

Chinese Policy in Central Asia in the Estimation of Chinese Experts

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The research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, grant #24-28-00249,
<https://rscf.ru/project/24-28-00249/>

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2024-22-2-141-154

Abstract

After the start of Russia's Special Military Operation (SMO) in Ukraine in February 2022, some in the West thought that China might take advantage of Moscow's diverted attention in order to elbow Russia out of Central Asia. Around the same time, China, having overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and lifted restrictions on cross-border cargo transportation and movement of people, enhanced its economic and diplomatic activity in Central Asia. This situation raises a set of interrelated questions. What is behind China's drastically increased activity in Central Asia? What are the driving forces of Chinese policy in the region? How does Beijing see its opportunities and challenges in Central Asia amid ongoing changes there and the overall new

geopolitical situation? Does Beijing intend to undermine Russia's position in the region? The author offers an analysis of what Chinese experts say and write on this score, providing some clues to the matter.

Keywords: China, Central Asia, Russia, great powers, regional policy, economic engagement, regional influence, sphere of influence.

Over the last few years, Central Asia's political, economic, and geopolitical landscape has undergone fundamental changes and even shake-ups. The countries of the region have acquired new leaders, reconfigured their political systems, reoriented their development strategies (including in the direction of greater economic openness towards neighbors and the world), and adjusted their domestic and foreign policies. The Central Asian states have continued to form a unified regional interconnected space. Over the past two to three years, the security situation in Central Asia has been determined by a number of factors: complete pullout of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the Taliban's rise to power; flareups of internal unrest (in Kazakhstan in January 2022 and in Karakalpakstan (in Uzbekistan) in July 2022); inter-ethnic and cross-border conflicts in some Central Asian countries (most acutely, on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in September 2022); and, finally, the escalation of the Ukraine crisis and the ensuing anti-Russian sanctions. Central Asia has abruptly found itself in the focus of major powers, and others, motivated by geopolitical interests and strategic rivalry.

China has further strengthened its foothold in the region since mid-2022, taking advantage of the ongoing regional changes. These intensified efforts starkly contrast with the lull in China's foreign economic and diplomatic activity in early 2020, when it was struggling through the COVID-19 pandemic. China's newly proactive stance in Central Asia has been interpreted in the West—either because of poor understanding, or out of a desire to disrupt the emerging Russian-Chinese geopolitical tandem—as evidence of China's intention

to undermine Russia's regional position. Many Western experts have long believed in the possibility, or even certainty, of a Russo-Chinese collision in the region. The launch of Russia's Special Military Operation generated Western expectations that China—with its three-decades-long experience of doing business with the region, and Russia's distraction with the situation in Ukraine—would be tempted to oust Russia from Central Asia. This article briefs the reader on Chinese academic discourse on the subject over the past two to three years, which illuminates the driving forces, motives, and objectives of Beijing's Central Asia policy.

CHINA'S ACHIEVEMENTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

More than three decades have elapsed since China and the Central Asian countries established diplomatic relations in 1992. They have since gone a long way, from delimiting and demilitarizing borders and building trust between the militaries, to regional economic and security cooperation within the SCO. At the bilateral level, political interaction between China and Central Asia was promptly complemented by trade and other economic interaction. Cooperation in energy and infrastructure has grown. The construction and launch of the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline in 2006, and the Central Asia-China gas pipeline in 2009, made China one of the main actors in the Central Asian hydrocarbon market. For Kazakhstan, the oil pipeline to China has become a second oil export route (in addition to the CPC oil pipeline crossing Russia). China is the largest—and in some years, only—buyer of natural gas from Turkmenistan.

The 2008-2009 global economic crisis was a crucial point in China's economic presence in the region. China replaced Russia as Central Asia's largest trading partner, as Chinese loans and investments rapidly increased and diversified between countries and economic sectors (Leksyutina, 2020, p. 303, 307-308). China became the main source of capital investment for Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, providing more than 40% of total foreign direct investment in the latter two. According to Chinese statistics, by the end of March 2023, China's accumulated direct investment in the five Central Asian countries

exceeded \$15 billion, while the accumulated volume of engineering and construction contracts amounted to \$63.9 billion (Sun, 2023, p. 20). China signed currency swap agreements with all Central Asian countries. Chinese UnionPay cards are used in all Central Asian countries but Turkmenistan. The current agenda now encompasses the interconnection of existing transport corridors and the development of new ones, and cooperation in industry, agriculture, and the digital and green economies.

