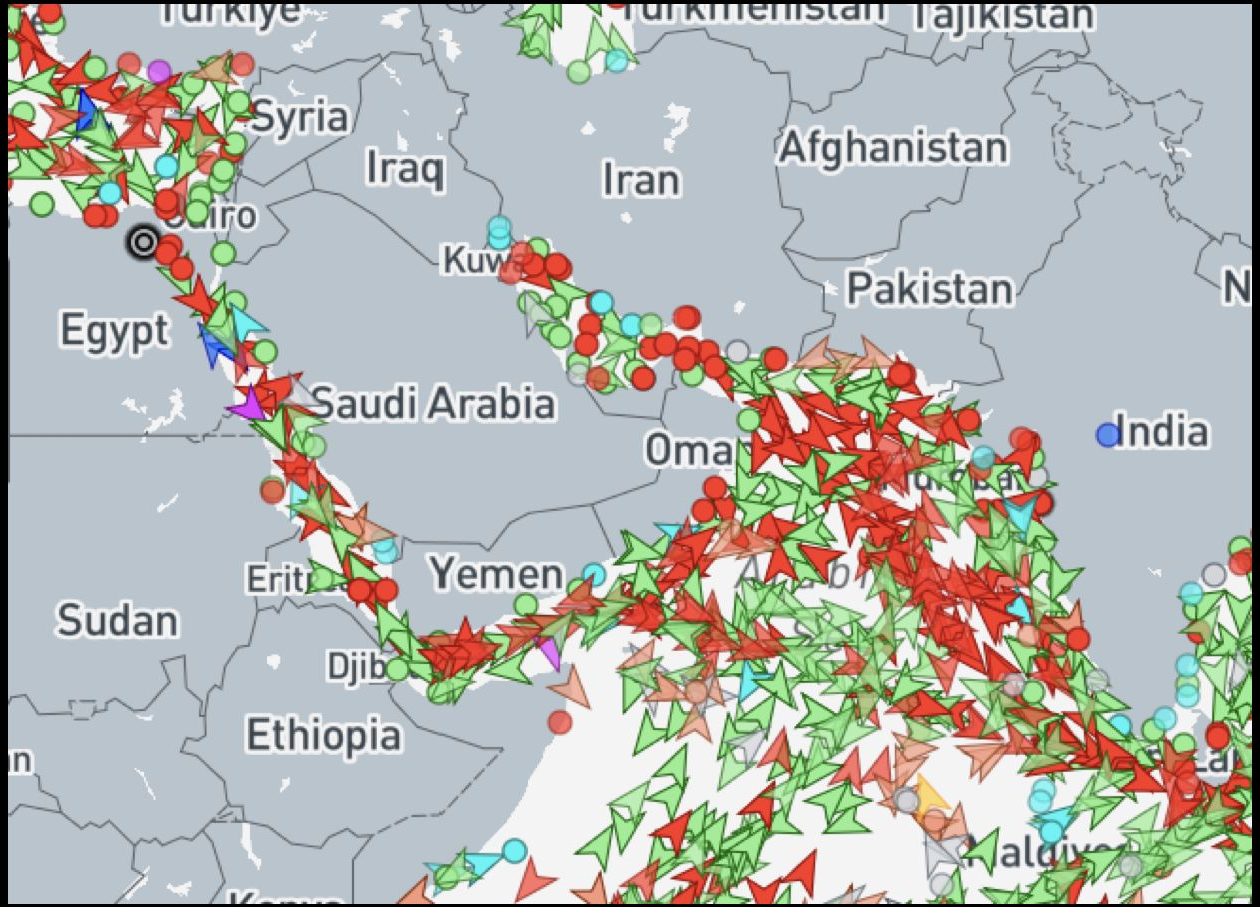
INIGO FOR THE LOVE OF DATA

Military Disruptions of Two of Today's Oil Roads

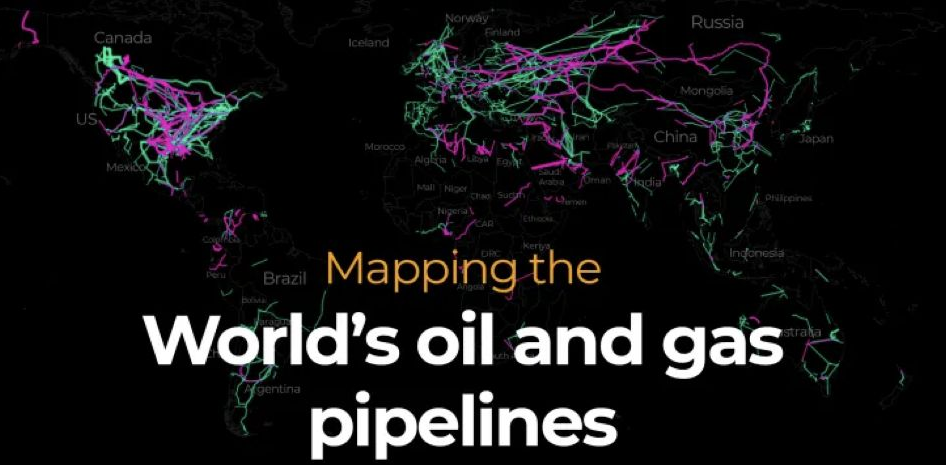


https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2026/09/11/iran-houthis-block-strait-of-hormuz-and-bab-el-mandeb/91709250007/?utm_source=join1440&utm_medium=email&utm_placement=newsletter&user_id=6755f4712456a5906405f449

Ship Traffic: Hormuz and Bab-al-Mandeb Straits; Suez Canal (09.28.26)



https://www.marinevesseltraffic.com/HORMUZ-STRAIT/ship-traffic-tracker

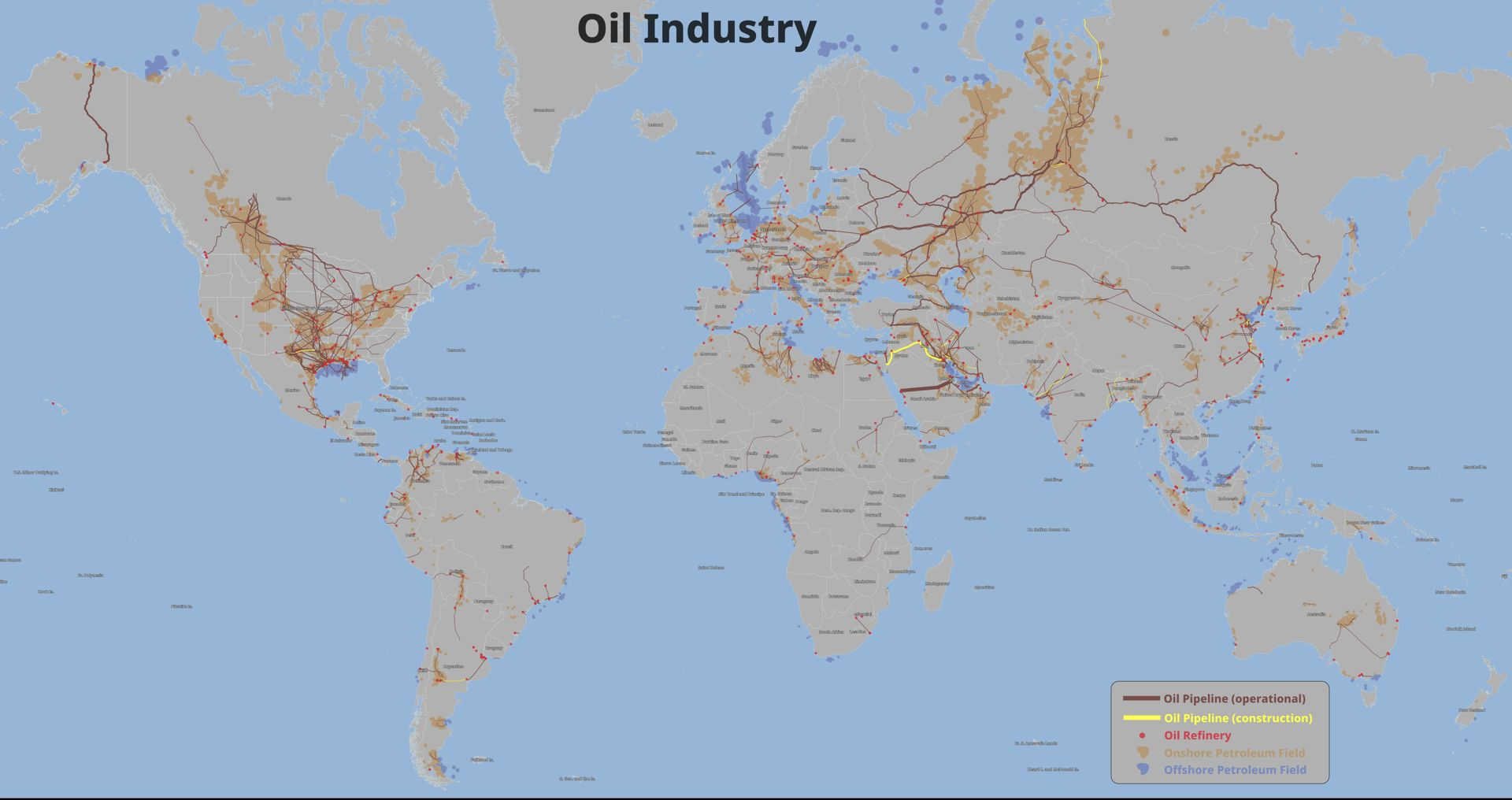


The combined length of these pipelines is more than **1.18 million km (730,000 miles) – enough to circle the Earth 30 times.**

