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China-Central Asia Relations and Role of the Belt and Road Initiative

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China is moving to greater economic and political influence in the global scale. One of the Chinese strategy for "go global" is Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which was announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI includes a significant number of countries from Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. In this framework, China relations with Central Asia are an important part of the BRI project. The BRI is not merely an economic project as framed by Beijing, but that it represents a new stage in China's engagement with the Central Asian republics. The Belt and Road Initiative is highly likely to become China's most significant contribution to Central Asia economic development. This would affect the China-Central Asia relations economically and politically.

Keywords: China, Central Asia, Belt and Road Initiative, the Central Asian republics

Introduction

Under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China is taking ambitious strides towards greater politico-economic influence globally, seeking to establish itself as great power by all definitions. Accordingly, in late 2013, the Chinese government announced its intention to create the new strategic initiative called "One Belt, One Road", later called Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which includes a significant number of countries from Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The strategic project aims at the deepening of economic, trade, and security cooperation among the participating countries. The project indeed has a huge potential to influence international business flows, not only in Asia, but also within the global economy.

The Central Asian republics are still struggling to establish viable economies following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Central Asian countries are in need of large-scale investments and the BRI intends to do just that. Through the BRI, China is and will certainly remain the largest investor in Central Asia. It is the only country that can mobilize huge investment in the region, far beyond what Western countries and Russia can offer.

The BRI is a global project of enormous scope which could help the Central Asian countries. In part, the BRI entails repackaging and bringing together the many ongoing or completed China funded infrastructure projects in Central Asia under the umbrella of the new strategic project. In fact, one can say that this project can provide an opportunity for these republics to gain investment in order to recover their weakness economy, to develop their industry and infrastructure, to export energy and accordingly to play an affective role in global economy.

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This paper aims to address these questions: How China has become one of the key geopolitical players in the Central Asian region? How the Chinese BRI contributes to the development of this relationship? And what is the implication of China's new status in Central Asia on its BRI?

Central Asia After Independence: An Overview

Central Asia was part of the "heartland" and its pivotal geographical position allowed it to play a central role in relations among nations of Eurasia in the Middle Ages, as the bridge between China and Europe. In the modern world, its importance grew as the great powers of the time sought power and influence along its borders. Central Asia during the centuries had commanded the Silk Road traffic between China and the eastern Mediterranean basin (150 BC-onwards). Central Asia also served as the site for Islam's "Golden Age", where the world's greatest thinkers, including Ibn Sina (c. 980-1037) and Al-Biruni (973-1048) made their mark on medicine, geometry, physics, and a host of other fields.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and subsequent 70 years of Soviet rule closed the region to influences from the outside world. Yet, the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991 made salient the geopolitical, economic, and cultural importance of the five former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Indeed, with the Soviet Union's demise Central Asia again rose to prominence in geopolitical and strategic calculations. In other words, in the post-Cold War era, Central Asia's geostrategic importance and natural resource potential made it a focus of attention in Eurasian geopolitics (Fuller, 1994).

The emergence of independent states in Central Asia has both literally and figuratively changed the map of Asia and affected the world, particularly the surrounding regions, notably the Middle East, South, West, and East Asia. The region borders Russia in the north, Iran and Afghanistan in the south, China in the east, and the Caspian Sea in the west (see Figure 1). This geographical location has made it strategically important. As Akiner (1998) has pointed out, the territory of the formerly Soviet region of Central Asia lies at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, encompassing an area of some four million square kilometers. The region's strategic importance, together with its world-class reserves of minerals and hydrocarbons, made it the focus of considerable international interest (Akiner, 1998).

Furthermore, it is located at the centre of Eurasia, connecting Eurasia not only from east to west, but also from south to north. More importantly, it is surrounded by four major world civilizations: Christian, Confucian, Islamic, and Hindu, and Asian powers, China, Russia, and India. In addition, the region lies at the strategic juncture between four nuclear powers: China, Russia, India, and Pakistan. In the meantime, another aspect of the region's geopolitical importance should not be overlooked, i.e., the rise of political and commercial competition over the energy resources, namely oil and gas, and particularly the routes for export pipelines (Tokaev, 2003).

As a result of independence, Central Asia, a closed and hard-to-reach region of Eurasia, once again achieved a significant position on Eurasia's map, with increased geopolitical and strategic weight. Such a geopolitical position, in fact, is a significant factor that has not only made the region attractive to the outside world but also placed it at global challenge.

During the Soviet era, the Central Asian republics never gained the status of independent actors in international relations. Foreign relations were directed by the central government, and the central leadership determined foreign policy goals and priorities. After the collapse of the USSR, when these independent

countries set out to outline a new framework of relationships with the outside world, this situation changed (Megoran & Sharapova, 2014; Stone, 2001). The independence of the republics and Russia's partial withdrawal from Central Asia changed the geopolitics of the region from a closed area to one opening up to other interested foreign actors. Indeed, in the early 1990s, the five Central Asian republics stepped up to the international arena as independent actors for the first time since the 19th century. Under the new circumstances, the countries found themselves in the interest zone of many regional and global powers, attracting widespread attention because they have emerged at a point where the political, economic, and security interests of various powers converge.

