



## CHINA'S POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA

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This paper is an attempt to analyze the role of the greatest rising economic power of the world, China in Central Asia for the quest of energy reservoirs and to maximize its hegemony in the region. According to Mackinder, the one who controls the heartland of Eurasia, will be able to control the world ultimately. Following the incident of 9/11, Central Asia got much importance in the eyes of the major powers, especially Russia, China and the United States of America because of its geo-economic significance. Central Asia has many natural resources like oil, gas, uranium, etc. Specifically, like Kazakhstan has large reserves of energy resources. The Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan) are land locked and this causes a hindrance in the export of oil, gas, etc. to the world market. In this scenario, this chapter has been attempted to examine the role of these major powers which is enhancing their influence in this region to get hold of the energy reservoirs and make this region as another potential market for their exports.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has ventured to build and strengthen its relations with the five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. While initially the main focus of its political and diplomatic activities was to settle the Soviet legacy of disputed borders, its ties with Central Asia later started to reflect a growing desire to protect broader economic and security interests in the region.

Today, a considerable network of roads, railways, air flights, communication, and oil and gas pipelines connects China to Central Asia (Wen Jiabow, H.E., 2012). In 2012, carrying out almost \$46 billion of trade with the region's five states, China was the leading economic actor and main source of foreign investment in the region. Since China constructed diplomatic relations with the five Central Asian states in 1992 and its overall trade with the region has increased 100-fold (Xinhua Xi, 2013). Huge financing and foreign direct investment in energy, natural resource extraction, and commodities, such as the Central Asia gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China, the Atyrau-Alashankou oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to China, significant investments in energy transport and communication in Uzbekistan, the construction of new roads and tunnels in Tajikistan, and the expansion of road connections between Kyrgyzstan and China have engendered many headlines. The supply of low-interest loans to credit-deficient central Asian countries such as Tajikistan has also been a very noticeable element. In June 2012, former President Hu Jintao declared that Beijing would offer \$10bn in loans to the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Reuters, 2012). Central Asia also portrays a growing market for China's goods.

Adding to a much deeper economic contract, the region has also experienced an increase in political, diplomatic, and cultural ties with China. All the five countries in the region, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have signed strategic agreements with China. High-level visits by Chinese officials have deepened. Confucius Institutes, which offer language courses and cultural programmes, are now present in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The SCO Network University was inaugurated in 2010 as a new platform for cooperation in education and people-to-people exchanges (The Central Web Portal of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, SCO University Project, 2011).



The Security and stability of Central Asia matters a lot to China not only for the safety and protection of its own investments in the region but also because of the almost unavoidable spillover effects that insecurity and instability might have within China's north-western region of Xinjiang. Moreover, China has started to become a player, although until now only tentatively, in Central Asia's security landscape.

China's increased participation presents many opportunities, for the five Central Asian countries, but also challenges, at a critical stage in the region's history. While China's presence is received with diverse degrees of acceptance, tolerance, or mistrust among civil society, its engagement has been accepted by the political elites of the region for the opportunities it creates to fuel economic development and for putting the local governments in a better negotiation position vis-à-vis the old dominant power, Russia, as well as Western states.

Key questions remain concerning China's main interests here and the future of its engagement, even while China's economic footprint in the region continues to expand. What lies at the vanguard of China-Central Asia relations? Is there a grand strategy for Central Asia on the part of China? Is China really intent on regenerating Central Asia towards Beijing and away from the world's other major powers? Is China's increasing energy appetite, particularly its access to raw materials to fuel its economic growth, the key factor motivating its massive investments in the region? Or is China principally motivated by the security concerns about Xinjiang, where the native population disturbs for greater autonomy? Are China's interests in the region 'safe'? Or may its economic interests, energy security, economic investments, even the lives of its citizens, come under threat from insecurity and conflicts that systematically flare up in the region? What are the indications of Chinese increased engagement for conflict management in Central Asia?.

