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Challenges and Threat Perceptions Regarding Central Asia in China and the EU

Introduction: China and the EU in Central Asia

Since the end of the Cold War, Central Asia has gradually become a platform for competition and, to a certain extent, co-operation between Russia, the EU, China, and the United States. The Central Asian region plays a very important role for all these actors: It is a direct neighbour of China and Russia with a high degree of significance, both strategically and in terms of security, and a neighbour of the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. The region's internal political and social stability and economic development are crucial for China, Russia, and the EU. Despite diverging intentions and motivations, all the actors involved are interested in containing and curtailing Islamic extremism in the region, reducing terrorist threats, and preventing these developments from crossing the borders and becoming part of their own domestic realities. Economic, cultural, and humanitarian co-operation with Central Asian states represents another pillar of mutual interest for China, the EU, and Russia. The new economic opportunities available to these powers depend as much on the security and stability of the Central Asian region as on good and constructive relationships between China, the EU, Russia, and Central Asia. Pursuing similar goals, China, Russia, and the EU use different methods of engaging with Central Asia, have different leverage in the region, and enjoy different levels of political and social acceptance within and among Central Asian states. Security and socio-economic relations provide opportunities for co-operation between these actors, which could bring benefits not only for them but for the Central Asian states too. However, from the realist point of view, China, Russia, and the EU are focusing on pursuing their own interests. Successful co-operation is complicated by a few fundamental problems and political disagreements in the relationship between the EU and Russia, a lack of mutual understanding between the EU and China, and a lack of trust between all three parties. This creates incentives for further contradictions, competition, and even possible conflicts among these powers over their interests in Central Asia.

The EU, China, and Russia build relationships with Central Asian states not only based on their interests and goals in the region, but also on their own perceptions of threats emanating from the Central Asian region. Some of these threat perceptions are shared among all the actors, while others are unique to each of them.

In this contribution, I focus on the threat perceptions of China and the EU with regard to Central Asia. China, despite having long-lasting historical relationships with Central Asian states, started engaging with Central Asia in the

1990s and has recently become more active and present in the region, especially after the introduction of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” in 2013, as it was known at the time, which crosses Central Asia on its way from China to Europe. The EU has always been interested in deepening its relationships with and increasing its presence in the region: It started developing its links with Central Asian states in the 1990s, and launched the “EU Central Asian Strategy” in 2007. However, despite its willingness, the EU does not have a well-established presence in Central Asia, and has not intensified its relationships with the states in the region to the extent it wished to. Recent Chinese engagement has stimulated an ever-growing European interest in Central Asia once again and strengthened Brussels’ realization of the importance of deeper EU involvement in the region and the development of co-operation with China there. A “Joint Communication on the EU and Central Asia: New opportunities for a stronger partnership” endorsed by the European Commission on 15 May 2019, and conclusions on a new EU strategy on Central Asia adopted by the EU Council on 17 June 2019 serve as a vivid example for this.

It is worth analysing this new tendency towards an ever-growing Chinese economic presence and subsequent influence in the region; the EU’s increasing desire to be involved and visible there; and some of the EU’s concrete measures in this direction in greater detail. The opportunities for these two actors to co-operate in Central Asia depend not only on them and the conditions created by and within Central Asia, but also on their threat perceptions of this region. Russia’s involvement, influence and threat perceptions with regard to Central Asia deserve separate analysis. Due to its historically established relations and perception of Central Asia as its own sphere of influence, Russia undoubtedly remains at present the main and only power projecting decisive political, military-security, and cultural influence in the region. Russia exercises its power in Central Asia bilaterally and through organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and recently through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) too. Although I will not conduct a direct analysis of Russia in this contribution, I will nevertheless refer to the “Russia factor” throughout, since Russia’s role in the Central Asian context is incomparably greater than the impact of China or the EU, and is recognized as such by the latter.