Figure 1. Central Asia's geopolitical position.[1]

Central Asia, as a region that during the Cold War remained in the background of international politics, has attracted the attention of the global and regional powers. Its strategic location and enormous natural resources made it an area where some states, such as the United States, the Russian Federation, China, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Israel, and the European Union (EU) also vie for influence.

Independence brought the formal establishment of foreign embassies along with rapid development of communication between the republics and East Asia, the Middle East, South Asia, Western Europe, and the United States. Rivalry between various forces in the region added to friction and historical grievances within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Oleksandr, 2003; Menon, 2003; Khidirbekughli, 2003; Hunter, 2003). Since 1991, the Central Asian republics have established diplomatic relations with many countries. The Central Asian republics' orientation to the outside world would greatly affect the power and national security

[1] See http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/caucasus_cntrl_asia_pol_95.jpg (27/03/2020).

planning of neighboring and other interested states, principally the United States, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, India, and Pakistan. How these actors have acted in Central Asia can influence geopolitical alignments in the region. It is also important to grasp how these states and others whose interest is acute though less direct (for example, EU, Japan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia) position Central Asia into their strategic thinking. In fact, the initial power vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union has pulled regional states and some international actors into an intensive competition for power and influence in the area. Obviously, each actor has specific ambitions and objectives and the competition has economic, political, ideological, and religious dimensions.

The Central Asian geopolitical and geoeconomical position has drawn significant attention and interest from China. In fact, in many ways, China's emergence in Central Asia is the most interesting thing to happen in the region since the Soviet Union demise and the appearance of independent states in 1991.

China Orientation Towards Post-soviet Central Asia

China and Central Asia are geographically neighbors (see Figure 2). Thousands of years ago, China and Central Asia enjoyed common prosperity through the "Silk Road", but this relationship was completely severed. As the vast middle section of the ancient Silk Road dating back to the Chinese Han dynasty (207 BCE-220 CE), Central Asia connected and bridged China's long-distance overland trade with Europe and the Middle East for many centuries (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). However, in the early 1990s, as the result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a new historical period in the relationship between China and Central Asia began. Central Asia offers China the prospect of a transportation corridor for overland communication between China and Europe, while China gives Central Asia safe, secure passage to the Pacific Ocean (Sun, 2007). Central Asia looms large in China's national interests than ever before. Beijing's unprecedented interests and involvement in Central Asia raises the possibility that China has ambitious designs on the region. China is driven primarily by economic interests in this region, as well as an attempt to "rebalance" its domestic, foreign, and security policies, so that these are less skewed in favor of eastern China and East Asia. Greater interest and involvement in Central Asia are manifestations of growing dependence on energy resources from the region and Chinese efforts to "march West" into region and beyond. Therefore, one can assume that China's commitment to Central Asia stems largely from its own national and international economic, energy, and security concerns.

The end of the Cold War saw Beijing's approach to Central Asia become not only about a push for increased global status, but also about consolidating deeper economic ties to facilitate the escalation of China's economic expansion. China's expansion of its economic ties in Central Asia was supported by Beijing, having established diplomatic relations with all newly independent republic s in the region.

The broad "Silk Road" trade network, indeed, connected China with Central Asia since ancient times. After independence one of the most intriguing developments has been China's renewed attention to the area. Four considerations provide the foundation for China's policies towards the Central Asian republics in the post-Soviet era: (1) China's desire to enhance the economic development of specific inland regions; (2) its growing energy needs; (3) its desire for stability on its frontier and in its border provinces; and (4) its concerns over its position in the post-Cold War strategic environment (French, 2004). Besides, for decades, the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan inherited disputable segments on the border with China (Chellaney, 2019; Israeli, 2001). The common border between the region republics and China included 19 disputed areas, which added up to a territory of about 34,000 km (Rahimov & Urazaeva, 2005). Since 1992, the republics of

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have had negotiations with the Chinese government. This resulted in some treaties being signed on delimitation between China and those republics. In addition, as an effective move on border issues between theses republics, China and Russia, they established "Shanghai Five" in 1996, then when Uzbekistan joined them in 2001, it was renamed the "Shanghai Organization for Cooperation (SCO)". For the time being, it can be said that the Chinese government has largely resolved all of its territorial disputes with its Central Asian neighbors (Komissina & Kurtov, 2004).[2]

Figure 2. China and Central Asia.[3]

China is one of Central Asia's largest trading partners since the early 1990s, particularly with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As early as 1992, it accounted for 44 percent of Kazantzakis imports and 16.3 percent of its exports (Kazakhstan Government, 1994; Nadyrov, 1998). By April 2017, China had invested in $304.9 billion worth of contracts with its partners in the region, in sectors including transport, communication, energy infrastructure, financial linkages, technology transfer, and trade facilitation (Miankhel, 2019). China has been also interested in reopening the "Silk Road", to function as a corridor between it and Europe. China's Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation and the Yalian China Commercial and Trade Center have established commercial centers in some cities, such as Tashkent, aimed at increasing trade (Swanstrom, 2001).