1. United States – Oil: 91,067km (56,587 miles); Gas: 333,366km (207,145 miles)
2. Russia – Oil: 38,419km (23,872 miles); Gas: 92,831km (57,683 miles)
3. Canada – Oil: 23,361km (14,516 miles); Gas: 84,682km (52,619 miles)
4. China – Oil: 27,441km (17,051 miles); Gas: 76,363km (47,450 miles)
5. Australia – Oil: 1,636km (1,017 miles); Gas: 23,002km (14,293 miles)

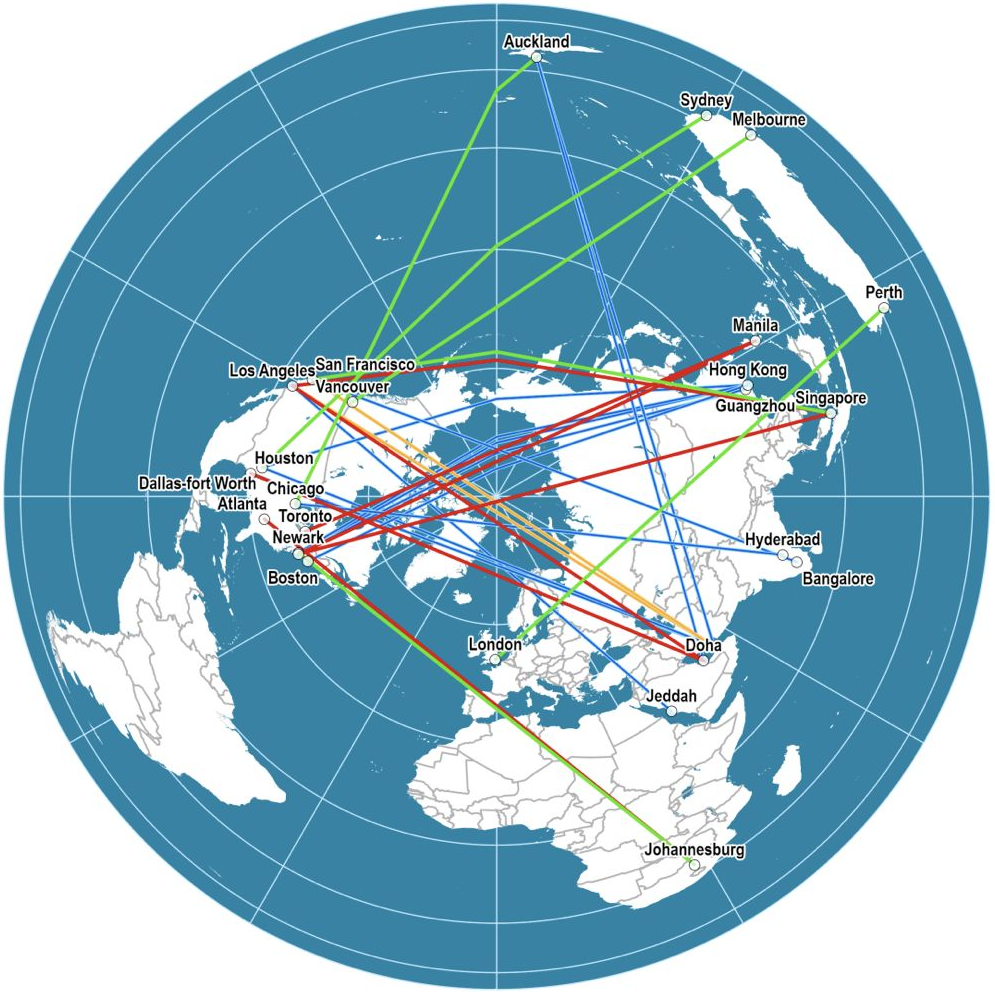
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/16/mapping-world-oil-gas-pipelines-interactive

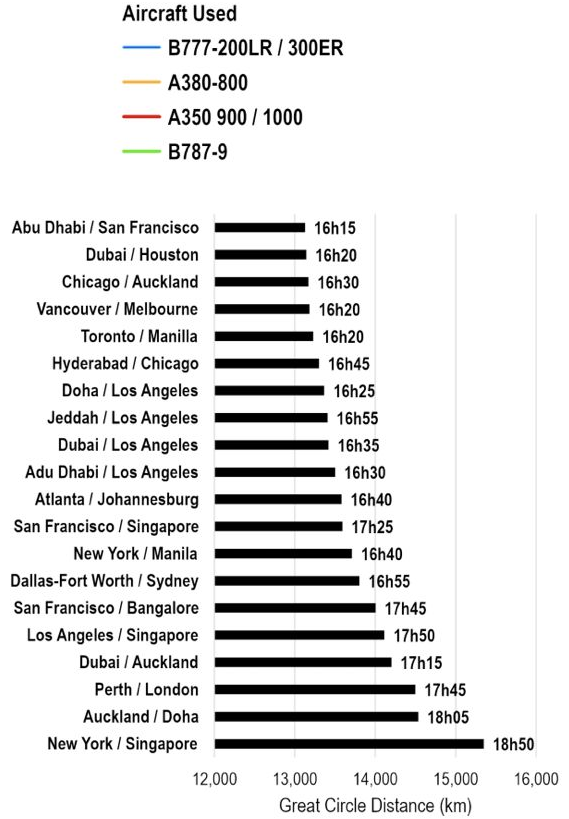
Oil Industry



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_oil_pipelines#/media/File:Oil_industry.svg

World's Longest Non-stop Air Transport Routes





Major Railway Routes

of North America



https://www.acwr.com/rail-map/

Major Truck Routes on the NHS: 2040

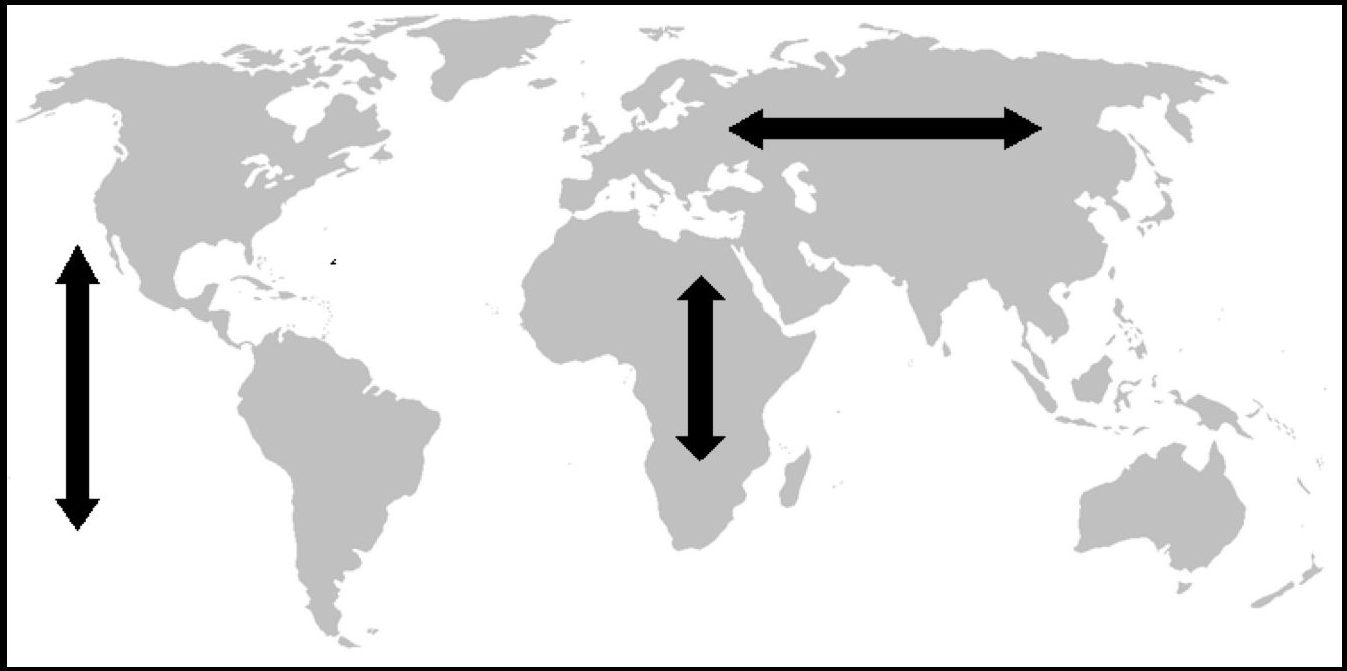


Notes: AADTT is average annual daily truck traffic and includes all freight-hauling and other trucks with six or more tires. AADT is average annual daily traffic and includes all motor vehicles. NHS mileage as of 2011, prior to MAP-21 system expansion.
Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Office of Freight Management and Operations, Freight Analysis Framework, version 3.4, 2013.

https://ops.fhwa.dot.gov/freight/freight_analysis/nat_freight_stats/nhsmajortrkrts2040.htm

Jared Diamond's Thesis (*Guns, Germs, and Steel)*

The East-West Axis: Eurasia's landmass stretches from east to west. Inhabitants shared a similar climate across the continent, allowing crops, livestock, and ideas to spread quickly. In contrast, the Americas and Africa stretch north to south, where distinct climate zones blocked easy movement.



