

CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA: A STRATEGIC PARTNER OR A GEOPOLITICAL THREAT

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses China's use of soft power tools, the economic and political impact of the BRI initiative, and the challenges emerging from its debt policies in the region. As the article notes, while China's role contributes to economic growth and cooperation, it also reshapes the geopolitical balance in Central Asia.

Keywords: *China, Central Asia, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), soft power, debt trap diplomacy, geopolitical influence*

ANNOTATSIYA

Ushbu maqolada Xitoyning yumshoq kuch vositalaridan foydalanishini, "Bir makon – bir yo'l" tashabbusining iqtisodiy va siyosiy ta'sirini va mintaqadagi qarz siyosatidan kelib chiqadigan muammolarni tahlil qiliadi. Maqolada ta'kidlanganidek, Xitoyning roli iqtisodiy o'sish va hamkorlikka hissa qo'shishi bilan birga, Markaziy Osiyodagi geosiyosiy muvozanatni ham o'zgartiradi.

Kalit so'zlar: *Xitoy, Markaziy Osiyo, "Bir makon – bir yo'l" tashabbusi, yumshoq kuch, qarz tuzog'i diplomatiyasi, geosiyosiy ta'sir*

АННОТАЦИЯ

В этой статье анализируется использование Китаем инструментов мягкой силы, экономическое и политическое влияние инициативы «Один пояс, один путь» и проблемы, возникающие в связи с его долговой политикой в регионе. Как отмечается в статье, хотя роль Китая способствует экономическому росту и сотрудничеству, она также меняет геополитический баланс в Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: *Китай, Центральная Азия, инициатива «Один пояс, один путь», мягкая сила, дипломатия долговой ловушки, геополитическое влияние*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, China's influence in Central Asia has significantly increased. This process is driven by economic, political, and geostrategic factors, primarily through its soft power strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China seeks to strengthen its presence in the region by fostering economic cooperation and financing infrastructure projects. While the BRI initiative has attracted large investments and

expanded trade relations in Central Asia, concerns remain. Notably, the concept of “debt trap diplomacy” has raised questions about the economic dependency of some countries on Chinese loans. This dependence may affect their economic sovereignty and lead to the transfer of strategic assets under Chinese control.

China’s Debt Policy: A Threat to Central Asia?

China’s increasing financial presence in Central Asia is often framed as either a necessary economic boost or a growing geopolitical risk. While its investments and loans provide crucial infrastructure and trade opportunities, they also raise concerns about economic dependence and political leverage. The fundamental question is whether China’s debt diplomacy strengthens Central Asia’s sovereignty or gradually undermines it.

One of the key arguments in favor of China’s lending policy is its role in closing Central Asia’s infrastructure gap. The region has long suffered from underdeveloped transportation networks, outdated energy grids, and limited industrial capacity. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has injected billions of dollars into roads, railways, and power plants, significantly improving connectivity and economic potential. For governments struggling to secure financing from Western institutions or global lenders, Chinese loans appear as an attractive alternative. However, the structure of these loans raises serious concerns. Unlike Western financial institutions that often attach strict conditions regarding governance, transparency, and reforms, China’s loans come with fewer restrictions but higher risks. Many agreements lack transparency, and repayment terms can place heavy burdens on recipient countries. When countries struggle to meet their obligations, China gains leverage to negotiate strategic concessions—whether in the form of long-term control over critical assets, preferential trade agreements, or political influence.

China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has provided significant financial resources to Central Asian countries for infrastructure development. For instance, 40% of Kyrgyzstan’s national debt is owed to Chinese institutions. While these loans support economic growth, they also raise concerns about increasing debt burdens and financial dependency.

Another critical issue is the lack of transparency in China’s lending practices. Many loans have long repayment periods, but high-interest rates and undisclosed conditions often lead borrowing nations to offer strategic assets or natural resources to Chinese companies as a means of repayment. This creates concerns about sovereignty risks and China’s growing leverage over key economic sectors. However, Chinese investments also contribute positively to economic development. Projects such as the Kamchik Pass highway and the Uzbekistan-China gas pipeline have

modernized Central Asian infrastructure, improving trade and transportation links. These projects have boosted economic activity, yet concerns remain about their long-term sustainability and the region's ability to maintain control over its assets.

China's debt strategy presents both opportunities and risks for Central Asia. If managed effectively, these investments can drive economic growth. However, without careful oversight, the risk of financial dependency may increase. Thus, Central Asian governments must develop balanced strategies that safeguard their long-term economic and political interests while benefiting from Chinese investments. Central Asian governments walk a fine line between maximizing Chinese investment benefits and safeguarding their economic sovereignty. While some see Beijing as a reliable partner offering much-needed funding, others fear a scenario in which excessive reliance on Chinese credit limits their ability to make independent decisions. The long-term implications of China's debt policy remain uncertain, but its influence over the region is undeniably growing.

Main part

Chinese Investments: Regional Development or a Geopolitical Tool?

China's growing investments in Central Asia have sparked a debate: are they purely economic stimuli, or do they serve as geopolitical tools? On the surface, China's economic engagement appears mutually beneficial. Infrastructure projects, such as highways, railways, and energy pipelines, have enhanced connectivity and trade, boosting local economies. Countries like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have leveraged Chinese investments to modernize industries and expand export potential. From this perspective, China is acting as a catalyst for economic growth, filling gaps left by Western and regional investors.

However, a deeper analysis suggests that these investments come with strategic motives. China's financial assistance is not purely altruistic—it often includes conditions that strengthen Beijing's political leverage. Many agreements are opaque, and some include clauses that favor Chinese firms for future projects or grant long-term operational control over key infrastructure. In cases where nations struggle to repay debts, China may negotiate access to critical resources or strategic assets, subtly expanding its influence.