China's growing energy requirements give it a significant interest in getting access to the energy resources of Central Asia and the Caspian Basin as well (Zhao & Wu, 2012; Liao, 2019). As Table 1 shows, at present,

[2] Kazakhstan spent five years demarcating its border with China, and was the first to finish legal registration of it. Former Kyrgyz President Akayev visited Beijing and met Chinese President Jiang Zemin. They signed eight bilateral agreements, including an Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation, and Good Neighbourliness that formally ended a border dispute between them. China and Tajikistan on 4 July 2000 agreed to speed up the search for early settlement of the border issue between them. And on 21 May 2002, former Tajik President Imomali Rahmonov visited China. He agreed to return 3.5 percent of the disputed territory to China, thus ending the border dispute.

[3] See http://www.operationworld.org/files/ow/maps/lgmap/chna-MMAP-md.png.

China is the world's largest consumer of energy. Accordingly, Chinese majors, like China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), Sinopec, and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), are highly interested in the Central Asian oil and gas deposits and they have contributed largely in the construction of gas and oil pipelines connecting Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which are today the biggest regional exporters of oil and natural gas respectively, to Chinese territory (Bolonina, 2019).

Table 1

The World 15 Top Crude Oil Importing Countries in 2019

Rank	Importer	Crude oil imports (US$)	World total (%)
1	China	$238,707,061,000	22.6
2	United States	$132,370,663,000	12.5
3	India	$102,306,491,000	9.7
4	Japan	$73,085,389,000	6.9
5	South Korea	$70,193,489,000	6.6
6	Netherlands	$46,414,486,000	4.4
7	Germany	$40,737,628,000	3.9
8	Spain	$30,499,660,000	2.9
9	Italy	$29,615,998,000	2.8
10	United Kingdom	$24,542,383,000	2.3
11	France	$24,446,306,000	2.3
12	Singapore	$24,224,539,000	2.3
13	Thailand	$22,284,239,000	2.1
14	Taiwan	$21,326,199,000	2
15	Belgium	$18,784,563,000	1.8

Note. Workman (2020).

Its primary energy consumption now stands at a fifth of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) total (exceeded only by the United States), a 10th of the world total, and it accounts for more than a 10th of world carbon emissions. Given the scale of China's demand, the solution to its oil supply problem could be found in Siberia and/or Central Asia (Chen & Fazilov, 2003; Vinogradov, 2000). This has placed the region at the centre of China's attention and encouraged it to establish closer ties.

From the security standpoint, the Soviet Union's dissolution improved China's military position in Central Asia (Swanström, 2015). One can argue that Central Asia is unique to Beijing because of its perceived potential to impact China's domestic security concerns. The sudden appearance on the international stage of the five independent republics in Central Asian in the early 1990 reinforced Beijing's concerns about the potential for separatist claims from ethnic Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region (Peyrouse, 2018). On the other hand, post-Soviet events in Central Asia have influenced Xinjiang, a region in the west of China mostly populated by Muslims. Its location is important for defence of China's national sovereignty. Xinjiang shares ethnic and cultural characteristics and borders with Central Asia, which China sees as a gateway to the West.[4] Chinese authorities have been cautiously following the events in the region and have tried to ensure that the Central Asian regimes give neither support nor encouragement to the separatist movement in Xinjiang (Paramonov & Stolpovski, 2008). During the last three decades, China has established military contacts with the

[4] The Uighur majority of Xinjilang's population is Muslims, and there are some Central Asian ethnic groups living in this area: Kazaks (1.1 million), Kyrgyz (140,000), Tajiks (33,500), Uzbeks (15,000), and Russians (8000). See Goverment White Papers, http://china.org.cn.

region's states. Reports of growing military exchanges between China and the republics, and offers of military assistance by the former to the latter have also appeared of late (Blank, 2017). China has conducted joint anti-terrorist military exercises, the first having united Kyrgyz and Chinese armed forces in 2002 ("Exercise-01"). A joint Chinese-Tajik exercise took place in 2006 ("Coordination-2006"). The same type of exercises has been organized with the participation of Kazakhstan ("Tianshan I") in 2006, and with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan ("Tianshan II") in 2011 (Bolonina, 2019).

One of the most important achievements in Sino-Central Asian relations is the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2001. The organisation seems useful to all the parties involved, but for different reasons (Alimov, 2018; Saksena, 2014).[5] Originally, it intended to resolve borders disputes between the member states and to prevent Russia or its predecessor the Soviet Union from dominating Central Asia. The SCO's focus has evolved slightly over time, but one of its main focuses is battling the separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism. While anti-terrorism and emergency exercises have been held between SCO countries militaries (as mentioned earlier), its focus is on regional cooperation. The SCO's focus has shifted in recent years to economic concerns, and in 2015, they released a 10-year development strategy in which economics was featured prominently and where a provision for developing common approaches of the SCO member states to the Chinese BRI (Sutter, 2016).