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guns,_Germs,_and_Steel#/media/File:Continental_axes_by_Jared_Diamond.png

Main East-West Routes of the Silk Roads



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silk_Road#/media/File:SeidenstrasseGMT.JPG

The Unrealized Dream of Western-Hemispheric, Inter-Continental Automotive Travel



1946

https://aeon.co/essays/why-the-pan-american-highway-only-half-exists?utm_source=Aeon+Newsletter&utm_campaign=60226bd20b-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2026_09_07&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-4ef8a26106-68694789

AI Overview of Pan-American Progress, 1924 - 2026

The highway connection between Alaska and Chile is **mostly complete but remains physically disconnected by a single stretch of land**. The route relies on the **Pan-American Highway**, a network of roads stretching roughly 19,000 to 30,000 miles from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, to the southern regions of South America.

The critical roadblock preventing a seamless drive is the **Darién Gap**, an **impassable 60-to-100-mile stretch**of roadless, dense tropical rainforest and marshland spanning the border between Panama and Colombia.

Because of this break, travelers driving between the two continents **must ship their vehicles** via ocean freight cargo from Panama to Colombia (or vice versa) to continue their journey.



https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/bvyeo3/the_panamerican_highway_is_almost_30000_miles/#lightbox

AFRICAN PLANS FOR A TRANS-CONTINENTAL ROAD NETWORK



Extract: OECD (2019), "Accessibility and Infrastructure in Border Cities", West African Papers, No. 23, OECD Publishing, Paris.

© 2019. Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat (SWAC/OECD)

https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/rafayh/africas_plan_for_transcontinental_roads/

Anyone up for a bike ride?

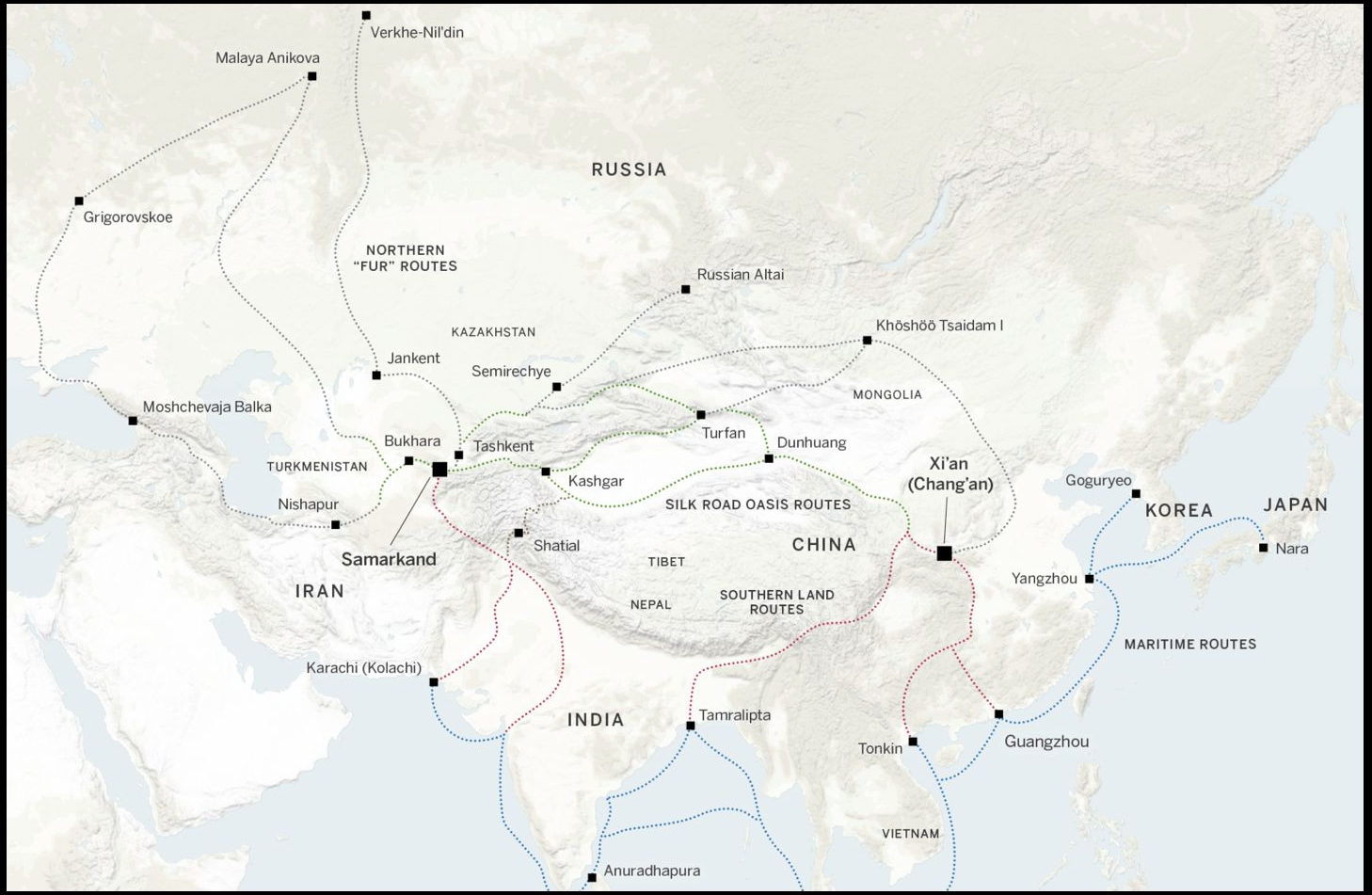


https://www.reddit.com/r/bicycletouring/comments/1nvjo19/advice_on_riding_across_africa/

Silk Road Trade Routes, Superimposed on a Map of Modern Nation-States

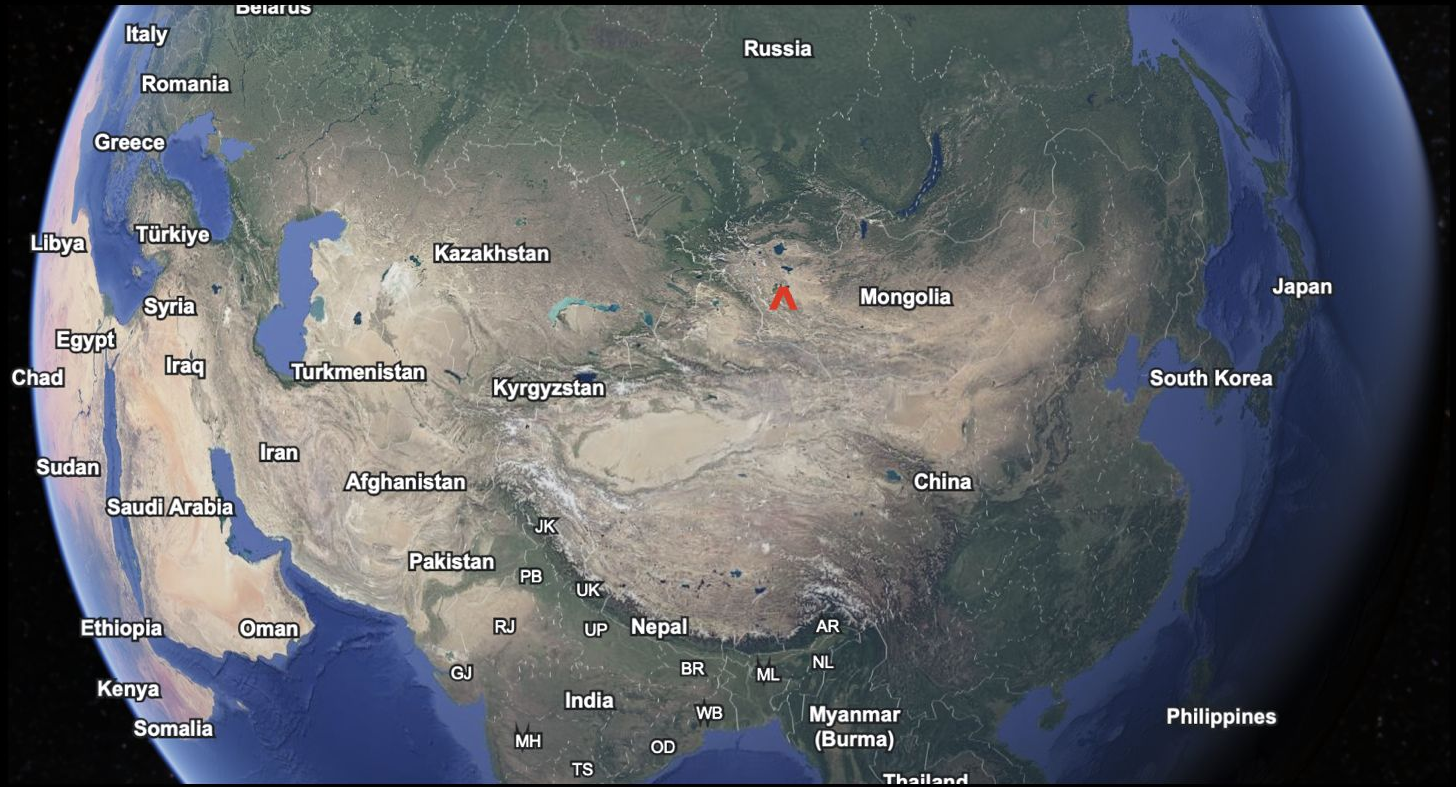


North - South Routes



https://sogdians.si.edu/introduction/

The Eurasian pole of inaccessibility is the place on Earth farthest from any ocean, located in the Gurbantünggüt Desert in NW China.



