THE PLACE AND ROLE OF CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES IN CHINA'S "THE ONE BELT, ONE ROAD" INITIATIVE*

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Abstract

This study analyzes the role and position of Central Asian states in China's "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) project. The method of comparative analysis is utilized to achieve the study's objectives. This initiative by the People's Republic of China (PRC) complies with the regulations of the ancient Silk Road and maintains continuity. The Silk Road Economic Belt spans across Eurasia and mirrors the route of the ancient Silk Road while generating economic corridors, cultural and political cooperation with mutually beneficial results for all nations. It includes free trade agreements and opportunities for surplus production in each nation, enabling the sale of products in other markets and the free circulation of local currency. The "One Belt, One Road" project was announced during Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit to Astana, Kazakhstan, in September 2013. The initiative covers an area that accounts for almost 55% of the world's Gross National Product, 70% of the world's population, and 75% of renowned energy reserves. The Silk Road Fund was launched in 2014 with an initial capital of US$40 billion.

Keywords: Central Asia, history, international relations, regional studies, PRC

1. Introduction

The term “Central Asia”, which is often observed in international periodicals, academic speeches and research by political pioneers across the globe, involves 5 former Soviet republics: Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Although those 5 nations hold

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much in common regarding language, geography, history religion, and culture, it is not correct to observe and consider Central Asia as a mere regional group with alike political, foreign policy and economic foundations (Kokushkina and Soloshcheva, 2019; Van Hoa et al., 2022).

Following the Soviet’s fall, the 2 greatest Central Asian countries Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan made an attempt to achieve bigger regional integration as well as cooperation. Over the course of January 1994, a settlement have been made in Tashkent to set up the Central Asian Union (Kazakhstan, 2015; Kuzmin, 2021). That highlighted the start of Central Asian economic integration via the implementation and development of economic schemes with all 5 nations. After the conflicts occurring in the last 2 decades, because of internal distinctions among the Central Asian nations and the impact of outside forces, Central Asian integration got a non-viable notion that seems tough to execute, even it turned out to be deemed a utopian concept. There stand the following issues: (a) preoccupation with national sovereignty and variations in foreign policy agendas; (b) water disputes and escalation around border (Daneykin et al., 2015; Oladele and Nubong, 2022) and (c) internal competitions (Galiullin et al., 2020; Nguyen-Chi et al., 2022).

In the very short history of their independence, all Central Asian leaders have rewarded their nation with sovereignty. Strengthening national autonomy and solidarity in exotic policy is vividly a great priority. In Kazakhstan, for instance, “internal political stability and consolidation of society” and “national security” have been listed as the 2 major priorities in the growth strategy “Kazakhstan 2030” (Jermsittiparsert, 2021; Seisembayeva, 2017). The next "Kazakhstan 2050 Growth Strategy” intends to join the club of 30 developed nations of the globe, by "reinforcing statehood" and "brand-new Kazakh patriotism". likewise, Uzbekistan is looking for a nation-building policy intended to define a new state at abroad and home (Daneykin et al., 2015).

The New Silk Road, formerly known as the "One Belt-One Road" and now known as the "Belt and Road Initiative", is set to connect the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe with commercial rail, land and sea trade networks that Iran It is at the heart of this plan. The New Silk Road, or Belt-and-Road Summit, was a two-day, China-centric, two-day summit in Beijing hosted by China on May 14 and 15, 2017. At the meeting, Chinese President Xi Jinping called on countries to reject protectionism and accept the process of globalization. Finally, a group of leaders present at the meeting signed the New Silk Road Agreement (Seisembayeva, 2017; Sibuea et al., 2021).

Xi Jinping is the secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party and the country's supreme leader. He first introduced the strategy during an official visit to Kazakhstan in September 2013. The project is backed by the industrial strength of the Chinese economy and its investment potential. This plan, along with China's military power, could lead to its hegemony in East Asia, and ultimately lead China to the top power in the global economy by overcoming Eurasian land and water trade routes. Proponents of the plan see it as a way to Infrastructure gaps between developed and developing countries are seen as contributing to their economic growth and boosting international trade. Opponents, however, see it as a colonial scheme in which many target countries are unable to repay their debts and their contracts are not transparent (Kuzmin, 2021). China has unveiled a $ 900 billion plan to invest in the world's economic infrastructure to expand globalization and market development.