In fact, one can argue that the SCO is a multi-dimentional organization which can improve Chinese relations with the five Central Asian republics in economy, trade, and security as well. As for security, the SCO has pursued counter-terrorist strategy particularly after the events of 9/11, 2001. To this, the SCO has created the regional anti-terrorist structure (RATS) with an objective to collect, analyse, and share relevant information, to create databases of terrorist networks and to maintain connections with other security organizations (Bolonina, 2019; Wang & Kong, 2019). Through China seeks assurance its access to Central Asia's resources, and improved ties with Russia and the republics to promote regional stability and combat terrorism (Wang & Kong, 2019; Xuan, 2003). In addition, China has been concerned about the US expansionist policy, especially its military presence. China also has seen the SCO as a counterbalance to the US presence (Rumer, 2002; Okhotnikov, 2002; Rasizade, 2002; 2003; Basken, 2002).[6] In other word, through the SCO, essentially Beijing has attempted to block US hegemony in the Central Asian region (Fingar, 2016). And the region's republics aspire to gain a higher degree of independence by playing off China and Russia against each other.

Central Asia's ruling elites from the beginning had attached great importance to developing relations with China. Former Kazak Prime Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev in 2001 described relations with China as a priority in Kazakstan's foreign policy.[7] In a meeting with his Chinese counterpart in 2003, former Uzbekistan president, Islam Karimov, expressed admiration for China's development, claimed its relations with Central Asian had broad prospects, and said: "It is an important part of Uzbekistan's foreign policy to continuously strengthen cooperation with China. The two countries will score new achievements in cooperation in the fields

[5] At a summit meeting on June 14, 2001, the leaders of China, Russia together with four Central Asian republics, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, met to sign the Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO in Shanghai, China. The SCO has declared aims to "create a new international political and economic order featuring democracy, justness and rationality and facilitate cooperation in economy and trade, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transportation and environmental protection among the member states". The Organisation has also focused on security and terrorism issues.

[6] For more comprehensive discussion see Elizabeth Wishnick, Russia, China and the United States in Central Asia: Prospects for great power competition and cooperation in the shadow of the Georgian crisis.

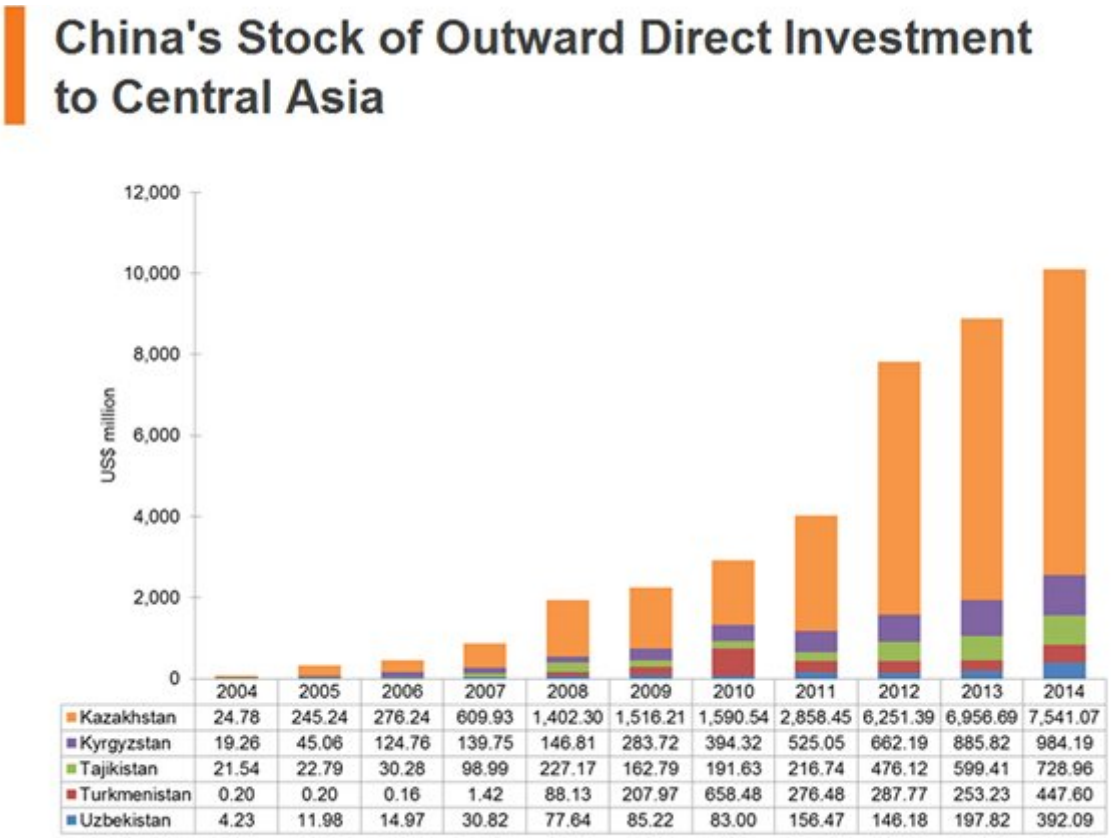
[7] *People's Daily* (9 September 2001), p. 3.