Beijing is promoting economic development in Central Asia not only to realize its own economic interests, but also to build a security belt of prosperity, stability, and peace along its western border. Beijing fears the effect upon its western regions of nearby socio-political instability, cross-border and inter-ethnic conflicts, and the spread of extremism from Afghanistan and the Middle East. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is especially vulnerable to the “three forces of evil” (terrorism, extremism, and separatism).

Central Asia is also significant for China’s energy security and its connection to European and Middle Eastern markets. The region is crucial for promoting China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Eurasia. The Central Asian countries feature prominently at all four levels of contemporary Chinese diplomacy: (1) “periphery/neighborhood diplomacy” (周边外交) due to their geographical proximity; (2) “developing countries’ diplomacy” (发展中国家外交) due to their developing status; (3) “multilateral diplomacy” (多边外交) due to their membership alongside China in multilateral mechanisms; and (4) “great power diplomacy” (大国外交) because of great power rivalry in Central Asia. Beijing conceptualized the basis for building relations with the region in 2022, when Xi Jinping called on the Central Asian countries to “build a community of common destiny for China and Central Asia.”

In building its policy towards Central Asia, Beijing has always recognized that the region is within the sphere of Russia’s special interests. Chinese expert Zeng Xianghong characterizes the post-Soviet order in Central Asia as “quasiunipolar,” with Russia holding a prevailing influence on regional processes (Zeng, 2022a, p. 38). Viewing Central Asia as Russia’s “strategic backyard” and also as a “common

neighborhood”(共同的周边) of China and Russia (Li, 2022, p. 54), Beijing has painstakingly avoided challenging Russia's special status in the region and maintained harmonious relations with Moscow. The SCO, founded in 2001, opened wide opportunities for Chinese interaction with Central Asia in cooperation with Russia. In addition to the SCO as the basic multilateral mechanism for coordinated operation in the region, Russia and China have also jointly taken other important initiatives, such as the May 2015 agreement to link the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) with the EAEU, and the 2018 agreement on China-EAEU trade and economic cooperation.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF MULTILATERALISM AND THE DAWN OF “GREAT OPPORTUNITIES”

By 2020, Beijing could no longer fully achieve its goals in Central Asia via the SCO, which remained a priority in Chinese foreign policy, but whose role in implementing the Belt and Road Initiative was limited by its members' heterogeneity (following the first wave of expansion), by growing contradictions among some member-states, and by certain features of the SCO's decision-making mechanism (Deng, 2022, p. 24-25). Beijing needed a multilateral dialogue mechanism that would encompass all Central Asian countries without exception (the SCO does not include Turkmenistan, with which China maintains close energy cooperation), that would be specifically configured for China's cooperation with Central Asia (since not all issues of interest to Beijing fit within the SCO's agenda), and through which it could coordinate the Belt and Road Initiative's implementation.

In 2020, Beijing set up the “1+5” mechanism for regular multilateral meetings of the Chinese and Central Asian foreign ministers. It gradually expanded to include six-party meetings of various ministers and agency directors, thereby moving from discussion to implementation. Since 2023, the “1+5” mechanism has been operating at the level of heads of state (summits are to be held every two years). The first China-Central Asia summit was held in May 2023.

The range and content of adopted initiatives point to Beijing's determination to make the “1+5” format its main platform for

multilateral interaction with the region. At the summit, the parties approved 54 agreements and cooperation initiatives, established 19 mechanisms and platforms for multilateral engagement (including mechanisms for regular meetings of ministers of the economy and trade, agriculture, transportation, education, etc.), and signed nine documents (NCA, 2023). The initiatives and agreements encompass trade and economic and humanitarian interaction, but not security cooperation.