China in Central Asia: Interests, Image, and Threat Perceptions

Central Asia is a strategically important region with severe security implications for the vulnerable Xinjiang province of western China. At the same time,

it provides perfect opportunities for economic co-operation and the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and offers a source of energy diversification for China.¹

China's main interests in Central Asia include border security, the fight against "East Turkestan" separatist forces, energy supply, economic interests, geopolitical security, and the further and successful development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). All of these are interconnected and influence each other. Although these factors all have an important meaning for Chinese foreign policy, their role in it is not fixed, which means that at various times, certain factors play a more decisive and crucial role than the others. At the same time, border security, geopolitical security, and the development of the SCO are part of Chinese security strategy in Central Asia. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, China has entered a process of developing and adjusting its interests in Central Asia, and this process is still ongoing. Until 2001, China did not perceive Central Asia as a threat in any respect, which is why it did not occupy a position of priority in Beijing's foreign policy: At that time, Central Asia was perceived as stable and secure. In 2001, the situation changed, and security issues took on a greater role in Chinese policy towards Central Asia, with the main focus on combating terrorism, religious extremism, separatism, drug trafficking, and illegal migration. The SCO, originating from the Shanghai Five, was established the same year. Its tasks were to tackle the aforementioned security issues and promote economic development among its member states. It is worth noting that despite Central Asia occupying a very important place in Chinese foreign policy, it cannot become the number one priority due to the fact that the region is not a great power and cannot play a decisive role in world affairs. Central Asia is China's strategic backyard and plays an auxiliary role for China.²

Despite the turbulent and unpredictable security environment outside Central Asia, Chinese analysts believe that there is no threat of military intervention in any of the Central Asian states from outside, but the main threats lie within Central Asia itself and the "hot spots" surrounding it. A number of factors have created new conflicts and intensified existing ones, leading to a structural imbalance in the local societies and encouraging tendencies towards radicalization and extremism. These include the authoritarian political system in Central Asian countries; the concentration of power in the president's hands; an unsuccessful economic transition, which led to economic inequality; the poor economic development of rural areas; enormous differences in the development of the region and among countries; and loss of jobs. In other words,

1 Cf. Guo Junping/Xu Tao/Hu Aijun, *Dangqian zhongguo zai zhongya diqu mianlin de anquan tiaozhan ji zhengce sikao* [China's current security challenges and policy considerations in Central Asia], *Heping yu fazhan* [Peace and Development] 6/2014, pp. 43-50, here: p.44.

2 For more on the position of Central Asia in Chinese foreign policy priorities, cf. Zhao Huasheng, *Zhongguo de zhongya waijiao* [China's Central Asian Diplomacy], Beijing: Shishi chubanshe, 2008.

security challenges in Central Asia are of a non-traditional character and come from a deeper socio-economic level.³

There are at least six groups of challenges Central Asia currently presents to China.⁴

First, the transformation of Chinese Central Asian foreign policy is a challenge that comes from within China and its definition of its interests and priorities in the region.

Second, in addition to changes in the external environment, political, security, and economic priorities in Central Asian states are reflected in the priorities for multilateral co-operation and within multilateral institutions,⁵ as well as bilaterally. This means that challenges arise from the changing situation in Central Asia and the foreign policy of Central Asian states towards China. At the same time, important security threats for China with regard to changes within the region come from the Central Asian states' lack of capacity to respond to emergencies and border control related issues, especially in the border areas of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan adjacent to the northwest of China, which is sensitive in political and security terms. This will inevitably lead to transboundary effects, affecting social stability of China's north-western frontier.⁶

The third group of challenges arises from the relationships between the great powers in the region, especially the China-Russia axis. From a geopolitical point of view, the Central Asian security situation is diverse and mutually restrictive. The region is a "battlefield" of various great powers, each with their own interests in the region and perceiving the growing Chinese presence and influence as a threat to them. They try to counterbalance China and reduce its influence there. Russia-led economic and security integration processes and mechanisms, including the CSTO and EAEU, prevent China from being part of these processes, thus limiting China's options for co-operation.⁷ Of all the powers involved, Russia has the biggest influence on China in Central Asia. Moscow and Beijing pursue common interests and compete with each other, and both continually stress that their two countries are important strategic partners and the bilateral relations between them continue to flourish. The reality looks quite different, with existing mutual distrust and antagonism in many areas. As soon as the BRI was announced, Russia regarded it as a sign of rivalry in the post-Soviet space and between the BRI and the EAEU. Beijing's initiative undermined Moscow's ambition to serve as a bridge between East and West on the Eurasian continent. The unfavourable economic, political and social situation within Russia, combined with the Western sanctions against it, brought Moscow closer to Beijing, willingly or not. Russia was left with China

3 Cf. Sun Zhuangzhi, *Dangqian zhongya diqu anquan xingshi ji qi dui zhongguo de yingxiang* [The current security situation in Central Asia and its impact on China], *Aisixiang*, 2017.

