

Anastasiya Bayok

What Is Central Asia for China? A Chinese Perspective

Introduction: The Region of Central Asia

An area rich in natural resources and located at the heart of the Eurasian continent, Central Asia's geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic significance grew enormously when the region's states gained independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Central Asia is where the interests of at least three major regional and world powers, namely, China, Russia, and the USA, intersect. These great powers try to project their influence and guarantee their own interests, making the region the setting for both co-operation and competition. Nostalgic for the USSR, Russia still considers Central Asia to belong to its sphere of interests, while most of the Central Asian countries are still politically dependent on Russia to a great extent, and act as a buffer between Moscow and Beijing. For the USA, post-Soviet Central Asia has become a significant arena for spreading democracy and fighting international terrorism – both the variety imported from Afghanistan and tendencies for radicalization and Islamization within Central Asia itself. There is a great deal of bilateral co-operation between the USA and Central Asian countries in the field of counterterrorism, in particular.¹ No less importantly, Central Asia became central to China after the adoption by Beijing of the “reform and opening-up” policy and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. China is not only trying to diversify its imports of natural resources while connecting itself with Europe through Central Asia via the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, but by contributing to the stabilization and security of Central Asia, Beijing is also attempting to stabilize and economically develop its troublesome western provinces.

In recent decades, scholars and politicians have been confronted with questions concerning the role, interests, and place of China in international relations² as well as China's growing regional role, particularly in Central Asia. This also raises the question of Central Asia's importance for China. Due to the long-standing influence of the USSR – and later Russia – on Central Asia, there is a widespread perception of China as a “newcomer”³ in the

1 Cf., for example, the websites of the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, at: <http://www.apcss.org>, and the US Department of State, at: <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2012/182643.htm>, on US policy in Central Asia and the co-operation between the USA and Central Asian states in the field of counterterrorism.

2 Cf. Anton E. Maltsev, *Osobennosti politiki KNR v Tsentralnoi Azii v otsenkakh rossiiskikh i zapadnykh uchenykh* [Features of Chinese policy in Central Asia in the assessment of Russian and Western scientists], in: *Sravnitel'naya politika i geopolitika* 4/2012, pp. 17-31, here: p. 17.

3 Cf., for example, European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, *Old games, new players: Russia, China and the struggle for mastery in Central Asia*, August

region. However, this is only partially true. The strengthening of bilateral relations between China and the Central Asian countries, China's active role within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), growing Chinese interest in Central Asian energy resources and markets, implementation of the One Belt, One Road initiative, all these are the indicators of China's growing involvement in the region since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the traditional and special relations that have existed for thousands of years between China and Central Asia, which have their roots in the ancient Silk Road and provided a basis not only for co-operation but also for mutual learning,⁴ should also be taken into account.

Given the lack of European scholarly discourse on the general issue of the importance of Central Asia for China, I would like to briefly introduce the Chinese viewpoint in this regard.

Key Phases in Chinese-Central Asian Relations

For China, Central Asia represents not only ca. 3,300 km⁵ of common borders (with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) – which means that China, like no other country, is located in the immediate proximity of several Central Asian countries⁶ – but also a set of neighbours and co-operation partners with a history of mutual economic and cultural exchange. This geographic proximity also explains why Central Asia has a very high geopolitical, geo-economic, and security importance for China, especially in the light of the terrorist threats currently emanating both from Afghanistan via the Central Asian states and directly from the Central Asian states themselves, and the activities of separatists in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which often receive support from Central Asian countries to the concern of the Chinese government.⁷

Beijing has traditionally placed a high priority on relations with Central Asia as part of China's overall strategy of building good and friendly rela-

2012, at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO-INTA_SP\(2012\)491436](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO-INTA_SP(2012)491436).

4 Cf. Sun Zhuangzhi, The Relationship between China and Central Asia, in: Iwashita Akihiro (ed.), *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia, Vol 1: Russia and Its Neighbors in Crisis*, Slavic Eurasian Studies No. 16-1/2007, pp. 41-63, available at: http://src-h.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/coe21/publish/no16_1_ses/contents.html.

