



МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ И МИРОВАЯ ПОЛИТИКА

Большая игра в Большой Центральной Азии

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Аннотация: Регион, который в советское время назывался Советской Средней Азией, включает в себя 5 бывших советских центрально-азиатских республик (ЦАР): Казахстан, Узбекистан, Туркменистан, Таджикистан и Кыргызстан. После распада Советского Союза в 1991 г. их политический статус резко изменился. Они стали независимыми республиками. С начала 1990-х гг. лидеры стран Центральной Азии иногда называют соседний Афганистан шестой центрально-азиатской республикой. Фактически, он занимает 14 % бассейна Аральского моря, в его горах формируется около 15 % стока реки Амударья, которая является крупнейшей рекой в Центральной Азии и впадает в Аральское море.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Россия, Китай, США, ЕС

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A Great Game in Greater Central Asia

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Abstract: The region historically referred to as Soviet Central Asia includes the 5 Central Asian Republics (CARs) of the Former Soviet Union (FSU): Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Their political status changed drastically when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and they became independent republics. Since the early 1990s, Central Asian leaders have referred on occasion to neighboring Afghanistan as the sixth CAR. In fact, it does occupy 14% of the Aral Sea Basin and its mountains supply about 15% of streamflow to the region's mighty Amu Darya River that used to flow into Central Asia's Aral Sea.

Keywords: Central Asia, Russia, Chine, USA, EU

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INTRODUCTION

Before the Soviet collapse, the CARs of the USSR were little known to the West, relatively speaking, and had been more or less off limits to foreigners. The region drew considerable environmental interest and elevated international status, because the Aral Sea was rapidly shrinking in the last few decades of the 20th century. The shrinking of the sea was the result of deliberate river diversions from the sea's two major rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya. The diversions were officially sanctioned by the Soviet Politburo and later by the independent CARs to use river water on fertile but dry desert sands, mainly to grow cotton. The Aral Sea was the fourth-largest inland sea in the world in the 1970s but today it has almost disappeared.

The Central Asian region has now become a political playing field for global as well as regional powers, even though Russia considers its former Central Asia Republics as within its sphere of influence. Regional powers including China, India, Pakistan, Iran and Russia (along with the distant US) are vying for dominant influence in and over the CARs. It is fair to say that all these countries could be collectively labeled as «Greater Central Asia».

Some of the 5 FSU republics are rich in hydrocarbons (oil, natural gas, coal resources), while others have mineral and water resources. Though they are at various levels of economic development, size, and population, and with different geographic features (desert, mountain, glacial landscapes), they share a common

political feature: each republic is landlocked. Idan [1] stated its significance in the following way:

The major geographic characteristic of the Central Asian countries established following the break-up of the Soviet Union is the fact that they are land-locked. This factor creates challenges in all spheres of development — foreign policy, security, and unique human development.

Idan quoted “Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev [who] stated ... that the lack of access to the sea could be detrimental to the country's economic development, and to its political independence, as well as making participation in international economic relations difficult”.

As for the sixth CAR, Afghanistan, the prolonged wars in that country have made it difficult to realize major involvement in regional transboundary infrastructure development plans, except for some notable projects with Uzbekistan [2].

Rehabilitating the existing infrastructure and modernizing it to meet contemporary needs is common and recognized as a necessary key to national development as well as regional cooperation in a Greater Central Asia. Modernization would enhance the regional exchange of goods and services with neighboring as well as foreign markets, including those in China.

China's step-like change in development interest and in expanding its socio-economic and political influence in the region can easily

be traced to President Xi's OBOR/BRI. Each of these countries has received development loans from China through OBOR/BRI. It did so before OBOR/BRI was launched in 2013 and has continued to make such loans today for infrastructure projects such as pipelines for natural gas and oil shipments to China, rail lines and roads for trade interactions, again with China, as well as with other countries. Kazakhstan supplies oil to China, Turkmenistan provides natural gas to China, while others exchange their mineral resources for infrastructure development loans. Furukawa [3] noted that "Borrowing from Beijing has ballooned in all but...Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan".