4 For more on the first five principles, see Zhao, cited above (Note 2), pp. 51-53.

5 Cf. Sun, cited above (Note 3).

6 Cf. Guo/Xu/Hu, cited above (Note 1), p. 46.

7 Cf. Sun, cited above (Note 3).

as the only major power still on its side, which put the former into a relatively vulnerable and dependent position towards the latter. In 2015, Russia and China signed a declaration on a “Greater Eurasian Partnership”, with the goal of synchronizing the BRI and the EAEU. The wording has then gradually changed to “comprehensive Eurasian partnership” in 2016⁸ and to “Eurasian Economic partnership” in 2017⁹. This was a tactical position for both sides, whereas Russia hoped to benefit economically and geopolitically from this co-operation.¹⁰ After an agreement on merging the EAEU with the BRI was signed, Russia stopped talking about a rivalry with China, at least for the time being. China, on the other hand, continues to stress that the bilateral co-operation with Russia is crucial to the success of the BRI and seeks to strengthen this partnership within the BRI, at the same time calling for stability and transparency in its relationship with Russia.¹¹ China accepts the role of Russia as a security provider and guarantor in Central Asia and sees Russia as the leader in the field of security in the region.¹² The concepts of the BRI and the EAEU are quite different and not conflicting: The complementarity and inclusivity of the BRI means the EAEU can be integrated into the BRI.¹³ Another example of such complementarity and inclusivity is that Kazakhstan’s own state programme of infrastructure development “*Nurly Zhol*” was integrated into the BRI in 2016.¹⁴

The fourth source of challenges is the Afghan issue. Afghanistan is also a source of security threats such as religious extremism, international terrorism, and cross-border drug trafficking in Central Asia. It is in China’s economic and security interests to promote peace, stability, and reconstruction in Afghanistan through economic assistance and multilateral political participation.¹⁵

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- 8 Nadège Rolland, A China-Russia Condominium over Eurasia, *Survival*, Volume 61, Issue 1, January 2019, pp.7-22.
- 9 Li Yongquan, The greater Eurasian partnership and the Belt and Road Initiative: Can the two be linked? *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Volume 9, Issue 2, July 2018, pp. 94-99, here: p. 97, available at: <https://reader.elsevier.com/reader/sd/pii/S1879366518300198?token=814930E846527952B98B60A8CD1622CF9FCAA708862699D33DCD6CA526574A423ACB8C30C0D891899B2AF685F0BD75FE>.
- 10 Cf. Sebastien Peyrouse, The Evolution of Russia’s Views on the Belt and Road Initiative, *Asia Policy* 24/2017, pp. 96-102, here: p. 96.
- 11 Cf. Hu Biliang/Liu Qingjie/Yan Jiao, Adding “5 + 1” to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, *Eastasiaforum*, 25 October 2017, at: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/10/25/adding-5-1-to-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/>.
- 12 Cf. Sun, cited above (Note 3).
- 13 For more about the advantages of connecting the EAEU with the SREB, cf. Konstantin Syroezhkin, Sopyrazhenie EAES i EPSHP [The Alignment of the EAEU and the SREB], *Strategiya i Politika* 2/2016, pp. 37-55.
- 14 Cf. Rashmini Koparkar, Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for Central Asia, *Vivekananda International Foundation*, 14 June 2017, at: <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/june/14/belt-and-road-initiative-implications-for-central-asia>.
- 15 Luo Yingjie, Zhongya anquan xingshide bianhua ji qi yingxiang [Changes in the security situation in Central Asia and their impact], *Guoji anquan yanjiu [International Security Studies]* 2/2016, pp. 13-124, here: p. 124.

Fifth, the smooth and successful development of the SCO is very important for China, since it is one of the mechanisms for China to project its economic influence in Central Asia on a multilateral basis, and the only platform where China and Russia, as well as Central Asian states, come together to address security issues in an institutionalized way.