5 Cf. Zhang Ning, *Zhuanjia jieshao: zhongguo yu zhongya guojia jiaowang hezuo san jieduan* [Experts: Three Stages of China's Trade and Co-operation Relations with the Countries of Central Asia], Renminwang – zhongguo gongchandang xinwenwang, 7 September 2013.

6 Cf. Zhao Huasheng, Qianping zhongmei sanda zhanlue zai zhongya de gongchu [A Brief Comment on the Coexistence of the Three Great Strategies of China, Russia and the USA in Central Asia], in: *Guoji-guancha* 1/2014, pp. 96-109, here: p. 105.

7 Cf. Luba v. Hauff, *A Stabilizing Neighbor? The Impact of China's Engagement in Central Asia on Regional Security*, DGPanalyse 3/2013.

tions with neighbouring states.⁸ And since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this relationship has only grown in importance.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, China immediately recognized the newly independent Central Asian states and started developing co-operation with them. This co-operation can be divided into three phases, each lasting approximately ten years.

The first stage, from 1991 to 2000, was characterized by the resolution of issues left over from Soviet times, namely, border demarcation and the strengthening of border security. These issues were successfully resolved in the late 1990s within the “Shanghai Five” framework, with the key agreements being signed between China and the Central Asian countries in 1996 (Agreement Between Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China on Confidence-Building in the Military Field in the Border Area, signed in Shanghai) and in 1997 (Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Military Forces in Border Areas between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, signed in Moscow).⁹ This led not only to a historically rare instance of border issues being resolved peacefully, but also created a solid foundation for further co-operation between China and the Central Asian countries based on friendship and trust.

The second phase of the relationship, from 2001 till 2010, is considered the most fruitful period in Chinese-Central Asian relations, and is marked by intensified anti-terrorism co-operation, the creation of the SCO in 2001, and rapidly intensified economic co-operation as a result of which China became one of the region’s largest investment and trading partners, as the volume of visible investments and trade rose from 1.509 billion US dollars in 2001 to 45.94 billion in 2012. During this period, Central Asia became one of the most important oil suppliers to China and one of the main destinations for Chinese foreign investment.¹⁰

The third phase started in 2011 and is ongoing. Its main characteristics are intensified and deepened co-operation and the opening of co-operation in new areas, such as education, science and technology, culture, the environment, and agriculture. This is alongside the co-operation within the framework of the One Belt, One Road initiative.

8 Cf. David Lamoureux, The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Assessing China, in: *Journal of Energy Security*, 14 December 2001, at: http://www.ensec.org/index.php?Itemid=386&catid=121:contentenergysecurity1111&id=331:the-shanghai-cooperation-organization-assessing-chinas-energy-strategy-in-central-asia&option=com_content&view=article.

9 Cf. Zhang, cited above (Note 5).

10 Cf. *ibid.*

Dimensions of Chinese-Central Asian Relations

As outlined above, in the last few decades, China's relations with Central Asia have moved quite rapidly from successfully resolving border issues, safeguarding borders, and co-operating in the field of fighting terrorism, towards establishing the main priority of Chinese policy toward Central Asia as strengthening economic and political ties.¹¹ In substantive terms, we can say that there are at least three dimensions to the relationship:

Geostrategy and Security

Central Asia has major geostrategic and security significance for China. China's neighbours in the region include states where Islamic radicalization and terrorism, a lack of political stability, and growing nationalism have become more evident in recent years.¹² These circumstances encourage China to co-operate with Central Asian states and Russia on security-related issues, including countering terrorism, both bilaterally and within regional organizations such as the SCO.

