

CENTRAL ASIA IN CHINA’S STRATEGIC VISION

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the role of Central Asia in China’s contemporary foreign policy strategy. It examines the key directions of China’s policy in the region, including the geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions of interaction. Particular attention is given to the Belt and Road Initiative as the principal instrument for advancing Beijing’s strategic interests in Central Asia. The study explores the mechanisms through which China expands its economic and political influence, as well as issues related to regional security and sustainable development.*

Keywords: *Central Asia, China, foreign policy, geopolitics, geoeconomics, Belt and Road Initiative, international cooperation, strategic interests.*

The dissolution of the USSR in the early 1990s and the subsequent emergence of independent states in Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – gave rise to a qualitatively new configuration of the geopolitical space. These transformations affected not only the Central Asian region but also the entire Eurasian system of international relations. The emergence of new sovereign actors was accompanied by a redistribution of the balance of power, the formation of new patterns of interaction and competition, as well as the growing salience of regional security issues.

Significant changes also occurred in the strategic environment of Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The appearance of independent Central Asian states created new opportunities for political and economic cooperation, while simultaneously intensifying risks associated with cross-border instability, ethno-political conflicts, and competition among external actors for influence in the region. As a result, Central Asia has evolved into a crucial nexus of intersecting interests among regional and global powers.

These processes acquired particular significance for China, primarily in the context of developments along the country’s northwestern frontiers, specifically in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Beijing takes into account that Uyghur populations residing in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan maintain enduring social, cultural, and communicative ties with the Uyghurs of Xinjiang. This factor is regarded by the Chinese leadership as an important element of regional security, as

transboundary ethnocultural linkages may potentially influence domestic political stability and the formation of identity processes in border areas.

A major factor that intensified China’s strategic focus on Central Asia was the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States. In their aftermath, Beijing integrated into the emerging global counterterrorism coalition, engaging with key international actors, including the United States and Russia. In political and strategic terms, this contributed to a reassessment of Central Asia’s role as a space for security provision, where combating transnational threats became one of the priorities of China’s foreign policy.

At the same time, a central direction of Beijing’s geopolitical strategy in the 1990s was the resolution of border issues with both Russia and the Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The negotiation process, initiated in 1992, was characterized by a complex dynamic, marked by periods of stagnation as well as phases of gradual progress. Nevertheless, by the mid-1990s, the dialogue between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation had already yielded its first significant results, laying the groundwork for the subsequent stabilization of cross-border interaction.

At the same time, a positive dynamic was also evident in China’s relations with the Central Asian states. Thus, on 10 May 2002, China and Kazakhstan signed a protocol on the delimitation and demarcation of their state border, extending over 1,740 km. This agreement, grounded in established norms of international law, was signed by the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Tang Jiaxuan and his Kazakh counterpart Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, and was subsequently ratified by the parliaments of both countries. For its part, the Kyrgyz Republic and China concluded two protocols in 1996 and 1999 aimed at the final settlement of bilateral border disputes, which constituted an important step in the institutionalization of regional stability.

Within the framework of border settlement, Kyrgyzstan transferred 30,000 hectares of territory to China in accordance with the 1996 agreement, which was later ratified by the national parliament in 1998. A further stage was marked by the 1999 agreement, under which China received an additional 95,000 hectares. These arrangements established an institutional foundation for the normalization of bilateral relations, facilitating a transition toward stable and pragmatic cooperation between Bishkek and Beijing.

Despite this, an initially critical reaction emerged within the country from opposition political forces, which viewed the territorial concessions as a risk to national interests. However, the political stance of President Askar Akayev, who

emphasized the legality and mutually beneficial nature of the agreements reached, played a stabilizing role and contributed to reducing domestic tensions surrounding this issue.

A similar model of settlement was also implemented in relations between Tajikistan and China. In May 2002, during the official visit of the President of Tajikistan, I.Sh. Rahmonov, to Beijing, an agreement was signed providing for the transfer of 1,000 km² of territory to China in exchange for Beijing’s renunciation of claims to 28,000 km² of Tajik territory. This compromise reflected a pragmatic approach by both parties to the resolution of protracted territorial disputes and became an important element in strengthening mutual trust. In 2005, the agreement was ratified by the Majlisi of Tajikistan, thereby definitively consolidating its legal status and confirming the strategic orientation of bilateral cooperation¹.