Sixth, economic threats and challenges intensified following the deepening of the relationship between China and the Central Asian states, especially after the implementation of the BRI. Chinese economic interests face tangible threats in Central Asia. China is one of the biggest investors and trading partners with Central Asian states, with many Chinese businesses located in the Central Asian region. For this reason, the financial and personal security of the Chinese citizens residing and working in Central Asia are of central importance in investment projects, infrastructure, energy, and industry. China is sensitive to political turmoil in the countries, since they lead to big financial losses for China, as occurred during the political unrest in Kyrgyzstan. Another issue of concern to Beijing is the possibility of a debt risk. China is one of the biggest creditors in Central Asia and has provided numerous loans, but the poor economic situation in the region creates risks too.¹⁶ The possibility of tense relationships between Central Asian states, leading to instability and uncertainty within the region, is also crucial for Chinese economic security. For example, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are the source and transit countries of the Central Asian-China gas pipeline, so conflicts between them and with Uzbekistan threaten its successful functioning and China's investment security in Central Asia in general.¹⁷ At the same time, threat perceptions of China among Central Asian states play a crucial role for the economic success of China in the region. Central Asian countries' risk perceptions are based on the inability to predict the success of the BRI, uncertainty regarding the economic and political developments within China, and the increasing debt leverage of Chinese companies in Central Asia. Major risks are associated with labour migration, lack of jobs for the local population, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, the instability of local currencies, and environmental pollution.¹⁸ In terms of economy and finance, Kyrgyzstan's biggest debt is to China. The state already heavily depends on China, leaving almost no room for manoeuvre with regard to decision-making in co-operation with China. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan's main wish to increase job opportunities for the local population cannot be fulfilled by the BRI. The central concerns are thus related to a huge amount of loans which might lead the Central Asian countries into a debt trap and an influx of Chinese labour. There are further concerns that as China gets generally stronger and its economic presence in Central Asia becomes more visible, it will inevitably lead to China transforming itself into the security guarantor in Central Asia.¹⁹

16 Cf. Sun, cited above (Note 3).

17 Cf. Luo, cited above (Note 15).

18 Marlene Laruelle (ed.), *China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia*, Washington, D.C., 2018.

19 Cf. Koparkar, cited above (Note 14).

The regimes in Central Asian states, and particularly their high levels of corruption, present an important threat to Chinese economic involvement in the region. The decision-making processes in Central Asia are not transparent and it is hard to find evidence of the conditions on which the BRI projects are based, whether they have local content, or are being imposed unilaterally.²⁰

To these important security, political, and economic threats, we could add some socio-cultural threats originating from China's image in Central Asia and perceptions and acceptance of Chinese culture, way of life, socio-political system, and model of economic development within Central Asian societies.

There are many reasons Central Asian states do not favour China's deeper involvement in the region. These include an existing distrust of China, among others, due to a lack of understanding of its goals, motivations and culture, coupled with the absence of a Chinese official document on its aims, code of conduct, or the main principles of the BRI, a lack of consideration of local interests and risks in the region, as well as existing Sinophobia. Interestingly, Sinophobia and Sinophilia are closely intertwined in Central Asia, and quite often both are expressed by the same people depending on the issue at hand.²¹ Culture, language, religion, traditions, and way of life should not be underestimated either. There is an existing imbalance between strong state-to-state relations and rather weak people-to-people relations and attitudes towards one another. People in Central Asia, despite being China's neighbours, do not know much about China, its culture, and traditions. This is mostly due to their long-term interactions with Imperial Russia and then the Soviet Union. They do not admire China in cultural or political terms, and do not want to see China's model as an alternative to theirs, politically or culturally. This can be partially explained by wider acceptance of Russia within these societies.²²

Among Central Asian societies, interest in China is not of a cultural character, but has more to do with Chinese socio-economic advances and foreign policy choices. There is a lot of anti-migration and anti-Chinese sentiment in the media and within Central Asian societies, especially in Kyrgyzstan, where the issue with Chinese migrant workers is acute. It is worth noting that the responsibility for this does not just lie with China, which does indeed prefer to engage its own workers and neglects the employment needs of the local population. The Central Asian governments are also accountable for the fact that they do not provide official, transparent, and accessible data on migrant workers in their countries, thus exacerbating concerns and leading to exaggerations in media reports and public opinion. Central Asian governments make the mistake of not trying to integrate migrant workers into local societies, and instead

20 Cf. *ibid.*

21 Cf. Sébastien Peyrouse, *Discussing China: Sinophilia and Sinophobia in Central Asia*, *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7/2016, pp. 14-23.