Yet another dimension of security with huge political relevance for China is the issue of Uyghur minorities living in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Xinjiang borders Kyrgyzstan, which also has a small population of Uyghurs, and the East Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO) is carrying out separatist activities in both countries.¹³ For China, this issue is most relevant in terms of the threat of domestic terrorism. At the same time, however, there is a possibility of this Chinese province becoming home to terrorists from neighbouring countries. As well as terrorist activities, the main threat Uyghurs pose is their separatist activities, based on their desire to establish their own state, named East Turkistan. The Chinese government is very sensitive to issues of separatism, whether with reference to the Uyghurs, Tibetans, or Taiwanese, and views separatist endeavours as a direct threat not only to the political system but to the existence of the state itself.

China is disturbed by the support provided by Central Asian states for Uyghurs and their separatist activities, and to counteract this, often exercises pressure on Central Asian countries where Uyghur activities are most evident, particularly Kyrgyzstan. A case in point is when Kyrgyz courts, under pressure from China, convicted a number of Uyghur individuals of terrorist bombing and attempting to establish a branch of the Uyghur separatist movement in Kyrgyzstan,¹⁴ banned several organizations and political par-

11 Cf. Maltsev, cited above (Note 2), here: pp. 17-18.

12 Cf. Mariya Y. Omelicheva, *Counterterrorism Policies in Central Asia*, London 2011.

13 Cf. Mariya Y. Omelicheva, Convergence of Counterterrorism Policies: A Case Study of Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, in: *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 10/2009, pp. 893-908, here: pp. 899-900.

14 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 889.

ties, including the ETLO,¹⁵ and shut down a number of newspapers in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶ China has also been using the SCO and the SCO Convention on Counterterrorism to influence the Central Asian states on the issue of Uyghur separatism and terrorism. In accordance with the Convention, Uyghurs in Central Asia were prosecuted by the local courts and extradited to China.¹⁷

Various factors led China to accept religious extremism as a danger on a par with terrorism, even though it has few problems with it, and Central Asia to do the same with regard to separatism, which is not really an issue there. These factors include geographical proximity, political and – to some extent – cultural similarities, plus a certain dependence, or more accurately, economic and even political benefits that Central Asian states could gain from good and healthy relations with China, not to mention the need to face common challenges. This is why, within the SCO framework, the “three evils” – terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism – are always addressed together by the member states.

Economic Co-operation

Of all the forms of co-operation between China and Central Asian countries, economic co-operation has probably been most discussed in the recent scholarship, especially after the announcement of the One Belt, One Road initiative by China. Central Asian countries are crucial to China’s plans to connect itself more effectively to Europe. China also has pragmatic interests in diversifying its imports of natural resources and acquiring access to Central Asian resources and markets. At the same time, deepening economic relations with Central Asia is part of the Chinese foreign policy of strengthening good neighbourly relations and the earlier policy of performing a leading role among developing countries.

Since the proposal, first of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” initiative in September 2013,¹⁸ and then of the One Belt, One Road initiative in Autumn 2014 by President Xi Jinping,¹⁹ Chinese economic and other activity in Central Asia has grown. This has aroused both positive interest and concern in the countries of the region and the international community with regard to China’s intentions and depth of involvement in the region. Even prior to these initiatives, but after the increase in China’s economic presence and the provision of aid to Central Asia, the leaders of some Central Asian countries,

15 Cf. Elmurad Zhusupaliyev, *Zakon o borbe s ekstremizmom prinyat v Kyrgyzstane* [The law on combating extremism, adopted in Kyrgyzstan], Fergana.ru, 7 September, 2005.

16 Cf. Chung Chien-peng, The Shanghai Co-operation Organization: China’s Changing Influence in Central Asia, in: *The China Quarterly*, December 2004, pp. 989-1009, here: p. 999.