of joint ventures and transportation".[8] At the same meeting, former Kyrgyz president, Asgar Akayev, said:

> We treasure our friendship with the Chinese people and wish to strengthen the mutually beneficial cooperation with China in all aspects. Kyrgyzstan would work hard to make its long border with China the bond of good-neighborly friendship and close cooperation and revitalise the ancient "Silk Road".[9]

Chinese influence, particularly on the region's economic growth, is increasing. The total trade turnover between China and Central Asia grew 60-fold between 1991 and 2016, from $500,000 million to $30 billion, excluding significant informal trade by small-scale entrepreneurs (see Figure 3) (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019). Such contribution might reduce the republics' dependence on Russia over time, and enable them to play the "China card" against Moscow (Rumer, 2015). Although, one can argue that Chinese activities in Central Asia might undermine Russia's position, in practice, it is hard to see China replacing Russia in the area at least for the next few decades.

In the 2010s, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative has opened a new era of political and economic relations between China and the Central Asian societies. The BRI would provide the region countries with the opportunity to leapfrog some intermediate steps in the development of their infrastructure and economy, and to expand their global and regional trade and transportation networks.



	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Kazakhstan	24.78	245.24	276.24	609.93	1,402.30	1,516.21	1,590.54	2,858.45	6,251.39	6,956.69	7,541.07
Kyrgyzstan	19.26	45.06	124.76	139.75	146.81	283.72	394.32	525.05	662.19	885.82	984.19
Tajikistan	21.54	22.79	30.28	98.99	227.17	162.79	191.63	216.74	476.12	599.41	728.96
Turkmenistan	0.20	0.20	0.16	1.42	88.13	207.97	658.48	276.48	287.77	253.23	447.60
Uzbekistan	4.23	11.98	14.97	30.82	77.64	85.22	83.00	156.47	146.18	197.82	392.09

Figure 3. China investment in Central Asia for 10 years 2004-2014.[10] Source: Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment.

[8] Chinese former President Hu Jintao visited some Central Asian leaders in Moscow, 28/29 May 2003. And President Xi has visited Central Asia in September 2013 and June 2019 aiming at cementing neighbourhood friendship and regional cooperation.
[9] *People's Daily* (9 September 2001), p. 3.
[10] See http://www.hktdc.com/resources/MI_Portal/Article/rp/2015/11/472180/1447841101389_472180CentralAsianMarkets5e_472180.jpg.

China Belt and Road Initiative: A Multi-dimensions Project to Improve Connectivity

In March 2013, a speech by Chinese president Xi Jinping in Astana, Kazakhstan, at Nazarbayev University, initiating the strategy of the "Silk Road Economic Belt", and later in November, 2013, a sequential speech by President Xi in Jakarta, Indonesia, launching "the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road", together marked the birth of the grand strategic vision of the 5th generation of Chinese Communist leadership. This vision is commonly referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative. China's Belt and Road Initiative promises to integrate the economies of the vastly larger Eurasian landmass. The "Silk Road Economic Belt" and "21st Century Maritime Silk Road", Belt and Road Initiative, encompasses 68 countries across Central and Eastern Eurasia and maritime Asia Pacific, 63% of the global population, and over 1/3 of the world's GDP (see Table 2) (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, National Development and Reform Commission, 2015). The BRI will do so not just with highways, but with railways, waterways, pipelines, fiber optic cables, power transmission lines, airports, ports, and industrial estates.

Table 2

The BRI Countries

No.	Region	Number of the countries	Countries
1	East and Southeast Asia	14	China, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Vietnam
2	Central Asia	5	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan
3	Middle East and Africa	17	Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, Yemen
4	Europe and Eurasia	24	Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey, Ukraine
5	South Asia	8	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan
Total		68	

As the Chinese economy grows, there is massive growth in Beijing's cross-border capital flows. China has set a goal of $2.5 trillion in trade with the countries which are included in Belt and Road Initiative (Silk Road) by 2025. This was mention by president Xi in 2015: "We hope that the annual trade volume between China and these countries surpasses $2.5 trillion in a decade or so" (Arpi, 2015). Even now, it is said that China's massive Belt and Road Initiative is projected to cost the PRC between $1 and $ 4 trillion (Grant, 2019). In the framework of the BRI, the trade of merchandise goods between China and the involved countries increased 19.4 percent between the fourth quarter of 2017 and the first quarter of 2018, for a total of $ 287.3 billion. Exports and imports in this same period rose by 16.5 percent and 23.2 percent, respectively. The BRI countries accounted for nearly a third (29.1 percent) of China's total exports in the first quarter of 2018, an increase from 27.9 percent in the second quarter of 2018. The BRI involved countries accounted for a quarter (25.8 percent) of China's total imports in the first quarter of 2018 (Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2018). Furthermore, China is encouraging mergers, acquisitions, and green-field investments to create what might be called "multinational companies with Chinese characteristics", some with headquarters in Asia, Europe, Africa, or elsewhere outside China.