China has set up financial institutions to implement the projects. For example, he launched the Silk Road Fund with $ 40 billion in the capital in 2014. It also established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank with a base capital of $ 100 billion in 2015 with the participation of other countries. The Chinese government has also transferred $ 82 billion to three banks this year to invest in Silk Road projects. Thus, the way has been paved for Chinese companies to implement Chinese government-backed infrastructure development projects in other countries. China has also welcomed the involvement of non-Chinese companies, including Western industrial companies, in advancing projects to reduce the risk of failure. The Chinese-French company, for example, is developing a reactor in the UK. Siemens is also building a power plant in Saudi Arabia with $ 1 billion in the Chinese capital. GE also intends to participate in these projects (Galiullin and Tumanin, 2020).
2. Methods

The methodological framework is based on a combination of the principles of a scientific-objective approach and systems analysis. Interdisciplinary methods were applied in the article, such as:
- the method of comparative analysis, was used in assessing the main mechanisms of cooperation between the PRC and Central Asian countries;
- the predictive method in studying the prospects for the development of trade and political relations in Central Asia.

3. Results and discussions

The primary problem in the construction of the Chinese OBOR project has been the incomplete delimitation of borders. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, all 5 nations have been left with border conflicts of differing levels of complexity. The most controversial is regarded to be the Fergana Valley region, where Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan hold historical claims to land tracts on each other's territories, resulting in a vast range of inter-state disputes. From the period 2012 to 2013, there existed 38 security events on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border, incorporating 37 on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Nes data demonstrates that the event rate amongst the nondemarcated borders in the area doubled over the year 2014 (Tolipov, 2013). regarding the Ferghana Valley, several border conflicts, including clashes among local societies, the nations involved, effortlessly turned into armed clashes among border troops, leading to a long-lasting border closures and strict security circumstances. That circumstances have aggravated already inadequate and weak inter-state collaboration in Central Asia.

In addition to border conflicts, water issues are a chief reason for dispute. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya downstream comprise nearly ninety percent of Central Asia's river water and provide roughly 75% of the water necessary for irrigated agriculture. Kyrgyzstan curbs the flow of the Syr Darya downstream at the Reservoir and Toktogul Dam. Tajikistan is creating the Ragun Dam on the Vakhsh River, a huge tributary of the Amu Darya. The shortage of a feasible regional measure to substitute the Soviet-era water management system, has resulted in armed clashes and conflicts over rivalry for water among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Ilikova and Glushkova, 2019). Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov has explicitly threatened that the execution of dam schemes without consideration for downstream nations, including Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, could end in wars. Despite the fact that a full-scale water-war appears improbable, any water conflict would pose doubt on collaboration amongst the 3 nations.

In regards to foreign policy approach, Kazakhstan looks for a multisector policy benefiting closer security, economic, and political bonds with external actors, specifically Russia, whereas Uzbekistan wants bilateralism and an security and independent policy (Galiullin and Tumanin, 2020). In one interview, Emomali Rahmon (Tajikistan President) declared that Tajikistan welcomes Xi Jinping's (Chinese President) Silk Road Economic Belt proposal with open arms, as it was for the nation’s national benefits. Likewise, at one meeting with the President in December 2014 in Dushanbe, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov (Turkmenistan President) said that Turkmenistan would take part in the Silk Road Economic Belt to strengthen national transport system and assist in facilitating cross-border transport between China and Central Asia. The favorable response of Central Asian nations to the Silk Road Economic Belt may well be easily perceived: The Silk Road Economic Belt proposes immense economic chances much required by all Central Asian economies in the encounter of Russia's economic recession and a bleak global economic perspective (Imomnazar, 2018).

In addition, all Central Asian nations are landlocked and mail inadequately developing nations (with the exception of Kazakhstan) are heavily dependent on the extraction of natural resources, including iron, oil, and gas, gratifying the core objectives of the Silk Road Economic Belt.
Belt of increasing connectivity, improving infrastructure, diversifying the economic structure, stimulating trade, and responding to Central Asia's dream for economic growth (Javaid and Akhlaq, 2018) After Xi Jinping (Chinese President) stated the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative and established the $40 billion Silk Road Fund, the Central Asian countries are quite keen on the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative. Central Asian countries have become quite interested in China's schemes to connect Europe and Eurasia since they can achieve further money through being a "transit hub" (Shamsipur et al., 2012).