17 Cf. Omelicheva, cited above (Note 12), here: pp. 61-62.

18 Cf. Zhao, cited above (Note 6), here: p. 98.

19 Cf. Pan Zhiping, *Zhongya diyuan zhengzhiboyi ji qi xindongxiang* [New Trends in the Geopolitical Game in Central Asia], in: *Shihezi daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexueban)* 2/2015, pp.1-3, here: p. 3.

while welcoming Chinese involvement, also started expressing “a common fear that China’s financial aid might be a poisonous gift, that with this soft power, Chinese investments might lead to economic dependency and political vassalage”.²⁰

The One Belt, One Road initiative is often viewed in the light of political and scholarly debates on the role of China not only in the region but in the whole system of international relations. It is even considered by some to be an aspect of China’s “new world order politics”, about which much is not yet known,²¹ but which is sometimes considered as a challenge to the Western world order.²² But what do Chinese scholars and officials say with regard to this initiative, as well as to the role of Central Asia in it and in Chinese foreign policy in general?

One Belt, One Road and the Role of Central Asia in China’s Foreign Policy

For the Chinese, the ancient Silk Road has a rich historical and cultural value, representing the necessity and inevitability of the blending of European and Asian civilizations, and the rules for exchange between them. It is considered a successful example of mutually beneficial co-operation and exchange between two parts of the world – and a model for the present, according to the Chinese viewpoint. One Belt, One Road thus has deep historical roots, accumulated cultural capital, and continuity. The main goal of this initiative is further co-operation with the Eurasian space and the creation of a community of common interests among all the countries in the region.²³

A shared cultural heritage and common challenges and problems explain the differences in China’s behaviour towards Central (and East) Asian countries compared to other regions. Chinese experts on Central Asia and Russia stress the important role that Central Asia, as a neighbouring region, plays for China. However, this does not imply that China will apply special political principles and policies towards the Central Asian countries, although certain policies in this region differ from those in other regions, due to the geographic and strategic location of Central Asia. Nor does it mean that Central Asia is more important for China than other regions it co-operates with. Furthermore, according to the experts, this initiative is not limited to Central Asia, but also applies to other Asian, European, and African regions included in the One Belt, One Road initiative.²⁴

20 Lamoureux, cited above (Note 8).

21 Cf. Maltsev, cited above (Note 2), on discourses among Russian, European, and American scholars with regard to the place of China in the international relations system and China’s foreign and global policy, here: pp. 17-18.

22 Cf. Nadine Godehardt, *No End of History. A Chinese Alternative Concept of International Order?* SWP Research Paper 2016/RP 02, January 2016.

23 Cf. Xing Guangcheng, *Sichouzhilu de lishi jiazhi yu dangdai qishi* [Historical Value and Modern Enlightenment of the Silk Road], in: *Guangming ribao*, 20 October 2014.

24 Cf. *The Silk Road Project and Strategic Interests of Russia and China*, Russian International Affairs Council, 20 December 2013 (Interview with Zhao Huasheng), at: http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=2884.

Political Influence

Officially, China proclaims that it seeks to promote regional co-operation and good-neighbourly relations with its neighbouring countries to promote harmonious Asia, calling for mutual respect and trust regardless of differences: “China [...] does not] want to exclude any country from participating in regional cooperation. China’s prosperity, development and long-term stability represent an opportunity rather than a threat to its neighbors.”²⁵ China views deepening co-operation with its neighbouring countries as an important part of its efforts to contribute to the maintenance of a stable and peaceful security situation in the region.²⁶

Acknowledging this, some Chinese scholars nevertheless argue that Chinese relations with Central Asia and the One Belt, One Road initiative help China to promote its international image and increase its influence in the region,²⁷ while falling short of trying to create a Chinese sphere of interest in Central Asia. Having good relations with countries that not only share similar traditions and history, but also possess similar political systems, namely non-democratic ones,²⁸ is also beneficial for the image of Chinese regime within its own country.