Idan identified some favorable aspects of China's involvement in the region to promote connectivity [1]:

Connectivity is a factor able to change the geopolitical reality in a region whose geographic location is naturally constant.

China provided CA states with a regional largescale plan for connectivity within the region to neighboring countries, but especially to China.

The BRI integrates the countries of Central Asia with a new and multi-faceted transportation network, as well as connecting Central Asia to faraway countries and markets.

According to the BRI scheme, Central Asia becomes the main continental gateway for Chinese transportation routes westward.

Essentially, China is unlocking landlocked Central Asia... China's BRI can transform Central Asia from its landlocked state to a transit region between Asia and Europe.

China has provided people-to-people exchanges with the CARs as part of its soft diplomatic efforts to win over popular support and to dissuade local people from their fear of China's potential hegemony.

However, Idan also identified some worrisome aspects of taking Chinese loans. "Central Asian states are well aware of the prob-

lematic experiences of some countries with Chinese investments — the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka being the most notable example". Each CAR has knowingly incurred varying levels of debt by the OBOR — related projects.

Comments by Furukawa [3] highlight concerns about emerging as well as potential, debt traps for the five CARs. "As Beijing bankrolls projects in Central Asia to promote its Belt and Road Initiative, countries in the region are at risk of granting China valuable concessions to ease their heavy debt burdens." For example, he noted "Tajikistan handed over a gold mine to China in April as remuneration for 300 million dollars in funding to build a power plant" and that "Some predict that Turkmenistan will have to hand over gas fields to China as repayment for its debts".

Cohen [4] provided advice to Central Asian decision makers:

[W]hile the BRI can be a great facilitator for connectivity and development in the region, Central Asian countries must be active in the management of the belt and road projects passing through their territory if they hope to maximize local input — and impact...Participants of China's BRI — particularly those which are overly dependent on China as a trade partner or creditor — run the risk of debt spirals and dangerous exposure to markets shocks. The Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, for example, respectively owe 40% and 50% of their public debt to China.

Cohen and Grant [5] suggested the following to Central Asian government seeking Belt and Road loans from China.

Knowing about the debt trap, government must carefully consider the soft elements of their legal, regulatory, and fiscal infrastructure. How will the projects be structured? What will be the local content and labor requirements to foster the growth of human capital? What are the terms of debt and will the government have future capacity to repay it? Lastly, and perhaps

most importantly, are the "rules" and "terms" of each infrastructure project transparent?"

KAIRAT MOLDAŠEV'S "CONSTRUCTIVE CRITIQUE OF BRI FROM CENTRAL ASIA: A SUMMARY"

Researcher Moldashev [6] states in his article, "Risks in the Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative' in Central Asia, «that the "Belt and Road" is a timely initiative for China and other Asian countries». Instead of widely — discussed geopolitical and economic implications of the BRI, his article focused on "other problems that may adversely affect the further development of this initiative: ... issues of (1) sustainable development, (2) the absence of control by the PRC over possible corruption schemes in investment projects and (3) China's domestic policy regarding national minorities." He politely but repeatedly concluded that "Insufficient attention to resolving these issues may slow down the process of projects implementation under the Chinese initiative in Central Asia in the future."

While "The absence of clear legislative regulations imposing liability for corruption when investing outside the country, in a short-term perspective puts the Chinese investor in a preferential position" and while" at the moment, Central Asian countries are open to Chinese investments,... the medium — and long-term success of the "Belt and Road Initiative' implementation in Central Asia will depend on many factors that must be considered by the Chinese side and the countries of Central Asia — recipients of investments from the PRC." "Progress in the development of the "Belt and Road Initiative' will depend on how far China can take action to solve the emerging problems and [for their part] Central Asian states also need to develop standards for cooperation with the PRC apart from economic indicators, pay[ing] more attention to environmental and social issues".

1. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: ENVIRONMENTAL MODERNIZATION ISSUES

The growth of the Chinese economy, as in other industrializing countries, is accompanied by environmental problems. Studies show that environmental modernization within China, aimed at improving the environmental situation, was not reflected in the adjustment of investment activities outside the country. In addition, the government in underdeveloped and developing countries often lower environment standards to attract foreign investors, despite the fact that infrastructure projects (railways, roads, pipelines and power lines) usually carry risks of reducing biodiversity, charge of ecosystem, and environmental pollution, during construction and exploitation.

For example, Tracy et al. [7] stated it this way: Concurrently, on the domestic front, the Chinese Government has launched a new policy paradigm, "ecological civilization", to dramatically improve environmental regulations, reduce pollution, and transform industries by adopting new green technologies and higher environmental standards. But does China's intention to go through a "green shift" domestically resonate with these new trans-border infrastructure development mega-projects?

If China has only recently begun to discuss environmental issues at the highest level and to take serious measures, is it worth expecting that Chinese investors will more responsible for environmental issues in underdeveloped and developing countries? Risks in the implementation of the "Belt and Road Initiative" in Central Asia investments and for its own governments in terms of environmental safety are inevitable.

2 CHINESE INVESTMENTS AND DOMESTIC POLICIES OF RECIPENT COUNTRIES

The absence of clear legislative regulations imposing liability for corruption when investing outside the country in a short-term perspec-

tive puts the Chinese investor in a preferential position... But in the medium and long-term perspective. This strategy carries risks for Chinese investors, including in the framework of “Belt and Road Initiative”. There are two reasons for risks.

First, there is a risk now to become an object of discontent on the part of the societies of recipient countries of investment. The existing sinophobic sentiments can be reinforced by the not-fully-responsible behavior of Chinese investors, which will create difficulties for the existing and future projects within the framework of “Belt and Road Initiative.”

Secondly, regime change is always possible, and the new authorities might keep relations with China, but not share the enthusiasm of their predecessors. In Malaysia, after the defeat of the previous prime-minister Najib Tun Razak, accused of corruption, and the “Alliance of Hope” coalition came to power, the state policy regarding Chinese projects also changed. The new government has already suspended two projects under the “Belt and Road Initiative”. The main reason [being] the increase in external debt.

“Environmental and other problems associated with Chinese investments, such as attracting illegal labor or using only Chinese materials, are not adequately addressed at this stage”.

3. CHINA'S NATIONAL MINORITY POLICY AND INVESTMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia is a key region for economic growth for Xinjiang and development of a land corridor between China and Western countries as an alternative to the sea routes.

In relations with the countries of Central Asia, one of the risk factors for the “Belt and Road Initiative” is the policy of the PRC regarding ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Although issues of domestic policy and investment are often considered separately, in the case of China's

policy on national minorities of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region...it already has negative impact on perception of China and “Belt and Road Initiative” by Central Asia. The mass media of Kazakhstan, broadcast in the Kazakh language, actively follow the processes in Xinjiang.

For the development of western China or Xinjiang, close cooperation with the countries of Central Asia, through which opens a land access to the markets of Russia, Iran and Europe, is very important. The developing Xinjiang also gets access to mineral resources in Central Asia. But in the past few years, an attempt to erase ethnic and religious identity and “sinification” of minorities can be seen in China's domestic policy towards national minorities in Xinjiang [8]. What is happening does not quite correspond to the construction of a positive image of the PRC. The language of power, total control, the rejection of cultural diversity, an attempt to erase national identity, especially related to the societies of the people of Central Asia, creates an image of an aggressive neighbor. Will this lead to an increase in conflict or end in cultural genocide?

“For any outcome, this process negatively impacts the perception of China, not only in Central Asia but throughout the world. The discourse of Hostility will significantly limit the possibilities for full-fledged economic cooperation. Given that, national minorities in China, including the Uighurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, could be a bridge in creating closer and more sustainable economic ties.

CONCLUSION

Furukawa [3] observed that “Moscow seems to tolerate China's growing clout in Russia's sphere of influence”. However, he also noted some Chinese activities could eventually undermine its relationship with Russia because of its loans to the pro — West Ukraine and Moldova.

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