Furthermore, China's dominance in Central Asia's energy sector and major infrastructure networks raises the question: Are these nations truly benefiting, or are they gradually falling into economic dependency? The growing financial reliance on China could limit these countries' ability to make independent policy decisions, forcing them to align with Beijing's strategic interests in regional and global politics.

China's expanding influence in Central Asia is not limited to economic investments – it extends into security cooperation, strategic partnerships, and cultural diplomacy, shaping the region's geopolitical landscape. While Beijing promotes its role as a stabilizing force, its growing involvement raises concerns about long-term strategic ambitions.

Beyond debt-related leverage, China has gained control over critical infrastructure projects in Central Asia. Gas pipelines, highways, and rail networks built under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are not only economic assets but also strategic tools that enhance Beijing's regional dominance. For example, China controls significant stakes in Kazakhstan's oil industry and key logistics hubs in Uzbekistan, ensuring a long-term economic presence.

China's engagement in Central Asia's security affairs has increased through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and direct bilateral agreements. Unlike Russia, which maintains military bases in the region, China has established security outposts in Tajikistan and invested in regional surveillance technologies. These actions signal Beijing's growing interest in ensuring regional stability while also securing its own economic assets and trade routes.

China's role in Central Asia extends far beyond economic partnerships. By securing control over strategic infrastructure, deepening its security presence, and positioning itself as a counterweight to both Russia and the West, Beijing is reshaping the region's geopolitical balance. While these developments provide economic and security benefits, they also raise crucial questions about Central Asia's long-term autonomy and strategic direction.

What role does China play in maintaining a balance with Russia and the West?

China's role in Central Asia is steadily increasing, but how it maintains a balance with Russia and the West remains a crucial factor for the region's future. While China strengthens its influence through economic tools, diplomacy, and security cooperation, Russia is striving to protect its traditional geopolitical position. Meanwhile, the West continues to promote democracy and free market principles in Central Asia. This three-way power struggle has become a key factor in shaping the region's strategic direction.

China employs a flexible and long-term strategic approach to maintain this balance. It avoids direct confrontation with Russia while expanding its influence primarily through economic means. At the same time, it maintains a neutral stance toward the West while offering financial and infrastructure opportunities to regional

states. As a result, China safeguards its interests by engaging pragmatically with all major players in the region.

However, China's strategy seems less focused on direct competition with Russia and the West and more on limiting their economic and political influence in Central Asia. While Russia attempts to curb China's economic expansion, it retains its dominance in military and security affairs. Meanwhile, the West's declining presence in the region provides China with greater maneuvering space.

Security and Military Cooperation: Complementary or Competitive?

China has traditionally avoided direct military involvement in Central Asia, preferring economic and diplomatic means of engagement. However, recent developments suggest a gradual expansion of its security footprint. The construction of military facilities in Tajikistan and growing counterterrorism cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) indicate China's increasing role in regional security.

Despite these moves, China is careful not to provoke Russia, which remains the region's primary security guarantor through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Unlike Western actors, China does not push for military bases or regime changes, making it a more palatable partner for Central Asian governments. This allows China to increase its influence without directly confronting Russia, maintaining a delicate balance.

China's diplomatic approach in Central Asia is fundamentally pragmatic. Unlike the West, which promotes democratic governance and human rights, Beijing follows a non-interference policy, making it a preferred partner for authoritarian regimes in the region. This neutrality enables China to engage with all key players while avoiding ideological clashes. At the same time, China remains wary of Western influence. While it does not seek open confrontation with the US or the EU, Beijing's expanding role in Central Asia indirectly counterbalances Western attempts to promote political liberalization and reduce Russian dominance. For instance, China's growing energy partnerships with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan limit Europe's ability to diversify its gas supply away from Russia.

China's role in balancing Russia and the West in Central Asia is defined by a strategic mix of economic power, security engagement, and pragmatic diplomacy. By prioritizing economic expansion while avoiding military competition with Russia and ideological conflicts with the West, China has successfully positioned itself as a dominant yet non-confrontational force. However, as Russia seeks to maintain its geopolitical control and the West attempts to counterbalance authoritarian influence, China's balancing act may become increasingly difficult to sustain in the long run.

CONCLUSION

China's growing presence in Central Asia has reshaped the region's economic, political, and geopolitical landscape. Through large-scale investments, infrastructure projects, and diplomatic engagement, China has positioned itself as a key player, offering both opportunities and challenges to the region. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has provided much-needed economic development, yet concerns over debt dependency and strategic influence remain prevalent. While China has carefully balanced its role to avoid direct confrontation with Russia, its expanding economic reach has subtly altered traditional power dynamics. Meanwhile, the West's influence in the region continues to fluctuate, creating a complex environment where Central Asian states must navigate between competing global powers.

Despite these complexities, China's engagement has yielded significant economic benefits, improving infrastructure, trade, and regional connectivity. However, the long-term impact of its investments—whether they lead to sustainable development or increased dependency—remains uncertain. Moreover, China's growing role in security and governance raises questions about its future ambitions and whether its involvement will further strengthen regional stability or introduce new geopolitical risks.

Moving forward, key questions remain: Will China's economic expansion in Central Asia translate into deeper political influence? How will Russia and the West react to Beijing's evolving role? And how will Central Asian states assert their agency in shaping their own geopolitical future? These uncertainties pave the way for further research, particularly in analyzing the long-term consequences of China's engagement in the region and the potential for a shifting balance of power.

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