As well as maintaining bilateral political relations with the Central Asian countries, China also co-operates with them in regional organizations such as the SCO. The general view among Chinese scholars is that the SCO provides a good platform for co-operation between China and its partners, forging understanding and allowing them to collaboratively address common threats and fears. For China, participation in multilateral institutions and organizations is somewhat double-edged. On the one hand, it benefits China by allowing it to appear as an active and responsible player, to demonstrate its peaceful intentions and thus diminish the perceptions by others of China as a threat. China can also show its “commitment to diplomatic solutions to problems and to defuse the possibility of neighbouring states ‘ganging up’ on China, even as it becomes a stronger political, economic and military power”.²⁹ On the other hand, China has sometimes had to sacrifice its traditional bilateral relations and try to resolve issues – even some that China is sensitive about – at the multilateral table, though the most sensitive issues,

25 Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Peaceful Development*, White Paper, 6 September 2011, III. China’s Foreign Policies for Pursuing Peaceful Development at: http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7126562.htm.

26 Cf. Xia Liping, How China thinks about national security, in: Ron Huiskin (ed.), *Rising China: Power and Reassurance*, March 2009, pp. 103-118, here: p. 107, at: <http://press.anu.edu.au?p=61661>.

27 Cf. interview with Zhao, cited above (Note 24).

28 Here Kyrgyzstan is something of an exception thanks to its efforts at democratic development, but even Kyrgyzstan cannot yet be considered a typical democracy in practice.

29 Bates Gill, China’s new security multilateralism and its implications for the Asia-Pacific region, in: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (ed.), *SIPRI Yearbook 2004*, Oxford 2004, pp. 207-230, here: p. 230.

such as those relating to Chinese sovereignty and the integrity of the state, will still be resolved by China on a bilateral basis.

The Coexistence of Chinese, Russian, and American Initiatives: Co-operation Versus Competition – Is There a Risk of Open Confrontation?

When talking about relations between China and Central Asia, it is important to take into consideration the bigger picture, namely the interaction and co-existence of several major regional and world powers, China, Russia, and the USA, in this region. As already been mentioned above, there are currently at least three independent economic and political initiatives involving Central Asian states that have been proposed by three different and competing powers, China (One Belt, One Road), Russia (Eurasian Economic Union, EAEU) and the USA (“New Silk Road”, or “Silk Road Strategy”). The fact that these initiatives exist shows the huge interest in and importance of Central Asia for these countries. It also shows that, unlike during the Cold War, great powers nowadays cannot afford to underestimate small and middle-sized powers or merely use them as means to pursue their own goals in the global game, but rather need to engage them by means of fair competition and the provision of appealing offers. Due to its peculiar geographic and strategic location, Central Asia is in a situation where it can choose the best for itself from the available alternatives. Central Asian countries are seeking to increase their political and economic independence while also attempting to gain the support of the great powers, maximizing the economic and political benefits of this without coming too much under external influence or control. The coexistence of the three different initiatives provides the perfect conditions for Central Asia to gain maximum benefits while evading direct control.

But what is the Chinese perspective on the co-existence of these three initiatives, and how does China view its own prospects in Central Asia?

Chinese Central Asia and Russia scholars forecast that political competition will grow, but will not lead to direct confrontation. The three main powers in the region will either deepen their competition and confront each other, or the three existing initiatives will merge into one another in the form of economic co-operation. The latter scenario is seen as the most desirable one, because it will benefit every participating party. At the same time, Chinese experts believe that regardless of which of the initiatives wins, Central Asia will be integrated by transport networks and other infrastructure.³⁰

The maintenance of friendly and peaceful mutual relations is crucial for both China and Russia. Chinese influence on and involvement in Central Asia, which Russia traditionally considers as part of its own sphere of inter-

30 Cf. Zhao, cited above (Note 6), here: p. 109.

ests, might trigger some dissatisfaction from Moscow. Officially, after announcing the Chinese initiative, President Xi stated that China did not seek to establish a sphere of influence or dominance in the region and called for co-operation with Russia. This message aimed at showing Moscow that China does not intend to challenge Russia in the Central Asian region, but rather to work together or in parallel in a co-operative atmosphere. Chinese scholars, probably also in order to diminish any concern at China's possible desire to transform Central Asia into a Chinese sphere of interest, have also stated that relations between China and Central Asia are a normal part of Chinese diplomacy and overall foreign policy.³¹