22 Cf. Sheng Rui, *Yidai yilu zhanlüe xia zhongguo he zhongya guojia hezuo zhong de jiyu yu tiaozhan* [Opportunities and Challenges in Cooperation between China and Central Asian Countries under the "Belt and Road" Initiative], *Journal of Shandong Youth University of Political Science*, Volume 3, May 2017, pp. 28-32, here: p. 30.

of facing the problems openly and directly, brush the issue under the carpet in order to reduce its visibility.²³ In addition, China is often dragged into political struggle in Central Asia, making China a victim of domestic political competition. In such cases, China is often a target of suspicion rather than praise, which damages China's image overall.²⁴

The EU in Central Asia: Interests and Threat Perceptions

As mentioned in the introduction, the EU and China share similar interests in preserving security and stability and forging economic development in Central Asia. Nevertheless, the two actors' methods of involvement in the region vary, as do some of their threat perceptions and challenges.

Like China, the EU established and began intensifying its relations with Central Asian states in the early 1990s. In 2007, the EU adopted its first strategy on Central Asia. Ever since, the EU has been emphasizing the importance of strengthening relations with Central Asian states, promoting European values such as democracy, rule of law, good governance, and human rights in the region. At the same time, it continues to recognize that not much has been done to achieve these goals,²⁵ especially in the field of human rights. Despite its objectives, the EU has a rather limited interest in the region on behalf of member states and subsequently limited resources to implement its ideas and visions. The EU takes a rather passive stance and responds only when it perceives security threats originating in or coming from Central Asia. Similar to Chinese experts, European experts suggest that the interactions between key actors in Central Asia should be viewed against the background of global developments and geopolitical changes. The role of Afghanistan was of great importance during the revision of the EU's Central Asia strategy in 2012. The situation has changed since 2014, when the EU started paying more attention to its relationship with Russia in Central Asia, and the wider effects of the war in Ukraine. The consequent worsening in relations between Russia and the EU has led to an inability to co-operate on urgent issues such as terrorism and drug trafficking.²⁶

23 Cf. Laruelle, cited above (Note 18), p. 152.

24 Cf. Zhao Huasheng, Xingxiang jianshe: zhongguo shenru zhongya de bijing zhilu [Image Construction: The Only Way for China to Go Deep into Central Asia], *Xinjiang shifan daxue xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* [Journal of Xinjiang Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)], Volume 26, Issue 4, July 2015, pp. 65-75, here: p. 69.

25 Cf. Jos Boonstra/Tika Tsertsvadze Implementation and review of the European Union-Central Asia Strategy: Recommendations for EU action, European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, Policy Department, January 2016, p. 4, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO_IDA%282016%29535019.

26 Cf. Michal Romanowski, The EU in Central Asia: The regional context, European Parliament, Directorate-General for External Policies, Policy Department, January 2016, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO_IDA\(2016\)535020](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EXPO_IDA(2016)535020).

The long-term EU objectives are less visible than reactions to acute geopolitical changes. This could be partially explained by the fact that, unlike China, the EU does not see Central Asia as its strategic and geopolitical priority.²⁷ Geographical proximity to the region should not be underestimated either. Central Asia is relatively far from the EU, they do not share common borders, and as long as the Central Asian region is stable and does not present a threat to the EU or its interests there, the EU does not undertake much in this regard. For example, in 2014, the position of an EU Special Representative for Central Asia was even abolished, although it was revived in 2015, when, despite certain improvements to the 2007 Strategy, the EU still maintained a low profile in the region. In addition, the 2015 adjustments to the Strategy did not incorporate views from civil society in Central Asia,²⁸ which clearly demonstrates the EU's rather weak engagement in the region.