Beijing's proposal to establish a Central Asia-China Secretariat indicates that China seeks to fully institutionalize this format of interaction. Notably, during the meeting of six heads of state in Xi'an, the name of the summit was written in Chinese and Russian on the banners (in particular, on the background banner during Xi Jinping's keynote speech), alluding to China's appreciation of Russia's major role in Central Asia.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, four other considerations played an important role in Beijing's decision to create the "1+5" mechanism.

Firstly, Beijing already has experience in using dedicated multilateral mechanisms to cooperate with specific regions: the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation, the China-CELAC platform with Latin American and Caribbean states, and the "14+1" platform with Central and Eastern Europe. The creation of the "1+5" format could even be considered belated. It was delayed, perhaps, because the SCO was long sufficient for China's relations with the region.

Secondly, Beijing did not want to lose the initiative while other major powers eagerly set up "1+5" formats of their own. In fact, this format of interaction with Central Asia has been employed by Japan (since 2004), South Korea (2007), the United States (2015), India (2019), and Russia (2019).

Thirdly, the very evolution of the regional landscape, namely the gradual drift of disparate Central Asian states into a single regional interconnected space, has encouraged Beijing to engage with them jointly. Territorial and water-resource disputes, inter-ethnic tensions, and reciprocal mistrust flare up occasionally in Central Asia, and

each state has its own foreign policy, influenced by its own domestic political and socio-economic factors. But they are all aware of their common problems and the need for joint solutions, including regional integration.

The 2018 introduction of regular summits between Central Asian heads of state marks the beginning of regional “political integration” in the broadest sense. The consultative meeting of Central Asian heads of state, held in March 2018 at the initiative of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, was the first-ever instance of these countries’ leaders’ meeting, without major powers, to discuss regional affairs and jointly seek solutions to common regional problems. Tajikistan issued a positive signal for the development of regional cooperation when, in December 2021, it announced it was re-joining the Unified Energy System of Central Asia, which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan had restarted in 2019. The emerging trend towards deeper intraregional cooperation also manifested itself in the December 2021 Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan Declaration on Allied Relations and in the *Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century*, announced in July 2022 at the 4th summit of regional heads of state.

The establishment of “China + Five Central Asian Countries” format was Beijing’s response to the changing regional environment, which posed new challenges to Chinese diplomacy, but also new opportunities. The Central Asian states’ ambitious national development strategies—including foreign economic openness, favorable investment climates, and regional interconnectivity—facilitate their practical interaction with China. Moreover, additional anti-Russian sanctions have dramatically increased the regional countries’ interest in deeper cooperation with China and their role in implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (Liu, 2022, p. 118).

The profound impact of the Ukraine crisis on the global transport and logistics system has highlighted the parties’ need for new routes through Central Asia. The third “5+1” meeting of foreign ministers, held in June 2022, agreed to deepen China-Central Asia interconnectivity cooperation. Its focus was on taking full advantage

of cross-border rail transportation, creating favorable conditions for international motor road transportation, increasing the capacity of border crossing points, forming an express corridor for the movement of people, improving the “green corridor” for unimpeded cargo flow, and improving the institutional framework of connectivity. The parties quickly set about implementing this roadmap. To increase the throughput of border crossing points and boost transit traffic between China and Europe, an agreement was concluded in 2022 on the establishment of a third railway crossing on the China-Kazakhstan border, near the Bakhty (Kazakhstan)–Chuguchak (China) automobile crossing. Also, Kazakhstan started laying a second track at the Dostyk–Moyinty section, to quintuple its capacity (Leksyutina, 2023, p. 82).

Finally, after 25 years of negotiations and repeated stoppages, progress was achieved in the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad. In September 2022, a trilateral cooperation agreement was signed on this project’s Kyrgyz section. This railroad will, *inter alia*, speed up overland transportation from China and the three Central Asian countries to the Middle East, help landlocked Central Asian countries eliminate bottlenecks in trade, and grant them revenue from the transit of Chinese goods. The project is capital-intensive and, according to some Chinese experts, its economic feasibility is not yet obvious. For China it may even be loss-making, but it is intended to send a signal to the Central Asian countries that China fulfills its obligations, firmly adheres to the course of “friendship, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness”, and does its utmost to support all projects of strategic importance for the development of Central Asian countries (Zhang, 2023, p. 76).