Approximately 2,500 to 2,645 kilometers
(1,550 to 1,640 miles) from the nearest coastline

Roughly 46°17′N 86°40′E (with alternate calculations depending on whether the Gulf of Ob is counted as an ocean)

Moose River (Maine's northernmost point)—sits roughly **100+** miles inland from the open ocean. (The “pole of inaccessibility” is within Baxter State Park: ~ **73** miles from the Atlantic.) Today, I live ~ **400** feet from salt water.

The point in Florida farthest from the ocean is **where the Suwanee crosses into Georgia** at **74** miles. (I lived **on** the water.)

Tri-state corner of NJ is ~ **75** miles from the Atlantic. (I lived ~ **14** miles away.)

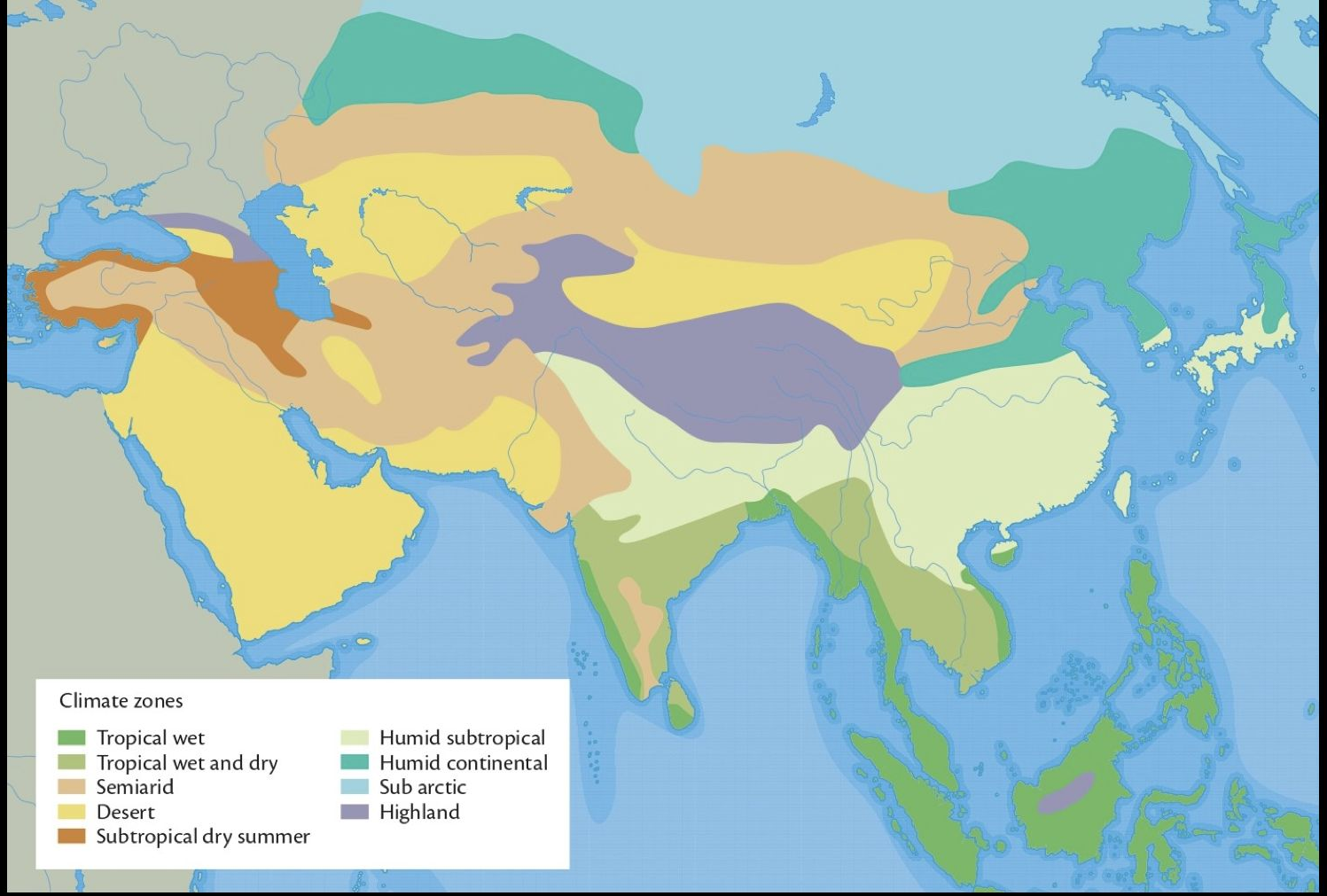
The remote corners of **Modoc and Lassen counties** of CA are farthest from the Pacific: ~ **180** miles. (I lived ~ **9** miles from San Francisco Bay.)

New Freeport, PA, **is ~350** miles from salt water. (I lived ~ **65** miles away.)

Salisbury, CT is **58** miles. (I lived ~ **7** miles away.)

Human blood, like seawater, is a liquid dominated by sodium and chloride.

(Some of us didn’t get very far when we crawled out of the primeval ocean.)



https://iranturan.leiden.edu/history/overview-of-the-silk-routes/

Climate as a factor in Silk Roads history

Early medieval warm and wet periods:

- Stronger oases
- Larger caravan towns
- More productive pastoral Steppes

Droughts and Cold snaps:

- Political stress
- Nomad migrations
- Shifting trade routes

Medieval Climate Anomaly (c. 900 - c. 1300):

- Unusually warm and wet period
- Rise of Mongol Empire

'Little Ice Age' (c. 1320 - c. 1850):

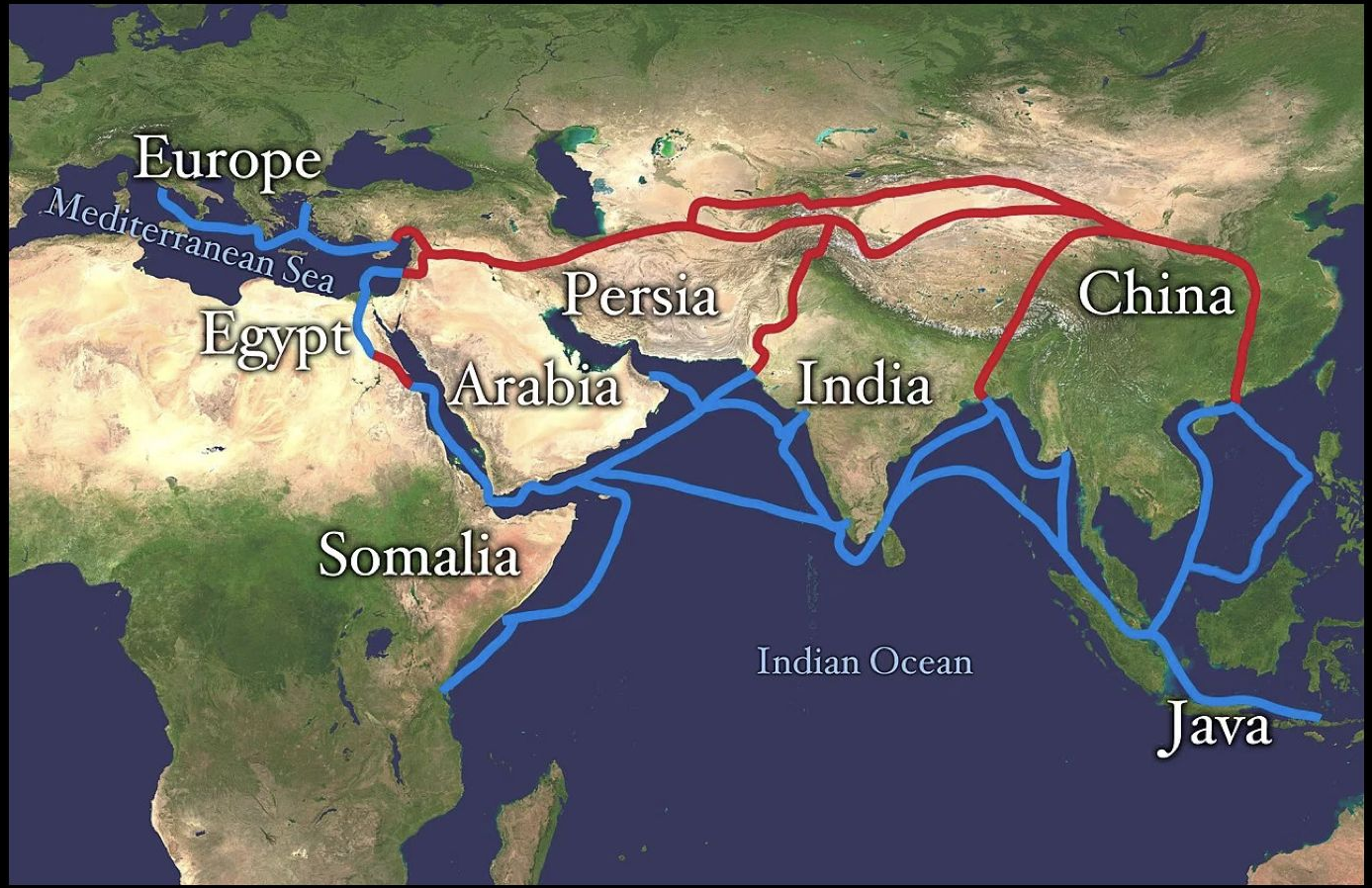
- Decline of Mongol power
- Black Death pandemic