Another important factor and challenge for the EU's involvement in Central Asia is the lack of interest on the side of Central Asian states. Their inability to institutionalize the High-Level Political and Security Dialogue in 2013, and the cancellation of a second meeting planned for 2014 in Tajikistan,²⁹ demonstrate this clearly. However, since 2015, High-Level Political and Security Dialogue meetings have been held regularly, with the most recent taking place on 28 May 2019 in Brussels, to which Afghanistan was invited as a special guest. This was a special meeting for the EU and Central Asia, as the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commission adopted a Joint Communication on "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" on 15 May. The sides discussed important issues such as border management, the fight against illicit drug trafficking, strengthening co-operation on counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism, co-operation on new security challenges such as hybrid threats and enhancing co-operation in the field of connectivity between Europe and Asia, as well as ensuring the latter is sustainable, open and rules-based.³⁰

Since around 2017, the EU has been intensifying its activities regarding Central Asia. The process of drafting a new EU Strategy for Central Asia started in 2017 and was finalized in June 2019. Although the transformation process in Central Asia – especially Uzbekistan's gradual opening and increasing readiness to enhance regional co-operation and engagement with the EU since 2016³¹ – favours greater active involvement in the region on the part of the EU, this does not sufficiently address the question as to why the EU has

27 Cf. Boonstra/Tsertsvadze, cited above (Note 25), p. 5.

28 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 4.

29 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 5.

30 Cf. European Union External Action, The EU and the countries of Central Asia and Afghanistan hold High-level Political and Security Dialogue, Bruxelles, 28 May 2019, at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/63320/eu-and-countries-central-asia-and-afghanistan-hold-high-level-political-and-security-dialogue_en.

31 Cf. Martin Russell, The EU's new Central Asia strategy, European Parliament, European Parliamentary Research Service, January 2019, pp. 2 and 11, available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2019\)633162](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2019)633162).

refocused its foreign policy on Central Asia. The main factor is China's BRI and its implementation both in Central Asia and in the EU itself. Although not directly referred to in the EU new strategy on Central Asia, the BRI has triggered the EU's anxiety and brought them to recognize the importance of having a stronger presence in Central Asia and enhancing their relationships with the states in the region.

The EU perceives not only economic but also political threats from Chinese involvement in Central Asia and the EU. Brussels takes a rather critical view of Chinese non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states and the lack of political conditionality on providing loans and assistance, since this could be viewed as indirect support of non-democratic regimes. Quite often, the lack of information and transparency of Chinese co-operation with Central Asian states, both from the Chinese and Central Asian sides, might also suggest some hidden political motives and conditionality.

There is a view that China's active role within the EU under its BRI framework and BRI-related activities provided China with a basis for influencing EU policies. This happened, for example, in 2017, with Greece blocking an EU statement at the UN Human Rights Council. In the same year, Hungary refused to sign a joint letter denouncing the reported torture of detained lawyers in China.³² These failures to make joint statements in international organizations, and some member states breaking EU consensus on international issues are worrisome tendencies for Brussels. The EU used to have no unified position towards many of China-related issues, including the BRI, human rights, or the South China Sea. However, the European Parliament resolution on the state of play of EU-China relations, adopted in September 2018, emphasises the importance for the EU of speaking with one voice in its relationship with China, and the participation in the 16+1 co-operation format (16 Central and East European states, among which eleven are EU member states, plus China) should enable this.³³

If we try to draw a parallel between China's challenges and threat perceptions with regard to Central Asia analysed above, and those of the EU, we can see that the latter could also be organized into similar categories.

First are the challenges related to the EU policy towards Central Asia, namely the formulation of the policy on the EU level and its consequent implementation on the ground. The ability to speak with one voice and interest plays a very important role here. It is crucial for the EU to co-ordinate policies

32 Cf. Erik Brattberg/Etienne Soula, Europe's Emerging Approach to China's Belt and Road Initiative, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 19 October 2018, at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/19/europe-s-emerging-approach-to-china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-pub-77536>.

33 Cf. Gisela Grieger, State of play of EU-China relations, European Parliament, European Parliamentary Research Service, January 2019, p. 3, available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2019\)633149](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2019)633149).

and actions among its institutions and member states in order to avoid the challenges and risks of duplications and inefficiency.³⁴

Second, the challenge of the EU's involvement into the region also depends on its acceptance among the Central Asian states. As discussed above, the Central Asian states have recently begun to welcome the EU's involvement in the region, both from an economic perspective and a political one, as a counterbalance to Russia and China. The EU is also popular in Central Asian societies in terms of languages, literature, culture, education, and way of life.