This part of the paper on China's interests in Central Asia uses very broad brushstrokes to try to answer these questions and portray a basic overview of the economic, political, security, and energy dimensions of China-Central Asia relations. After briefly describing relevant foreign policy principles that inform China's immense participation in Central Asia, the chapter will try to explore the reasons behind China's engagement in the region. Policy statements and rhetoric are then examined, as are crucial Chinese economic and security interventions. This part on China ends with some tentative conclusions and an assessment of some of the challenges that the China-Central Asia relationship will face in the future.

### **Central Asia's stand in China's foreign policy**

It is significant to first analyze the main principles that underpin China's foreign policy in order to assimilate its engagement in Central Asia. Chinese foreign policy is still acknowledged, at least in the official discourse, by the 1954 Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

The Chinese officials proclaim that foreign policy questions in Central Asia, as well as in other regions around the world, derive from the Five Principles. They represent China as a developing country which is not part of any power bloc such as that around the United States, and which through the Five Principles seeks the road of peaceful development. Emphasizing on China, never seeking hegemony, or wanting to impose its will on other countries (Bangguo, Wu. 2011). By solemnly announcing to the



world never to seek hegemony, China tells its smaller Central Asian neighbors and the world at large that its rapid economic growth and the strengthening of its military potential not only will not be a threat but also offer opportunities to its neighbors and partners in what could be described as a ‘win-win situation (Jintao, Hu. 20112).

The Chinese policy discourse often emphasizes on the distinctiveness of China’s approach as a responsible great power (*fu zeren de daguo*) that respects other countries’ sovereignty, in contrast to what are discerned as Western powers’ efforts to interfere in other countries’ social systems, development paths, and internal and external policies. China’s alternative world model stresses instead multipolarity and equal treatment of all countries “no matter they are big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor”. Each national government alone, acting on the basis of its own national conditions, has the right and ability to properly control matters related to domestic, political, economic, or social affairs, including internal conflict. Such a view on the conduct of international relations is clearly informed by China’s own history and its sensitivity on issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang.

China’s take on most global disputes is that they should be solved by mutual understanding, sincere dialogue, and peaceful negotiation, and it opposes any intervention from the outside. This has been China’s view and approach on resolving its border issues with Central Asian countries, as well as on major global crises and hotspot regions, including the war between Iran and Iraq, the struggle between Israel and the Arabs, the rivalry between North and South Korea, the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, and the most recent upheavals in the Middle East, including the current Syrian conflict. Thus, the core idea behind the Five Principles as interpreted by China today is sovereignty – that one state has no right to interfere in the internal affairs of another state.

However, as one Chinese scholar put it, “principles must be understood in the context of reality.” (Wang Zaobao Lianhe, 2010). The reality is that the balance of safeguarding China’s interests overseas while maintaining a dependable commitment to the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference will become ever more uncertain (Campbell I., Wheeler T., Attree L., Butler DM., Mariani B.,2012). As Chinese officials and scholars are becoming more aware of the tensions between the principle of non-interference and China’s responsibilities as a global power and have started to realize that “attempts to separate politics and business do not generally succeed”,(Taylor I., Rienner L.,2009). China has become more adaptable in its interpretation of non-interference and has been willing to take a more active diplomatic role in the resolution of conflicts, for example the role that it has played in Sudan and South Sudan over the past two years. When voting at the UN on sanctions or interventions directed at resolving or dealing with major international crises, instead of using its veto power, China often restrains because “As a permanent Security Council member China’s negative vote would constitute a veto, angering countries who favor intervention. By not voting or casting an abstention, China has allowed several interventions to go ahead without reversing its commitment to nonintervention.” (Nathan A., 2009).