Topography of West Asia



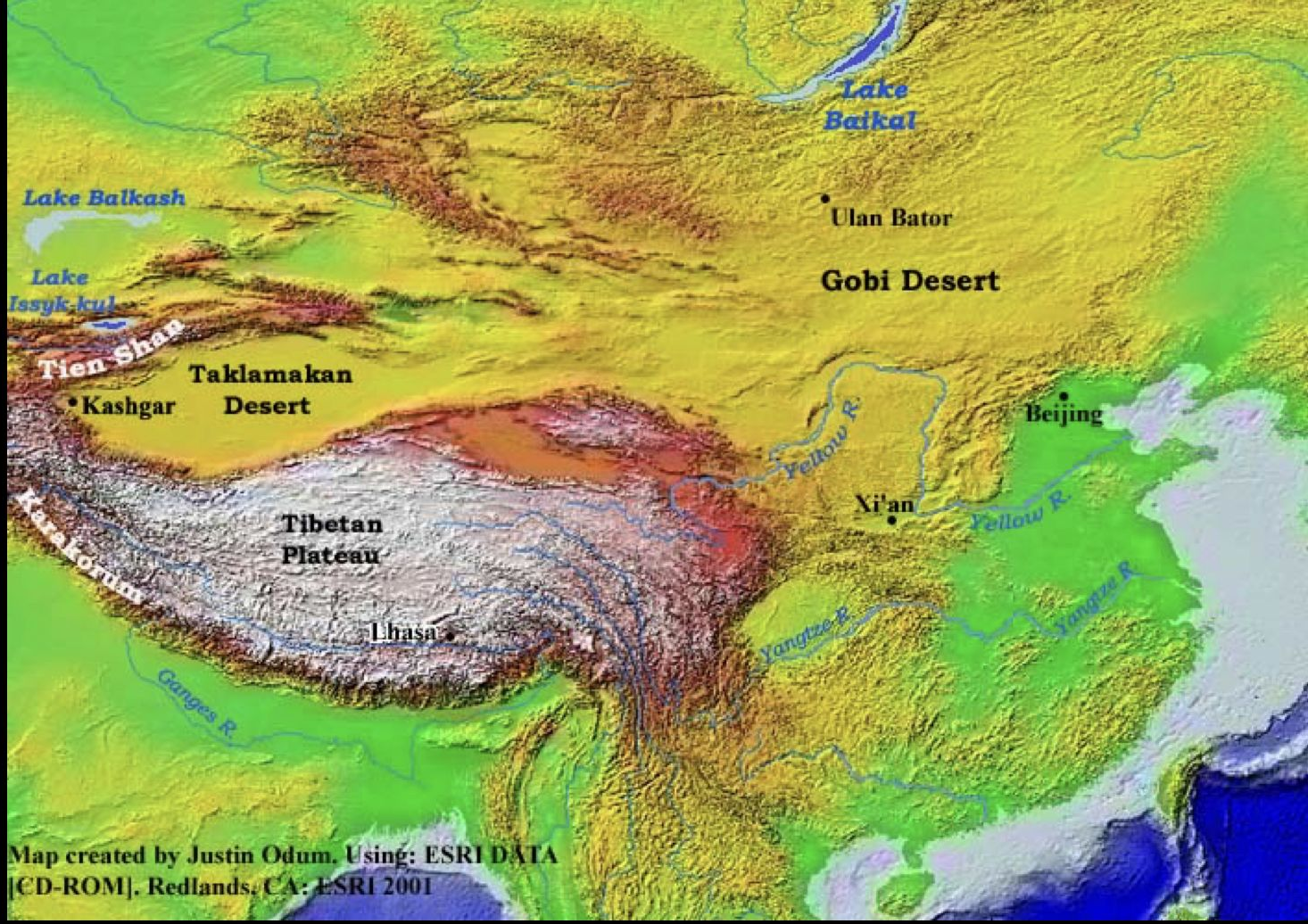
https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/maps/physical/wtopo.html

(just for quick reference)



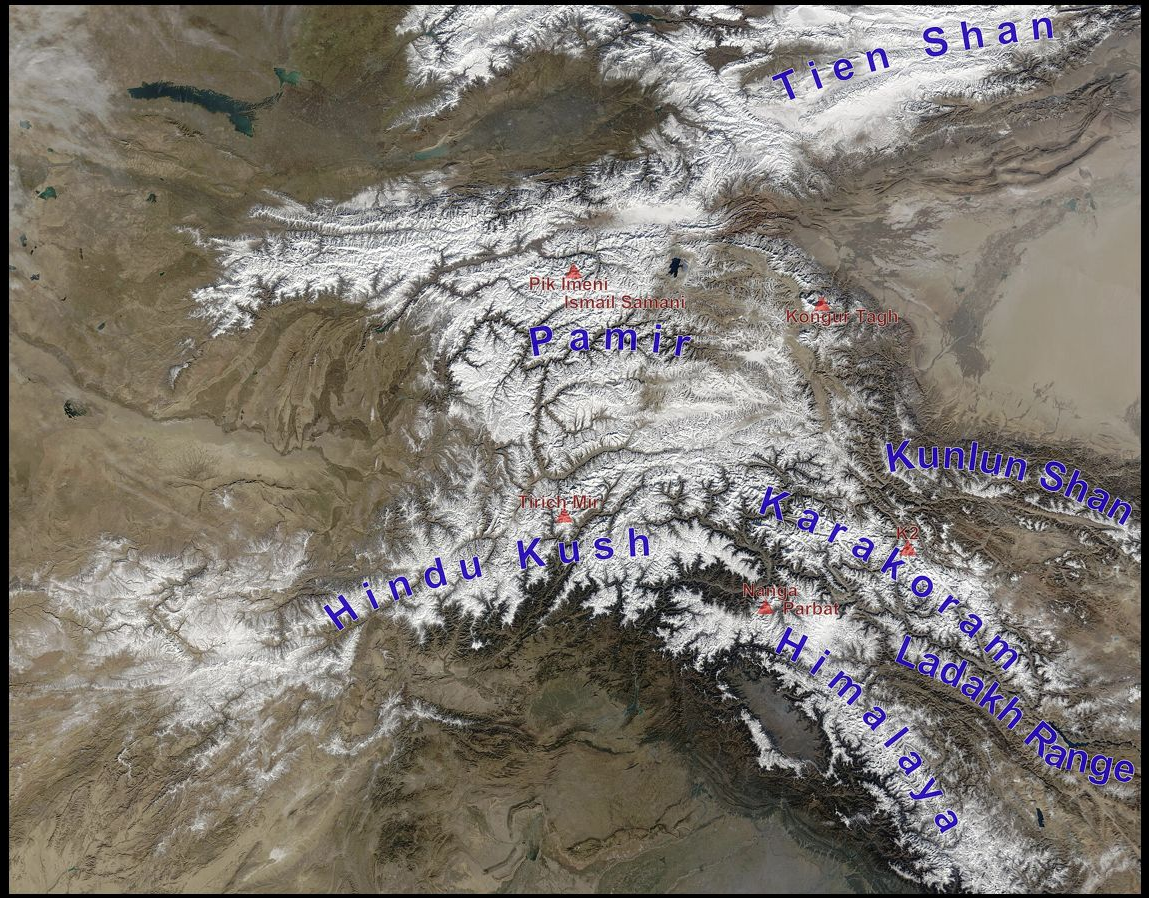
https://www.worldhistory.org/image/8327/map-of-the-silk-road-routes/

Topography of East Asia



https://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/maps/physical/etopo.html

The Kunlun, Tianshan,Karakorum, and Pamir mountain ranges



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pamir_Mountains#/media/File:High_Asia_Mountain_Ranges.jpg

Now that we've glimpsed the climate regimes and topography of the silk roads, let's watch another brief history of the trade system:



https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Evergreen_Valley_College/Asian_Art_History_(Gustlin_and_Gustlin)/05:_The_Maritime_and_Overland_Silk_Road_(400_BCE__50_BCE)/5.02:_The_Maritime_and_Overland_Silk_Road_(200_BCE_-_200_CE)



Palmyra,

Eastern Syria

https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/21/world/middleeast/palmyra-syria-islamic-state.html



Mesopotamian landscape near Baghdad

https://create.vista.com/unlimited/stock-photos/792117560/stock-photo-ctesiphon-baghdad-bagdad-iraq-building-ktesifon-palace-tak-kisra-taq/

Central Asian Steppe



https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&url=https://www.thoughtco.com/ancient-societies-central-asian-steppe-172847&ved=0CBYQjRxqFwoTCIC99tmO7JYDFQAAAAAdAAAAABA3&opi=89978449