In engaging in negotiations with the Central Asian states, the Chinese leadership pursued the following objectives:

1. Maintaining stability in its border-adjacent territories and ensuring the economic well-being of its population;
2. Ensuring peace and stability along its borders through the strengthening of a belt of good-neighborliness and friendship².

The intensification of China’s foreign policy engagement in Central Asia has not been incidental but strategically grounded. For Beijing, ensuring sustainable stability along its western frontiers is regarded as a key prerequisite for domestic development and national security. In this context, the establishment of good-neighborly and predictable relations with the Central Asian states assumes particular priority.

A defining feature of China’s foreign economic strategy lies in the provision of concessional loans to Central Asian states for large-scale projects, the majority of which are implemented within the region by Chinese companies themselves. At the same time, China tends to employ a “Central Asian resources for Chinese loans” model: by extending substantial financing for project implementation, Beijing stipulates the required volume of long-term raw material supplies, through which the loans are to be repaid³.

A similar model of foreign economic strategy was tested by China in a number of the least developed countries of Africa. Between 2000 and 2012, the volume of

¹ Комьяр Д. Д., Шахрам Набати. Внешняя политика Китая в Центральной Азии в переходной эре // Каспийский регион: политика, экономика, культура. 2018. №3 (56). С.110.

² Dwivedi R. Chinas Central Asia Policy in Recent Times. China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly, 2006, vol. 4, no 4. P. 139.

³ Захватов А. Сотрудничество Таджикистана и Китая развивается по китайскому сценарию. URL: <http://www.Dialog.tj/news/news20614>.

trade turnover between China and African states increased nearly twentyfold, reaching approximately USD 200 billion. This dynamic attests to the high effectiveness of China’s approach, which combines investment activity with the expansion of its economic presence.

The provision of large-scale long-term loans and investments is typically accompanied by the imposition of certain conditions. In particular, recipient countries are expected to grant preferences facilitating the engagement of Chinese labor, ensure duty-free import of Chinese materials and equipment, and create favorable conditions for the implementation of projects involving Chinese companies. In cases of non-compliance with such conditions, Beijing generally reassesses its interest in the project, underscoring the pragmatic nature of its foreign economic policy. In the implementation of its geopolitical and geoeconomic strategy in Central Asia, China assigns central importance to the “Belt and Road Initiative.” Despite its transregional scope and orientation toward fostering infrastructural connectivity across the Eurasian space, Beijing regards Central Asia as its system-forming core. This approach is обусловлен both the region’s geographical position and its strategic potential in facilitating transit and energy flows.

Within the framework of this initiative, China seeks to institutionally integrate the Central Asian states into its own foreign policy and economic architecture. This enables Beijing to strengthen its influence over regional political and economic processes while establishing long-term mechanisms of interdependence. At the same time, the implementation of the project objectively affects the interests of other major actors, including Russia and the United States, thereby imparting an additional geopolitical dimension to the initiative. According to the official action plan, China intends to actively employ both bilateral and multilateral formats of engagement to advance the concept of the “Silk Road.” In this context, emphasis is placed on deepening regional cooperation, developing transport, energy, and trade infrastructure, and establishing sustainable coordination mechanisms to ensure the long-term realization of the initiative’s strategic objectives⁴.

As concrete steps toward its implementation, China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the purpose of which is to promote financial cooperation and finance infrastructure projects in Asia, as well as a dedicated Silk Road Fund.

In formulating this strategy, Beijing proceeded from the objective realities of the contemporary period. Following independence, the Central Asian states were

⁴ Шаймергенов Т. Экономический пояс шелкового пути: большой проект, большие вопросы // Индекс безопасности. 2015. Т.21. №3. С.14-15.

compelled to seek new markets for their products, replacing those lost after the dissolution of the USSR. However, the region’s isolation and distance from major maritime trade routes, the sharp reduction in trade ties with Russia, and other factors led to increased costs and, consequently, a decline in the competitiveness of their principal export commodities, primarily agricultural and energy products.

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