It is fascinating to see how security and development are interpreted by China, while security and development are the primary issues confronting Central Asia. Secondly, in order to develop properly a country needs a peaceful and stable internal and external domain because “nothing could be achieved without a peaceful and stable environment”. (Wen J, 2011). Thirdly, security is often seen from the prism of development: underdevelopment generates insecurity and instability and is a root cause of conflict, or in other words, investing in development offers the best guarantee for promoting security.



The security-development nexus was originally based on China's national experience and later translated into foreign policy, in particular through the promulgation by former President Hu of 'the harmonious society' concept where development and security are closely linked. The indications and conclusions to be drawn for dealing with political and ethnic tensions in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or indeed other conflicts across the broader Central Asia region, are quite clear: economic development has the power to attenuate, or even eliminate, political and ethnic tensions.

### **China's major interests in Central Asia**

In spite of its intensive participation in the region over the past decade, China's interest in Central Asia has to be put into perspective. Central Asia does not lead China's main international, economic, and security concerns. Consistently, and even more so in recent years, China's assertive proclamations and actions have focused on more fundamental zones of interests, in particular the relationship with the United States, Sino-Japanese relations, cross-strait relations with Taiwan, tensions in the Korean peninsula, and relations with India. Allegations that China has hidden motives in Central Asia and is pursuing a grand geopolitical strategy aimed at ultimate control and dominance of the region are excessive and exaggerated. China has neither the potential nor the intention to be Central Asia's hegemon. As it has been argued, "there is no grand strategy for Central Asia on the part of Beijing... What there is, however, is a confluence of all the activities of these multifarious actors, which, regardless of what Beijing wants or doesn't want, means that China is nonetheless the most consequential actor in the region". (Petersen A.,2013).

However, the lack of a grand design does not mean that Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia is not pragmatic or strategic or that it lacks any geopolitical connotation. There is a range of realistic issues and interests involved in the China-Central Asia relations. Analysts studying China's engagement in Central Asia do not always concur on what is the main driver, in particular whether economic issues, especially natural resource extraction, or internal security issues, that is, the Xinjiang question, are the main priority. What is clear is that both sets of interests have a direct relationship to China's domestic issues and that they are interconnected. After three decades of intensively high growth rates, urbanization, and a breathtaking social transformation – and with only 1% of the world's oil reserves for the second largest consumption – China needs to shelter sustainable energy supply sources from elsewhere. Countries in Central Asia, especially those with large hydrocarbon reserves and mineral deposits, like Kazakhstan have become premier investment destinations for China, given their geographic proximity and the opportunity they also offer to secure continental energy supplies, thus reducing Beijing's dependence on maritime routes.

Nonetheless, China-Central Asia policy transforms a mere quest for resources. As stated in the 2011 White Paper on China's Peaceful Development, the "central goal of China's diplomacy is to create a peaceful and stable international environment for its development." (Government of the People's Republic of China, White Paper on China's Peaceful Development, 2011). At the same time, through advocating economic development, China also aims to stabilize the Central Asian states, which are crucial for the security of the region, including the Chinese region of Xinjiang that borders former Soviet Central Asia. There is an elemental link connecting China's engagement in Central Asia to the Uyghur question. (Laruelle M., Peyrouse S., 2013). China wants the region to develop and stabilize as underdevelopment, instability, and possible conflict may spill over and deteriorate its efforts to develop, 'pacify', and more strongly bind Xinjiang to the rest of China. It also wants its Central Asian neighbors, which have the largest Uyghur populations of any countries except for China, to more



actively take part in the fight against Uyghur separatism. (Doyon J., 2011). Unrest and anarchy in Kyrgyzstan, that shares a 1,000-km border with China, and in the Ferghana valley, that spreads across Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, runs the risk of disrupting trade, energy supplies, and, ultimately, to threaten its own internal stability, especially in Xinjiang. This was clearly exposed by the 2010 riots in Kyrgyzstan between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, which “directly affected Xinjiang’s exports there, as well as to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.” (ICG, Asia Report No. 244, China’s Central Asia Problem, 2013).

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