The ruins of Merv, Turkmenistan

https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/aug/12/lost-cities-merv-worlds-biggest-city-razed-turkmenistan

Mountains near

Samarkand, Uzbekistan



samarkand+uzbekistan+landscape+photos+near+samarkand

Outside of Kashgar



https://www.viator.com/tours/Kashgar/Best-of-Kashgar-tour-with-Karakoram-Highway/d36669-103794P

Near Kashgar



https://www.viator.com/tours/Kashgar/Best-of-Kashgar-tour-with-Karakoram-Highway/d36669-103794P2

Bactrian Camels out of Kashgar



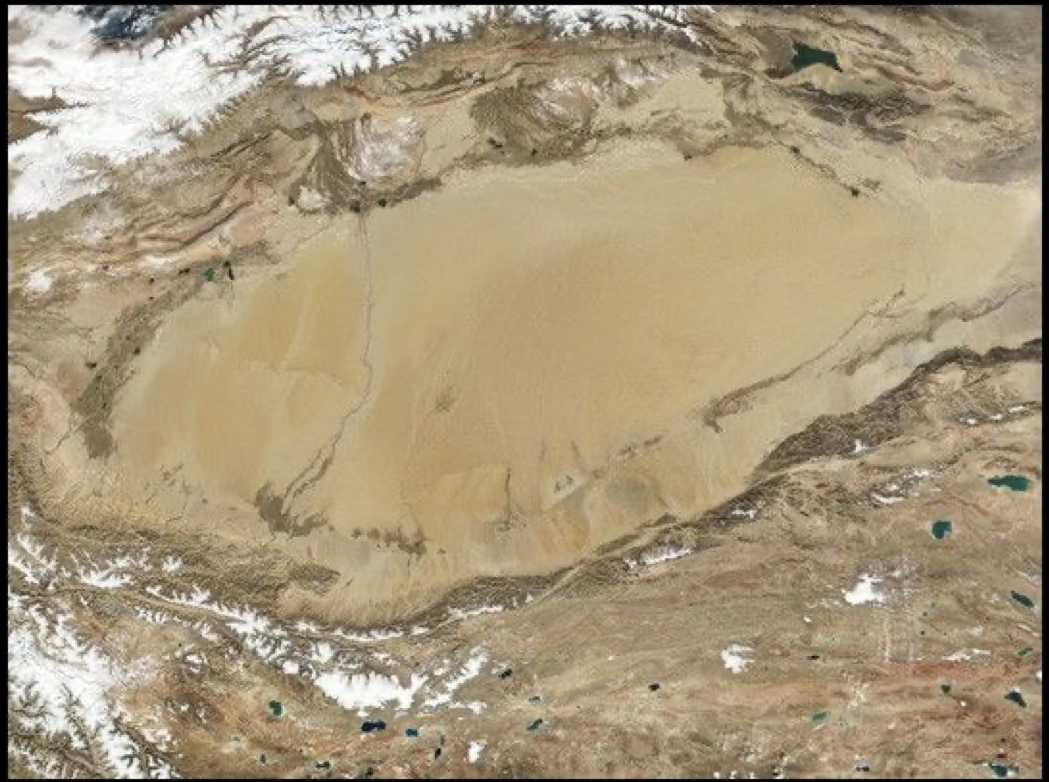
https://www.viator.com/tours/Kashgar/Silk-Road-Culture-Diversity-Adventure-to-Taklamakan-Desert/d36669-63760P64

The New Silk Road to Kashgar?



https://www.viator.com/tours/Kashgar/Best-of-Kashgar-tour-with-Karakoram-Highway/d36669-103794P2

The Taklamakan Desert



https://assets.science.nasa.gov/dynamicimage/assets/science/esd/eo/images/imagerecords/1000/1925/Taklimakan.jpg?w=540&h=405&fit=clip&crop=faces,focalpoint

Our caravan on its way to making the first ever crossing of the 780 mile Taklamakan Desert in western China.



https://www.keithsutter.com/adventure-blog/blog-post-three-p7j7j-hmg76

Another View of the Taklamakan



https://www.sciencephoto.com/media/109626/view

Spoiler Alert: We can all go home now.

"A wide variety of manufactured products and agricultural commodities traveled over the silk roads. Generally speaking, silk and spices traveled west from producers in southeast Asia, China, and India to consumers in central Asia, Iran, Arabia, and the Roman empire (including Egypt and north Africa as well as the European regions of the empire). Silk came mostly from China, the only land in classical times where cultivators and weavers had developed techniques for producing high-quality silk fabrics.

"The fine spices — cloves, nutmeg, mace, and cardamom — all came from southeast Asia. Ginger came from China, cinnamon from China and southeast Asia, pepper from India, and sesame oil from India, Arabia, and southwest Asia. […] Apart from spices, India also exported cotton textiles and valuable exotic items such as pearls, coral, and ivory.

"Central Asia produced large, strong horses and high-quality jade, much prized in China for stone carvers. From the Roman empire came glassware, jewelry, works of art, decorative items, perfumes, bronze goods, wool and linen textiles, pottery, iron tools, olive oil, wine, and gold and silver bullion."

Jerry H. Bentley and Herbert F. Ziegler. *Traditions & Encounters: A Global Perspective on the Past* (2006), pp. 292-93.

Our Author's Advice Before We Set Out:

- People thrive with long-distance communication and interaction.
- Interdependence of pastoral and agrarian peoples drove silk-roads history.
- Trade networks accelerated intercontinental integration.
- Avoid focusing primarily on the east-west termini (i.e., Xi'an — Rome).
- Silk was not the most consequential commodity transported along the silk roads.

- Silk was not the most consequential commodity transported along the silk roads.
- The silk trade persisted long after the putative end of the silk-roads trading routes.
- North - south routes must be included in our study of the east - west trunk roads.
- We must put aside our agrarian / urban biases when considering nomadic groups, the “proto-globalizers” of Afro-Eurasian cultures and technologies.

Let's Explore Our Biases:

- Our dwellings
- Our occupations
- Our government
- Our religions
- Our education
- Our food supply
- Our travel destinations
- Our languages
- Our relationships with animals
- Our sports and entertainment

Important Points (continued)

- Religion played a major role in connecting peoples along the silk roads.
- Missionaries, monks, and pilgrims spread belief systems and cultures beyond political and linguistic boundaries.
- Their written accounts are crucial to historians, and they provided important geographical information to their host cities and states.

Religious Sojourners

- In many cases, they provided scripts and literacy to foreign governments, uniting subjects into faith communities and providing rulers with clerical bureaucracies.

- Above all else, religious networks and imperial governance united disparate regions of Afro-Eurasia in a continental web of intellectual, artistic, scientific, and biological exchanges.

- North and Central Asian geography: tundra, taiga, steppe, deserts, mountain ranges and their rivers

- Pastoralists were not “barbarians;” they were often linked to farming and urban populations through cooperation and competition.

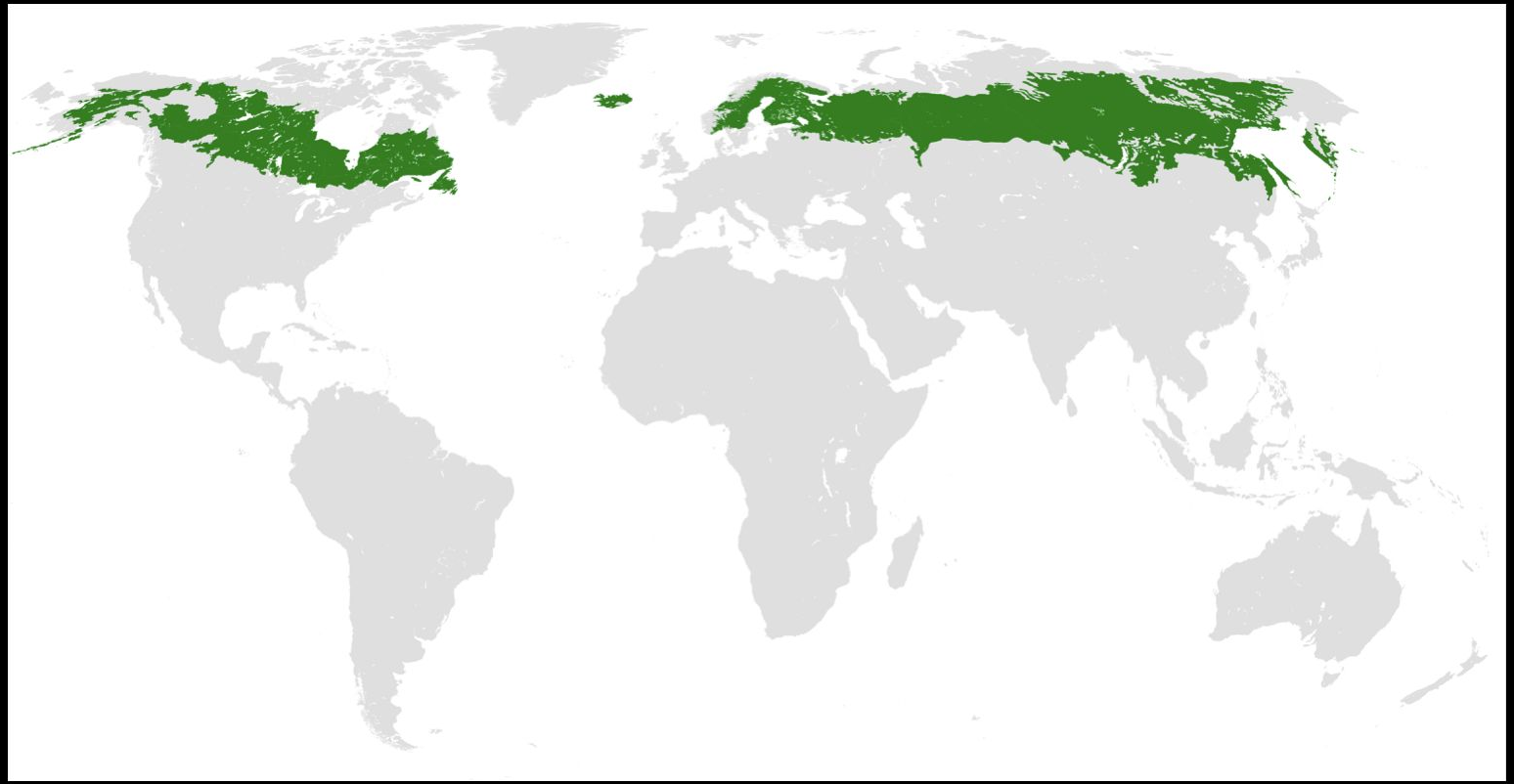
- No clear line between “steppe and sown” — even the ‘Great Wall’ was permeable.