CHALLENGES TO CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA

Alongside positive developments, China also perceives continuing unfavorable manifestations and trends in Central Asia. For example, the outbreak of another conflict on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, in September 2022, caused Chinese experts to speculate that these tensions could endanger some cross-border BRI infrastructure projects: the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad project; the

CASA-1000 high-voltage power line between Central Asia and South Asia; the fourth string of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline; and some other projects already in the implementation phase.

China finds very worrisome the Sinophobic sentiment in Central Asian countries (especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), which sometimes upsets Chinese projects in the region. Notably, Chinese scholars often attribute it to the legacy of Sino-Soviet confrontation (Xu, 2022, p. 54) and years of Soviet anti-Chinese propaganda, the stark contrast between China's prosperity and Central Asia's post-Soviet economic situation, and the deliberate fueling of anti-Chinese attitudes by the United States and other Western countries. Washington and its allies, according to Chinese experts, are waging an information war. They accuse China of neocolonialism, a predatory attitude to the region's resources, export of redundant manufacturing capacities and dirty industries to Central Asia, Uyghur-related wrongdoings, etc. (Deng, 2022, p. 27).

Among Beijing's weaknesses in Central Asia, Chinese experts cite its limited soft power, which is far inferior not only to that of Russia or the U.S., but even to that of the EU and Turkey. China lacks understanding of, and influence over, Central Asian security policies and related issues. The institutionalization of China's cooperation with Central Asian countries is still insignificant, especially when it comes to consular protection, customs quarantine, aviation control, travel security, disaster relief, etc. (Deng, 2022, pp. 36, 38).

Chinese experts see the uncertain situation in Afghanistan, the revival of pan-Turkism and, especially, the increasing activity of a range of major players (the U.S., the EU, Turkey, India, and others) in Central Asia as serious challenges to China (Deng, 2022, p. 35-36). Beijing is aware of the Central Asian countries' wish to diversify their trade and economic partners in order to avoid excessive economic dependence on China, including by developing ties with India, Turkey and other countries. Turkmenistan's measures to diversify gas export have not remained unnoticed. While a few years ago China was the monopoly buyer of Turkmen gas, now Russia and Iran have returned to the Turkmen gas market. Work is in progress on gas swap projects

involving Iran (in 2022, a gas swap with Azerbaijan through Iran began), on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, and on the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline (Leksyutina, 2023, p. 85). There are also concerns that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan may entirely stop exporting gas in order to meet growing domestic demand.

According to Chinese experts, the new round of the Ukraine crisis has a vast impact on the region and the balance of external forces there. After the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine, fears became widespread in China, especially in the first year of the military operation, that Russia, focused on the Ukrainian situation and ways to overcome sanctions, might lack the strength and resources for Central Asia. If so, the United States and its allies might hurry to fill the vacuum. Zeng Xianghong, although hesitant to predict the decline of Russia's control over the Eurasian space, sees a tendency towards the increased presence of various actors—including the United States, India, the EU, Turkey, and Japan—in Central Asia (Zeng, 2022a, p. 39).

During the first year of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, many Chinese analysts predicted that Russia's influence in Central Asia may be waning. For example, Zeng Xianghong and Han Yanxiong (2023), note adjustments to the foreign policies of Central Asian states at three levels. At the level of relations with major powers, the countries are “pulling away from Russia” (疏俄), “moving closer to the United States” (亲美), “moving closer to Europe” (近欧), and raising the status of diplomacy with China; in relations with neighboring countries, they are strengthening relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other neighboring countries, especially in energy and transportation; and at the level of relations with regional countries, cooperation is gaining pace (Ibid, p. 73). Zeng Xianghong and Han Yanxiong say that the escalation of the Ukraine crisis in 2022 has prompted the Central Asian countries to begin to distance themselves to some extent from Russia economically and to seek external support (including from the West) in order to alleviate their economic difficulties (Ibid, p. 78), while continuing to rely on Russia in security-related matters. Relations between the Central Asian countries

and Russia began to display the binary features of “dependence” and “alienation” (Ibid, p. 81).