Thirdly, the relationships between the great powers in the region and interaction between them play the same important role for the EU in Central Asia as for China. The aforementioned EU-Russian relations are decisive for the level of EU involvement in Central Asian region, since, like China, the EU recognizes Russia as the state with the greatest influence there. For instance, Kyrgyzstan, in its efforts to democratize, is politically important for the EU, but there is also a very strong Russian influence in the country, which could turn it into a battlefield if EU relations with Russia worsen.³⁵

China presents a rather new challenge for the EU, especially in terms of engaging and co-operating within connectivity projects between Europe and Asia, which has recently become an EU priority. The EU published its EU-Asia connectivity strategy in September 2018, prior to the October 2018 Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), with the main emphasis on sustainability and transparency in its future co-operation with all Asian partners. The Strategy is informed by principles of sustainable, comprehensive, and rules-based connectivity.³⁶ The EU places an emphasis on supporting educational exchanges, mainly through Erasmus+ and the CAREN project, and helping to dismantle trade barriers, nevertheless, its activities have not attracted the same attention as China's BRI.³⁷ The EU's vision of connectivity was presented in September 2018 by the EU High Representative, Federica Mogherini. For Europe, connectivity is "the physical and non-physical infrastructure through which goods, services, ideas and people can flow unhindered".³⁸ As a response to the BRI-

34 Cf. Anna Gussarova/Māris Andžāns (eds.), Political and security relations. Mapping EU-Central Asia relations, *SEnECA Policy Paper*, no. 1, September 2018, p. 3, at: https://www.seneca-eu.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/SEnECA_Policy_Paper_01_2018.pdf.

35 Cf. Boonstra/Tsertsvadze, cited above (Note 25), p. 7.

36 Cf. European Commission, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank, *Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU Strategy*, Brussels, 19 September, 2018, especially pp. 2-3, available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/50708/connecting-europe-and-asia-building-blocks-eu-strategy_en.

37 Cf. Martin Russell, *Connectivity in Central Asia. Reconnecting the Silk Road*, European Parliament, European Parliamentary Research Service, April 2019, p. 1, available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI%282019%29637891.

38 *Connecting Europe and Asia: time to move up a gear*, Delegation of the European Union to Kazakhstan, 20 September 2018, available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/50900/connecting-europe-and-asia-time-move-gear_en.

related concerns, the EU also stresses “the need for transparently managed, sustainable connectivity that is economically viable, good for the environment, and does not leave partner countries with unmanageable debts”,³⁹ in which it is easy to read the criticism of and a response to China’s BRI. The Strategy does not explicitly mention the BRI, however, its principles can be seen as an answer to some of the criticisms of Beijing.⁴⁰ This explains why many see it as a response to the BRI, although the EU has not presented it as such.⁴¹

Fourth, the Afghan issue is a troublesome one for the EU too. Recently, Afghanistan has been increasingly viewed as an opportunity and not a threat by the Central Asian states, so within the EU, awareness of the positive role Central Asian states could play in stabilizing Afghanistan is also growing. Afghanistan should become a transit country for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI) pipeline and the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) power line, and Uzbekistan is helping to build a new railway in the country and has already transformed Afghanistan into its sixth-largest export market.⁴² Afghanistan, in turn, also has the economic benefit of dealing with Central Asia as a transit state, as well as security and political advantages when Central Asian states engage in peace processes between the government and Taliban rebels, as Uzbekistan started doing in 2018.⁴³

Fifth, there are economic challenges. The EU and China both focus on the economy, but while the Chinese influence is spread across the whole region, the EU’s main focus lies on Kazakhstan, where the EU invests a lot, but also imports a lot.⁴⁴ Both actors pursue the same goals of developing Central Asia economically, but use different methods. The EU stresses progress in governance, the judicial system, civil society, and the relationship between the state and its citizens, and all this against the background of democracy and respect for human rights. China does not stress norms and values and sticks to the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs. China-led infrastructure-building is very appealing to Central Asian states, especially when no normative conditions are imposed on them.⁴⁵ Given that the EU money is limited and spread across a wide range of priorities, the EU does not generally fund major infrastructure projects in the region, with the exception of the World Bank-led CASA-1000 power line.⁴⁶ The EU does not oppose China in Central Asia, but wants to engage and co-operate with it. At the same time, despite a comprehensive strategic partnership between the two actors and their ties being highly institutionalized, the interaction between two different economic systems

39 Russell, *The EU’s new Central Asia strategy*, cited above (Note 31), p. 11.

40 Cf. Russell, *Connectivity in Central Asia*, cited above (Note 37), p. 11.

41 Cf. Grieger, cited above (Note 33), p. 3.

42 Cf. Russell, *The EU’s new Central Asia strategy*, cited above (Note 31), pp. 11-12.

43 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 12.