The BRI has resonated within and far beyond the region. This initiative, which has a broad geographic scope, consists of two corridors: One route, known as the "Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)", follows the historical overland Silk Road through Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, and eventually to Europe (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015). The other route, or "Maritime Silk Road (MSR)", originates in the South China Sea, passing through the Malacca Strait, the Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea and extending into the Mediterranean Sea (see Figure 4) (Alden & Sidiropoulos, 2015). China portrays the BRI—an interconnected network of rail lines, oil and gas pipelines, roads, bridges, and port facilities designed to connect China with Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe—as an effort aimed at regional economic integration with win-win outcomes for every country involved (Xinhuanet, 2015; Kennedy, 2015). China sets up the vision of a revived regional economic entity based on the ancient concept of the Silk Road.

Figure 4. China's Belt and Road Initiative (Source: Xinhuanet, 2016).

The initiative is partly a short-term measure to alleviate overcapacity in China's steel, aluminum and cement industries by conjuring up export markets for them. It will let Chinese manufacturing and construction companies continue for a while to do the sort of work abroad that is winding down at home. The BRI is also a way of developing Xinjiang and other parts of western China by making them key connectors to Central Asia and Europe through Central Asia and Russia. However, in the longer term, BRI is a strategy to use Chinese resources to tie Asia and Europe and even Africa more closely to each other and to China. The added efficiencies of its planned highways, railways, waterways, pipelines, power grids, fiber optic cables, and sea and air ports respond to real market requirements and opportunities. Its institutional linkages would facilitate the investment necessary to realize these efficiencies.

To fund China's ambitions, Beijing has created an imposing range of global financial organizations. They include the New (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa [BRICS]) Development Bank, the Marine Silk Road Investment Management Fund, the Maritime Silk Road Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Silk Road Fund. Indeed, these banks and funds address well-documented investment shortfalls. These financial organizations and some Chinese bank would support BRI projects in the BRI countries. Finance for the infrastructure goals of the BRI is already well underway:

1. The China Development Bank has supported 400 projects in 37 economies worth $110 billion and is tracking more potential projects.

2. The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) is involved in 212 projects worth $67 billion, and is expected to arrive at around $159 billion.

3. The Bank of China is pledging $100 billion for the period 2016-2018.

4. China Exim Bank supported 1,000 projects in 49 economies worth $80 billion.

5. The China Construction Bank also supports BRI projects.

6. The Silk Road Fund, with pledged capital of $40 billion, is smaller in comparison, but works with other institutions in consortiums.

7. The New Development Bank has small investments thus far but is expected to play a larger global role in the future.

8. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is small in comparison to the above, at $2.3 billion of loans, and is in any case not formally a part of the BRI (OECD, 2018).

The Chinese BRI's strategic priorities around the world are:

1. Support China's "Go Global" strategy: BRI will accelerate the internationalization of Chinese firms and create world class multinationals and supply-chains.

2. Strengthen the RMB's global role: So far there is little evidence that BRI has strengthened the Renminbi's role. In fact, capital controls have arguably reversed recent gains.

3. Strengthen China's geopolitical role: BRI strengthens China's economic and political role in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe.

4. Increase exports to BRI countries: China's exports to the BRI countries are growing at a faster rate than exports to Europe and the United States. BRI seeks to accelerate this rate of growth.

5. Promote industrial restructuring: BRI will force Chinese firms to compete internationally, adopt best practices, improve transparency and employ foreign workforces.

6. Reduce industrial oversupply China suffers from excess supply in most industrial products. The BRI is seen as an opportunity to sell such products to other markets (Mckenzei, 2018, p. 6; Spire E-Journal, 2018).

These goals and objectives indicate that the BRI is a new China's "going out" policy of the early 21st century, where China's leaders emphasized Chinese companies to investment abroad. Instead of exporting natural resources from abroad and importing low-end goods, China seeks to move up the value chain to creating high-end manufactured goods and be at the center of regional production change and innovation, and to become the standard setter for technology and innovation (Cai, 2017). For those countries in Central Asia South East, the Middle East, Europe, and Eastern Africa designated as Belt and Road partners, the ability to readily fund infrastructure development is proving of huge benefits. As more infrastructure projects are completed, and transport and communication networks along the Belt and Road corridors strengthen, the Chinese private companies will become much more involve in the BRI countries, in turn offering huge opportunities for local and international partners in a wide variety of sectors.

The vast space from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Pacific to Central Asia and the Indian Ocean is to be laced with industrial development corridors and special economic zones that draw on these links to create centers of economic activity. Network effects assure benefits not just to China as the initiative's leader but to every country touched by it.[11]

The Role of Belt and Road Initiative in China-Central Asia Relations

China's economic relationship with the Central Asian countries underwent its most significant transformation yet with the advent of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. When in 2013, President Xi Jinping announced the opening of the Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan, confirmed China's long-term strategic, economic, and security objectives in Central Asia. Accordingly, Central Asia was designated as a "neighbor" region by Beijing in November 2013 at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, meaning that it now falls within China's top-priority geostrategic zone (Lyall, 2019). Countries are typically ranked by importance by China according to where they fall within four concentric geographic circles protruding outwards from the Middle Kingdom. When Central Asia was re-imagined within the closest concentric circle outside of China, it became a focus of increasingly proactive Chinese diplomacy, primarily exercised through the BRI. The prioritization of Central Asia within BRI—itself the central feature of contemporary Chinese diplomacy—has seen China become the largest trading partner of the region republics.