The United States’ policy in the region takes an important place in Chinese experts’ discussions of the balance of power in Central Asia. As the U.S.-China rivalry escalates, Beijing is increasingly concerned that Washington may use Central Asia to contain China. Zeng Xianghong points out that Central Asia’s geographic location makes it the best springboard for the U.S. and its allies to pursue a strategy of “dual containment” of Russia and China (Zeng, 2022a, p. 40). For example, the decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 was once viewed in China as aimed at containing Russia and China by throwing the regional situation off balance. Moreover, Chinese experts note that, after the U.S.’s pullout from Afghanistan, it repeatedly tried to plant military bases in Central Asia, considering Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as promising partners (Zeng and Pang, 2023, p. 120). Increasingly frequent visits of U.S. dignitaries to the region, U.S. military and technical assistance, and especially the August 2022 Regional Cooperation military exercise in Tajikistan (also involving Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Mongolia, and Pakistan) are all seen in Beijing as attempts by the Biden administration to strip China and Russia of their influence over Central Asia security.

Beijing also suspects that the U.S. may try to curb China’s economic development and regional influence by blocking the Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia, undermine China’s relations with the region, and use it to interfere in China’s internal affairs (Zeng and Pang, 2023, p. 133). Serious concerns in China are raised by Washington’s growing opposition to infrastructure development in the region. In March 2021, in a telephone conversation with British PM Boris Johnson, U.S. President Joe Biden proposed an infrastructure plan, led by “democratic” countries, capable of challenging China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Ideas to this effect were proposed during the G7 summits in 2021 and 2022: global initiatives to meet the infrastructure needs of low- and middle-income countries, called Building a Better World (B3W) and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure, respectively.

Chinese experts Zeng Xianghong and Pang Weihua are certain that these initiatives are aimed at impeding the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (Ibid, pp. 119-120).

Against this backdrop, Beijing now is trying to make the Belt and Road Initiative more attractive and improve its “demonstrative” effect. The focus is on top-notch projects that answer the demands of national agendas: to develop the economy, create local jobs, and meet environmental standards. Specifically, China has begun to build Luban workshops—specialized centers for vocational training of local people so that projects implemented under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative can employ skilled local labor. Tajikistan, and then Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, have received Luban workshops. Work on them is underway in Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, too. In order to debunk Washington’s “China threat” narrative, Beijing now attaches greater importance to raising local awareness of the BRI’s benefits and to enhancing practical humanitarian cooperation with Central Asian countries.

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To counteract the U.S. policy of containing China, and to further develop its diplomacy in Central Asia, China prioritizes the development of relations with Russia. Chinese policy in the region is aimed not at harming Russia’s positions, but at achieving a harmonious co-presence with Russia, while preventing unfriendly powers (currently the United States) from gaining a firmer foothold. As Zeng Xianghong and Pang Weihua emphasize, whether China is facing great power competition or simply building relations with Central Asian countries, it cannot do without stable relations with Russia in the region. The effectiveness of China’s engagement in Central Asia largely depends on coordination between China and Russia (Zeng and Pang, 2023, p. 130). Through strategic cooperation with Russia, China can better protect its interests in Central Asia and gradually expand its influence (Ibid, p. 116). The prevailing view among Chinese experts is that China and Russia do not have serious disagreements or conflicts of interest regarding Central Asia, and that they can effectively coordinate their

actions through bilateral and multilateral channels, thus forming a model of mutual respect and advantageous regional cooperation (Zeng, 2022b, p. 45). This has been China's approach throughout three decades of its engagement with Central Asia and, as demonstrated by an analysis of Chinese experts and Beijing's actual policies, it remains so in the new geopolitical environment, though whether China continues this approach in the long term remains to be seen.

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