44 Cf. Boonstra/Tsertsvadze, cited above (Note 25), p. 7.

45 Cf. Romanowski, cited above (Note 26), pp. 8, 10.

46 Cf. Russell, *Connectivity in Central Asia*, cited above (Note 37), p. 11.

might lead to competition.⁴⁷ The high level of corruption and absence of transparency in Central Asia create the same threats and risks for the EU's economic involvement in the region as they do for China's engagement there.

Concluding Remarks: Co-operation between the EU and China in Central Asia

China and the EU share the same risk perceptions with regard to Central Asia. Fighting terrorism, religious extremism, and radicalization, organized crime, drug trafficking, and security issues related to returning fighters in Central Asia all pose security threats both to China and the EU when they cross their state borders.

Aside from all its benefits, connectivity in Central Asia, regardless of whether it is set according to the standards and principles promoted by Beijing or Brussels, does not only bring positive results. Enhanced connectivity can lead to an increase in the prevalence and lucrativeness of drug trafficking, which is already a significant problem in Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyzstan, which are on the main drug transport route from Afghanistan to Europe. As well as increasing drug trafficking, road connectivity will facilitate the flow of migrants, both legal and illegal, and individuals interested in terrorist activities.⁴⁸ What is clear is that closer co-operation between China and the EU in combating their common security threats, working together on conflict prevention in the region, fighting against corruption in Central Asia⁴⁹ and deepening economic co-operation, including infrastructure and investment projects, could be beneficial for the region, as well as for relations between the EU and China.

From the Chinese point of view, the deeper involvement of the EU in Central Asia has both advantages and disadvantages for co-operation with Central Asia. Among the advantages is the promotion of economic development, and the opportunity for jointly combating terrorism and religious extremism, thus maintaining regional security and stability. Among the perceived disadvantages is the intensified and diversified competition between the great powers in Central Asia, including the strategies of the US, Japan, Turkey, and Russia in the region. Despite not having a geographical advantage in Central Asia, the EU is popular there, especially in the humanitarian and economic fields. This also means the EU has an advantage in competition for Central Asian energy resources, which could negatively influence energy co-operation between China and the Central Asian states. At the same time, in order to achieve positive results on a continuous basis, China should look for common interests with other powers present in the region and pursue co-operation as

47 Cf. Grieger, cited above (Note 33), p. 1.

48 Cf. Troy Sternberg/Ariell Ahearn/Fiona McConnell, Central Asian "Characteristics" on China's New Silk Road: The Role of Landscape and the Politics of Infrastructure, *Land* 3/2017 available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2073-445X/6/3/55>.

49 Cf. Boonstra/Tsertsvadze, cited above (Note 25), p. 6.

well as competition,⁵⁰ and the EU could be Beijing's most welcome counterpart in this regard.

Although the European and Chinese visions on connectivity vary, the EU does not view these two approaches as competing, but perceives them as complementary. All parties involved could benefit from a situation in which Chinese investments could be combined with European know-how and law practices,⁵¹ as well as with EU expertise and experience in fields of connectivity, such as education, person-to-person contact, and free movement of people, services, and goods.⁵² China and the EU could also reduce their economic risk in the region by addressing corruption issues in Central Asia together.

50 Cf. Zhang Ye, Zhongya diqu de daguo juezhu ji dui zhongguo yu zhongya quyue jingji hezuo de yingxiang [The competition of great powers in Central Asia and its impact on regional economic co-operation between China and Central Asia], *Xinjiang shehui kexue [Xinjiang Social Sciences]* 3/2009, pp. 59-63, here: p.63.

51 Cf. Boonstra/Tsertsvadze, cited above (Note 25), p. 6.

52 Cf. Russell, The EU's new Central Asia strategy, cited above (Note 31), p. 11.