According to Chinese regional experts, the creation and implementation of the One Belt, One Road initiative does not contradict the EAEU, but is rather a complementary effort that enhances mutual co-operation within Central Asia and between Europe and Asia.³² This has even become the official position of the SCO, whose members include both Russia and China. The SCO officially supports and has recently intensified its focus on the Chinese One Belt, One Road initiative and the Russian EAEU project.³³

In the Chinese view, the three initiatives, including the American New Silk Road, can co-exist peacefully and be complementary, because their combined advantages can lead to fruitful win-win co-operation in which the weaknesses of each can be compensated for by the strengths of the others. The strength of the American New Silk Road initiative lies in its relatively balanced internal political structure, in which there are no leading countries and ordinary participants, and the Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, and the Southeast Asian countries perform equal roles. The EAEU is strong due to the existing political ties between Central Asia and Russia dating back to Soviet times, but Russia lacks economic strength, while China is undoubtedly the strongest economic player in the region. At the same time one of the disadvantages of the One Belt One Road initiative, as stated by the Chinese experts, is the lack of consideration for humanitarian issues in these relations. There is also a disconnect and even conflict between the image of China and its proclaimed goals in Central Asia. This is not only based on historical factors and misinterpretations of China's intentions and actions by Central Asian states, but is also a result of some unhelpful Chinese strategies and rhetoric with regard to its co-operation with Central Asia, as well as the issue of the "China threat".³⁴ Chinese experts believe that the Central Asian elite does not have a deep enough understanding of China; they look forward to the further

31 Cf. interview with Zhao, cited above (Note 24).

32 Cf. *ibid.*

33 Cf. Eleanor Albert, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, Council on Foreign Relations, CFR Backgrounders, 14 October 2015, at: <http://www.cfr.org/china/shanghai-cooperation-organization/p10883>.

34 For more on China's image in Central Asia and how to improve it see, Zhao Huasheng, *Xinxiang jianshe: Zhongguo shenru zhongya de bijing zhilu*, [Image Building: The Only Way for China to Penetrate into Central Asia], in: *Xinjiang shifan daxue xuebao (Zhesheban)* 4/2015, pp. 65-75.

economic involvement of Beijing in the region, while nonetheless expressing their deep concerns about it. In the short term, the Russia-led EAEU seems to have more opportunities for success, while in the long-term the Chinese One Belt, One Road project has the greatest potential.³⁵

In political terms, the One Belt, One Road initiative is permeated with the idea of peaceful coexistence, proclaimed to promote mutually beneficial co-operation for all participants, and open to membership for every state in Europe and Asia. As a space of co-operation embracing all the countries willing to participate in it, the initiative aims to promote peace and development. Issues such as the Ukraine crisis, whose resolution requires multilateral talks and compromises, would be minimized if Ukraine would participate in such Eurasian initiatives and was not conditioned to choose between “East” and “West”. At the same time, it has been clearly stated that this initiative cannot be imposed on any country, nor can it promote the interests of just one country. The infrastructural and technological achievements of the 21st century have created perfect conditions for the implementation of the One Belt, One Road initiative, and now what is needed is the spirit of mutually beneficial co-operation and sharing ideas of mutual benefit.³⁶

Concluding Remarks

China is highly interested in the preservation of a peaceful and stable situation in Central Asia because the stability of China, and especially its western provinces, is highly dependent on the stability of this region. This is why the key areas for the intensification of relations between China and Central Asia in the last two decades have been border security and preventing instability and suppressing the activity of separatists in China’s western provinces, especially Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. As far as economic co-operation with Central Asia is concerned, China is interested not only in access to natural resources and markets, but also in developing its western provinces and including them in regional and global markets, while also building comprehensive and co-operative relations with the states in the region that go beyond the pursuit of purely political or economic benefits.³⁷

35 Cf. Zhao, cited above (Note 6), here: p. 109.

36 Cf. Xing, cited above (Note 23).

37 Cf. Zhao, cited above (Note 24).