The BRI is not merely an economic project as framed by Beijing, but that it represents a new stage in China's engagement with the region, and—if fully implemented—could have wide geopolitical implications. The BRI will expand on trade routes and resource pipelines over land and sea reaching to Africa, the Middle East, and even Europe. The land leg of BRI is the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) which passes through Central Asia before reaching the desired destinations, making the region critical to China's goals for BRI. Indeed, China's geoeconomically oriented Belt and Road Initiative is played out from the Kazakh steppe to the "Eurasian desert zone" further south and East-Central Europe further west. With and via the BRI, China is potentially capable of reshaping Central Asia's economic potential through reorganizing and expanding ties with the latter (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). The Central Asian region is "central" to Beijing's Eurasian ambitions to link China's west to South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, thereby reducing the country's dependence on sea routes that are vulnerable to US maritime supremacy. Two of the six planned corridors of this ambitious project will run through countries in the Central Asia (and South Caucasus as well). These countries are mostly land-locked, and their transportation infrastructures and quality tend to be low (see Table 3). For instance, the China-Central Asia-Western Asia Economic Corridor is being built to link China to the Persian Gulf through Iran and the Aegean Sea/Piraeus Port via Turkey. Likewise, the Silk Road Economic Belt rail routes to Turkey's Middle Corridor via Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea considerably shortens travel time to the Middle Eastern and European markets (Sim & Aminjonov, 2020). All in all, by launching the BRI in 2013, China has ramped and scaled up its geoeconomic strategy to make Central Asia the crucial region for widening and deepening overland trade and infrastructure ties to the larger Eurasia and Europe (Chen & Fazilov, 2018).

Beijing seems to hope that by promoting regional economic prosperity under the framework of the BRI and also advocating political settlements of the region's conflicts, it will foster stability and cement its power and influence as a newly emerged great power with minimum cost (Chen, 2018).

[11] "One Belt, One Road": What's in It for Us? Remarks to a Workshop of the China Maritime Studies Institute (2017).

Table 3

China's BRI Corridors[12]

No.	Corridor	Connection	Purpose	Countries
1	New Eurasia Land Bridge	Rail to Europe	Trade and commercial	Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, and Poland
2	China, Mongolia, Russia Economic Corridor	rail links and the steppe road—this will link with the land bridge	Trade and commercial	China, Mongolia and Russia
3	China, Central Asia, West Asia Economic Corridor	Rail	Trade and commercial	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyztan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey
4	China Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor		Trade and commercial	Viet Nam, Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Malaysia
5	China, Pakistan Economic Corridor	Water port	commercial and military	Links Kashgar city (free economic zone) in landlocked Xinjiang with the Pakistan port of Gwadar
6	China, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar Economic Corridor		commercial and security	China, Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar

Through BRI, China is and will certainly remain the largest investor in Central Asia. It is the only country that can mobilize huge investment in the region, far beyond what Western countries and Russia can offer (Vakulchuk & Overland, 2019). However, the success of this connectivity is relative: in practice, some of the money committed is lost to corruption and administrative dysfunction, while projects are not held to higher sustainability standards and are primarily assessed on their profitability. Already invested in volatile the Central Asian republics, China is expecting to create a stable economy by constructing new roads, railroads, and gas, oil pipelines in territories with endowed natural resources. The practicality of the project enables China to attract Central Asian governments with these initiatives to develop their economies and at the same time realising for China imports of energy resources from those regions. Two main pipelines from Central Asia to China, the Central Asia-China gas pipeline and Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, are already in operation (see Figure 5). The Central Asia-China gas pipeline goes from Turkmenistan to Xinjiang in west of China. By connecting the republic of Turkmenistan to China's domestic grid, this pipeline makes it possible to transport gas some 7,000 km from Central Asia to Shanghai. According to the Petro China West Pipeline Company, as of December 31, 2019, 294.6 billion cubic meters of natural gas had been imported via the China-Central Asia gas pipeline, benefiting over 500 million people in 27 provinces of China (Wang, 2020). The Kazakhstan-China pipeline running 988 km from Atasu in Kazakhstan to Alashankou at the Chin's border was completed at the end of 2005 and began operating in May 2006, with a total investment of $700 million[13]. At the beginning, this pipeline was expected to ship one million barrels per day of crude oil into western China or 10 million tons of crude oil per year, but the pipeline is expected to increase its export capacity to 20 million tons in the future (Fazilov & Chen, 2013). All in all, China considers Central Asia a key source and link in its energy security nexus.

In addition—and this is a critical issue—it seems that the Chinese projects have trouble achieving the kind of higher economic impact that could translate into more local jobs and transfer of knowledge. Yet, whatever

[12] Business Reporting Desk (April 16, 2020).