Despite the fact that Central Asian governors embrace China's Silk Road Economic Belt, they are severely worried regarding the adverse effect of intimate political and economic bonds with China. In the prevailing era, even though China is the greatest trading partner for Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, and is the second greatest trading partner for Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the scope of trade keeps very narrow: the Central Asian nations essentially export ore and fuel to China and import labour-intensive goods, including light industrial products and textiles. What’s more, China's investing in the area are also concentrated on construction and mining, with confined cooperation in other sectors (Daly, 2015).

Moreover, just as the import of rather affordable Chinese products has supplied unprivileged citizens in nations, including Kyrgyzstan with fundamental necessities, including vegetables and fruit, and created prosperous cross-border business and trade for enterprising, individual traders in cities like Almaty, the nation's domestic production base keeps shrinking (Sabouri et al., 2020). Moreover, some argue that China's purpose is to obtain gas, oil, and land resources from the local people in Central Asia. As all the nations have stated their aspire and tenacity to stay away from resource-oriented economies toward enhancing their own manufacturing sector, China is anticipated to make a further investment in the non-resource sectors of Central Asia (Starr, 2008). In Central Asia, China's primary concentration is to enhance energy and transport infrastructure along 2 wide transport corridors that will facilitate economic collaboration via integration (Gao, 2016; Shen, 2016).

5. Conclusion

1. All those new routes won't be commercially feasible. They save considerable time on maritime routes for low-volume, high-value products, however, would be way more costly for business with Europe. Kazakhstan pursues to connect transit routes to new particular economic zones in order to increase the influence of local entrepreneurs. "Khorgos-Eastern Gateway" special economic zone and port, inaugurated by President Nursultan Nazarbayev on 2 July 2014 with great fanfare, should "stimulate economic growth across Eurasia" (Kazakhstan, 2015). As the number of trains and their use increases, the cost per container is decreasing and customs procedures at Kazakhstan's borders have gotten much quicker, stated a Kazakh Railways executive. Various rail gauges among nations still need rail changes. In contrast, full train services evade that delay through carrying cargo in standard containers.

2. Other routes are transforming the project's domestic routes. Moreover, in 2015, China - with $128 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) - became the world's second biggest foreign direct investor, behind the US and on a par with Japan. In 2015, China - with $128 billion in FDI - became the world's second-largest foreign direct investor, leaving the US behind and on a par with Japan. Today, China is no longer heavily dependent on importing goods and attracting foreign investment. Rather, it is actively making its own investments abroad and reinforcing "Chinese brands" with high added value (often technical products).

3. Ambitious projects require a major investment that can only pay off in the long term and with sufficient transport capacity. As of 2021, the two largest investment projects in the Chinese energy sector are in Central Asia. The first is an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan. The total length of the pipeline is 2,800 kilometres. Since 2010, this pipeline has exported 10 million tonnes of crude oil annually to China, and by the end of 2021, its capacity is projected to reach 20 million tonnes.
per year. In March 2017, the two countries (China and Kazakhstan) noted that total crude oil exports from Kazakhstan to China, which exceeded 100 million tonnes. The second project is the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, which passes through all five Central Asian countries. Of the four pipelines, three are currently in operation, exporting 55 billion m3 of natural gas per year to China. By 2021, when the fourth line (Line D) is completed, the pipeline will have an annual capacity of 85 bcm. This represents 20% of China's demand. To make up some of the energy shortfall, China also plans to build 172 hydropower plants by the end of 2021.

4. Difficulties with the perception of the Chinese project. Efficient public relationships and multi-level diplomacy (state and interstate) are considered as the most favorable techniques to make the project understandable. In other words, "the Chinese must engage in an effective PR campaign, otherwise OBOR will seem overly imposed. The question is how eager China is to engage in PR. Moreover, such a willingness would give the Chinese leadership an opportunity to tackle some deep-seated nationalist dreads that permeate, albeit in various manners, Central Asian societies. " OBOR has different security implications for Central Asia and South Asia.

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