- Long periods of Eurasian history alternate between nomadic domination of agrarian states and vice versa.

- Nomads controlling vast Eurasian territories facilitated large-scale trade and cultural exchanges between towns and cities throughout the continent.

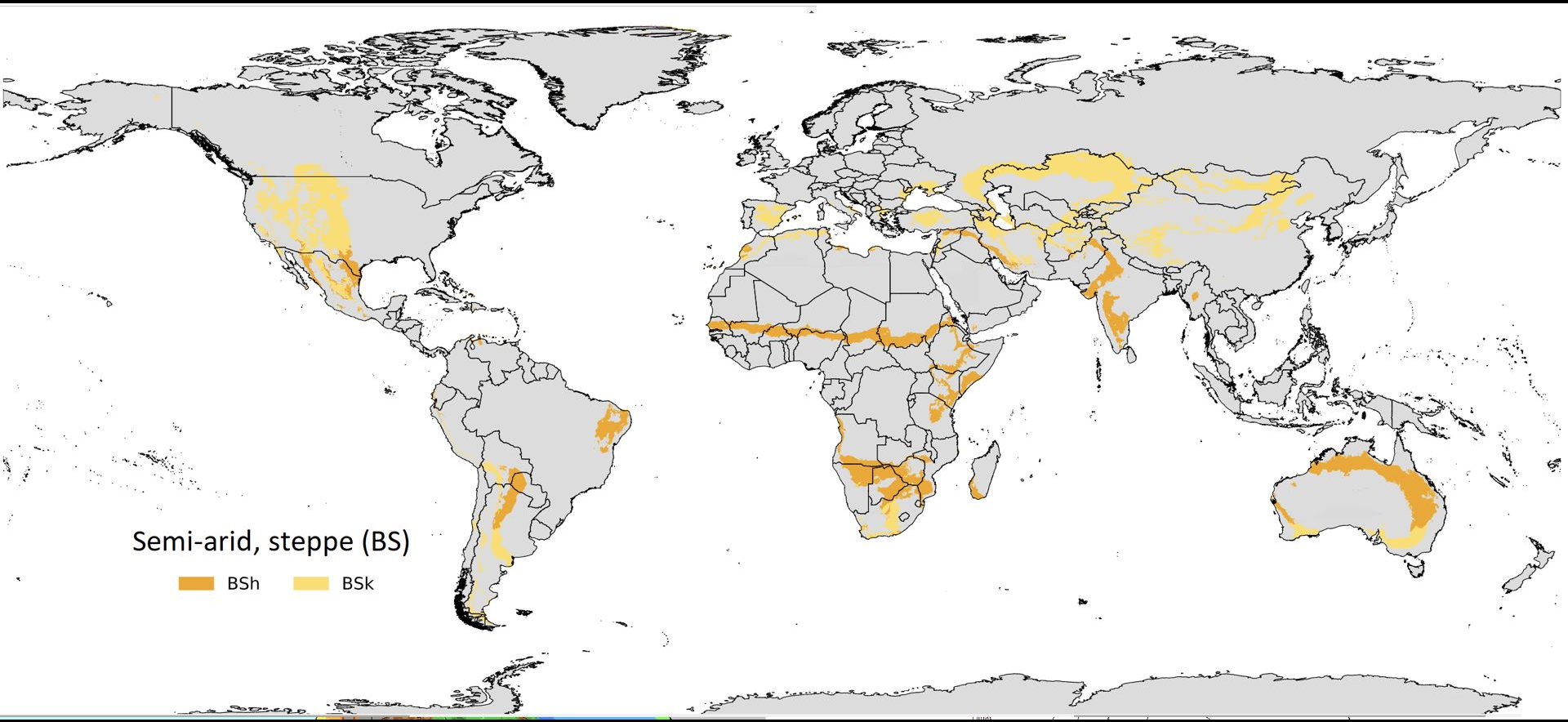
Taiga: “The Fur Road”

The world’s largest terrestrial biome



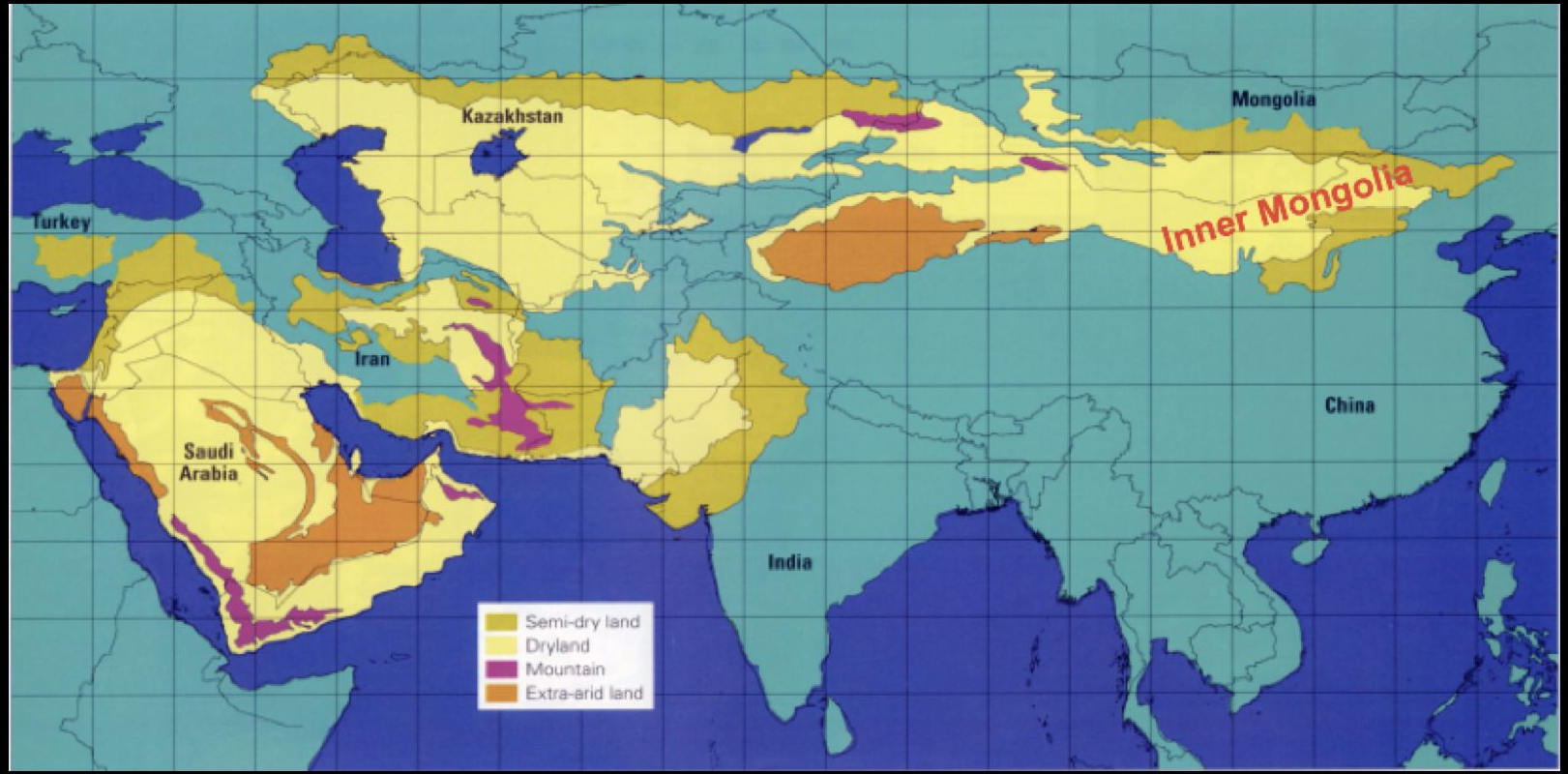
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiga#/media/File:Taiga_ecoregion.png