[13] "Oil begins flowing through completed Kazakh-China pipeline", BBC Monitoring-Energy, (June 21, 2006).

its outcomes, China's growing involvement in Central Asia is a long-term phenomenon and a turning point in Central Asia's post-Soviet history and economic development. Since 2013, the year in which President Xi Jinping announced the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt at Nazarbayev University, billion dollars in contracts have been signed between China and the economies along the route including the Central Asian countries.

Figure 5. Central Asia oil and gas pipelines to China.[14]

Of course, some experts have mentioned some limitations for projecting the BRI in the region. For example, Peyrouse has pointed out that one of the stumbling blocks for China-Central Asia relations is that both nations have limited knowledge of each other (Peyrouse, 2016). This relates both to professional ties and people-to-people relations, the latter is one of the main objectives of BRI. There are only a few think tanks and research institutes in the region that specialize in China (e.g., the China and Central Asia Studies Centre (CCASC) at the KIMEP University in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and the China Studies Centre in the Library of the First President of Kazakhstan in Astana—both established in 2017). China has also only started developing its knowledge about the Central Asians after 2014, as part of BRI public diplomacy efforts (Dave, 2018). Beijing has also established number of Confucius Institutes across the region to promote Chinese language and culture (see Table 4). Most of them, however, were set up prior to the launch of Belt and Road Initiative. In addition, new think tanks were established in China after 2013 in order to study countries that are part of BRI (Chen, 2015).

Yet, Chinese credit in the framework of BRI increases economic activity and facilitates trade growth in Central Asia. This will contribute to the globality of Central Asia. The Central Asian republics are still struggling to establish viable economies following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Central Asian countries are in need of large-scale investments and the BRI intends to do just that. Through BRI, China is and will certainly remain the largest investor in Central Asia. It is the only country that not only can mobilize huge investment in the region, far beyond what Western countries and Russia can offer, but also can develop cultural relations with the Central Asians. After BRI was launched, China rapidly scaled up its public diplomacy and strengthened its

[14] See https://www.eurasianbusinessbriefing.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/China-Central-Asia-pipelines.gif.

soft power presence, especially in education and culture, thus increasingly becoming a norm-setter in Central Asia (Dave, 2018).

Table 4

Number of Confucius Institutes in Central Asia by Country

Country	No.
Kazakhstan	4
Kyrgyzstan	3
Uzbekistan	2
Tajikistan	2
Turkmenistan	0
Total	11

Note. Vakulchuk and Overland (2019).

The BRI is a global project of enormous scope which could improve the globality of the Central Asian countries. In part, BRI entails repackaging and bringing together the many ongoing or completed China funded infrastructure projects in Central Asia under the umbrella of the new strategic project. In the framework of BRI, China is likely to remain the biggest investor in the Central Asian region in the future, far exceeding the potential economic footprint of Russia and the West (Laruelle, 2018). Under the BRI, there are 261 Chinese projects in Central Asia. Trade promotion and industrial development are the sectors where there is most BRI-related activity in the region. The total number of projects in these areas approximates the number of projects in all other areas combined. These sectors also receive most investment. In terms of the number of implemented projects, roads are the second key sector, followed by energy. Nevertheless, due to larger project sizes, energy receives more funds than roads. The majority of Chinese projects in Central Asia are bilateral.

In overall terms, the Central Asian countries' participation in the BRI has a two-fold dimension. As declared by Chinese officials, the new Silk Road project complies with the region states' interests and is beneficial for the Central Asia. The hard infrastructure diplomacy has indeed known success in the five republics, which consider it as an alternative to the European and American soft infrastructure that aims at fighting corruption and promotion of free and independent market economy (Bolonina, 2019). In fact, one can say that this project can provide an opportunity for these republics to gain investment in order to recover their weakness economy, to develop their industry and infrastructure, to export energy and accordingly to play an affective role in global economy.

Conclusion

While in the post-Soviet era China's presence is growing across all of Eurasia, its expanding geopolitical and geoeconomic influence is most striking in the Central Asian region. The BR initiative seeks to develop a wide network of connectivity and cooperation spanning the entire Eurasian land mass and parts of Africa, including Central Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North and East Africa. The massive BRI plans to build roads, railways, seaports and other trade infrastructure in dozens of countries in the Eurasian continent. The BRI aims to connect Asia to Europe, and the initiative has steadily expanded economic corridors and projects as far as Africa.

Two of the planned corridors of this ambitious project will run through countries in Central Asia. These countries are mostly land-locked, and their transportation infrastructures and quality tend to be low. BRI

infrastructure projects are expected to cut trade costs and enhance foreign investment in Central Asia. Indeed, Central Asian countries are in need of large-scale investments and the BRI intends to do just that.

The Belt and Road Initiative is highly likely to become China's most significant contribution to Central Asia economic development. Flow of investment and projects in the framework of BRI would contribute to the development of the Central Asian republics. In other word, the Chinese BRI would position the Central Asian region as the crucial nexus for the cross-regional long-distance loops of investment, trade, infrastructure, and culture development.

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