Steppe: Grazing, Mobility



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steppe#/media/File:BS_climate.png

Asia holds the largest concentration of non-polar deserts on Earth.



https://highwire.princeton.edu/2016/02/01/a-precarious-puzzle-of-expanding-deserts-how-arid-asia-has-varied-over-time-and-the-confusion-over-recent-desertification/

https://www.worldatlas.com/deserts/the-deserts-of-asia.html

Central and West Asian Mountain Ranges



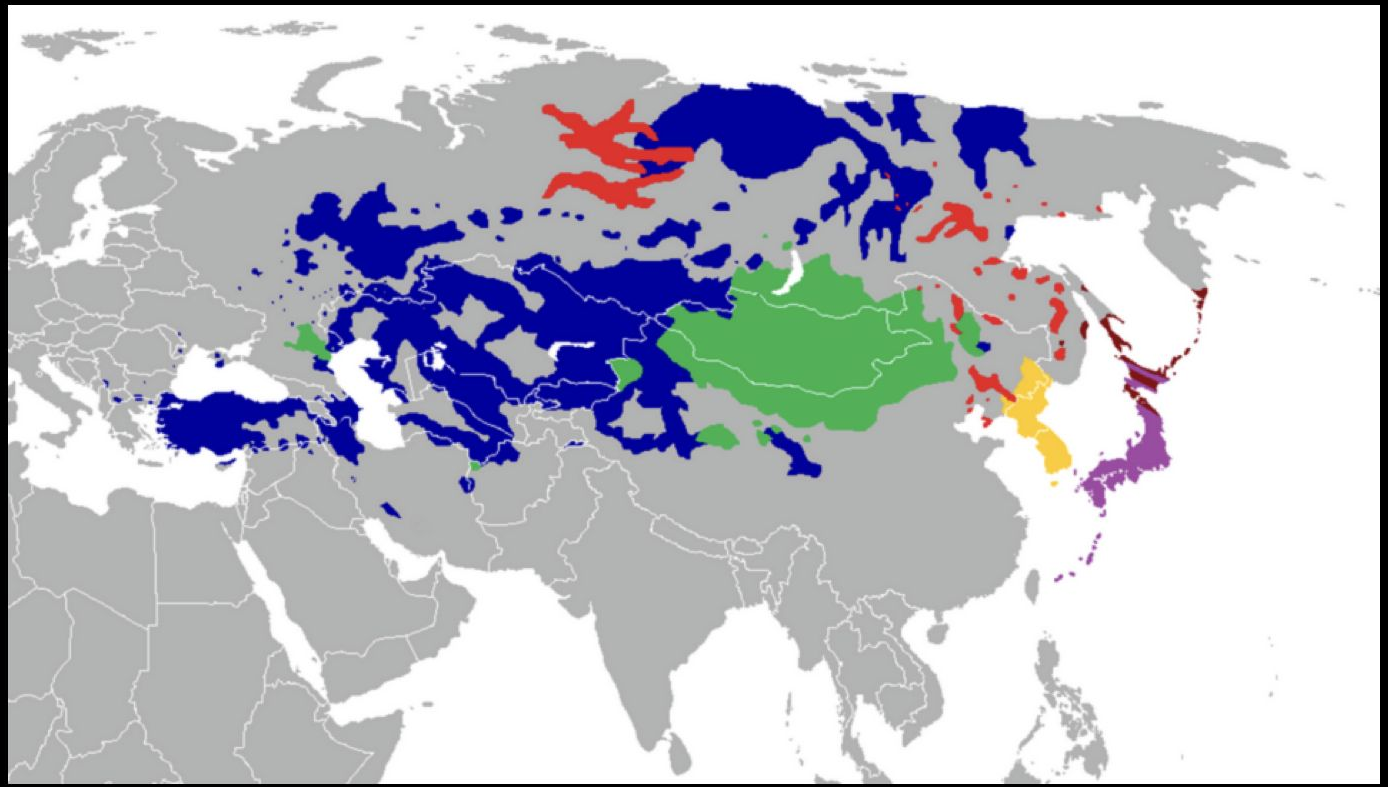
https://www.pmfias.com/major-mountain-ranges-world-highest-mountain-peaks/

Major Rivers of East, South, and Central Asia



https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/multimedia/rivers-asia

Core-Altaic *Sprachbund*



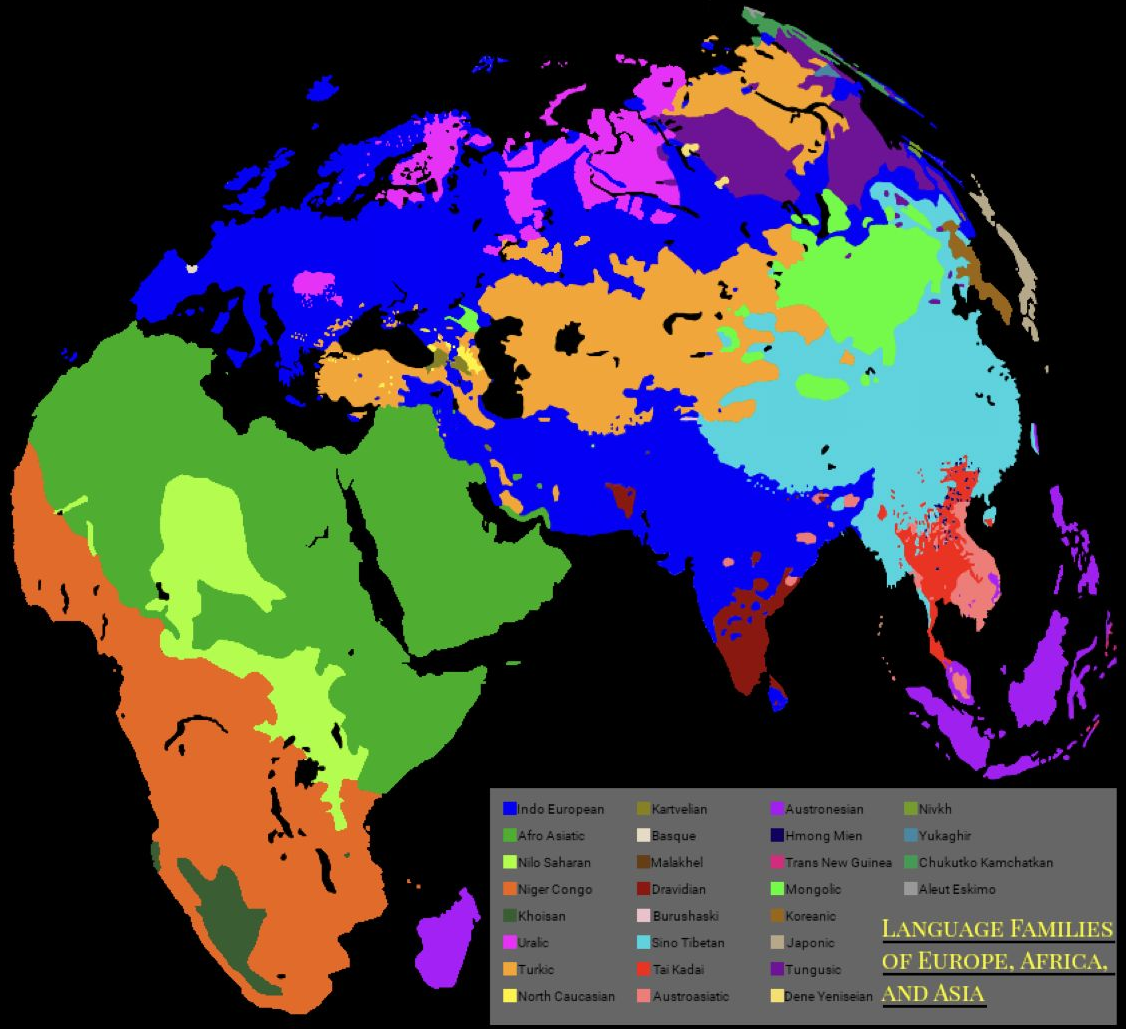
Blue: Turkic

Green: Mongolic

Red: Tungusic

Purple: Japonic

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altaic_languages



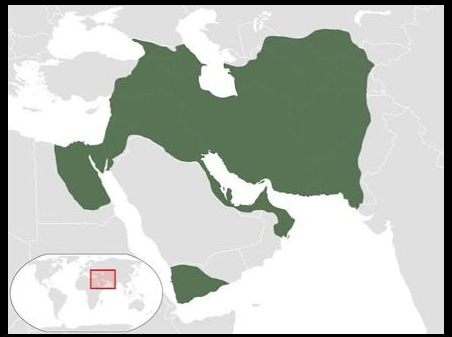
https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/ne0p0d/a_map_of_the_language_families_of_afroeurasia/#lightbox

Silk Road Empires

Roman



Sasanian



Kushan



Tang



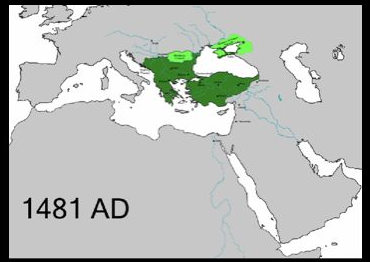
Byzantine



Abbasid



Ottoman



Mongol

