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Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia: Deciphering China's Geopolitical Ambitions

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Abstract:

Given its significant geopolitical, geo-economic and geo-strategic value, the five Central Asian republics (CARs) have become a focal point of strategic competition among major international powers. These external powers have sought to consolidate their influence in this strategically important region through four distinct strategic templates: the United States by promoting democratic institution-building and regional economic connectivity; the European Union (EU) by advancing regulatory convergence and hydrocarbon procurement; Russia by persistently enforcing institutionalized influence through traditional security arrangements and deep-rooted economic schemes; and the People's Republic of China by aggressively introducing its multi-trillion-dollar flagship infrastructure business, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This study examines the strategic objectives, implementation mechanisms and geopolitical implications of China's BRI in Central Asia, with particular attention to the structural challenges and conditions associated with its expansion. It explores the BRI's relationship with the evolving security, economic and political architectures of the region while examining the tension between infrastructure-led development and potential long-term economic imbalance. The study identifies Central Asia as a critical geographic corridor for the projection of Chinese economic and strategic influence beyond the region and assesses both the developmental opportunities associated with the BRI for the CARs and the potential geo-strategic implications for their political autonomy.

Keywords: China, Central Asian Republics, Belt and Road Initiative, new great game, geopolitics, energy security

INTRODUCTION

of the contemporary geopolitical landscape of Eurasia can be understood in terms of a reorientation of regional connectivity, in which China has assumed a central role. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was launched under the centralized leadership of President Xi Jinping back in 2013, as a comprehensive framework for infrastructure development and investment blueprint that will connect China to markets across the globe, spanning entire land-based and maritime corridors (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). Beyond its infrastructure commercial objectives, the BRI constitutes a multi-dimensional strategic matrix of geo-economic, political, cultural and military (Duarte, 2014)

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interests. Within this broader paradigm, Central Asia occupies a critical geographical position, serving as key land-based link between western China and markets in the Middle East and Europe (Laruelle, 2018).

Beijing has emerged as a major source of financing and infrastructure investment in the Central Asian Republics (CARs), reflecting China's growing economic engagement with the region and generating considerable academic and political discussion. Chinese investments have frequently been characterized in western policy discourse and by structural realist scholars as a form of the "debt-trap diplomacy," in which extensive lending to other countries may potentially undermine the sovereign autonomy of the recipient states (Rana & Ji, 2020). Conversely, the policymakers in Central Asian states have generally viewed BRI as a critical enabler of modernization and infrastructure development. Central Asian states have long-suffered financial deficits and, as Hashimova (2018) contends, require substantial infrastructure investment to address their geographical isolation, making the BRI a potentially important source of development finance for the region. Almost all CARs have experienced problems of long-term macroeconomic volatility since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, owing primarily to limited structural surpluses, obsolescent industrial structures and geographical constraints. (Kevlihan, 2011).

Although regional tensions and border disputes have persisted, China has helped develop and operate several critical transport links across Central Asia. Notable examples include the Pop-Angren railway corridor in Uzbekistan, the Khorgos Dry Port (KDP) on the Kazakhstan-China border and the international Uzen-Bereket-Gorgan railway line, which connects Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran (Aminjonov et al., 2019). Moreover, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) regional transport network "has received renewed diplomatic momentum" since mid-2020, despite complex border-related issues among the three countries. This development illustrates Beijing's "diplomatic prowess" advance its connectivity objectives amid persistent challenges to the regional stability (Mashrab, 2020). These mega infrastructure projects represent a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the landlocked CARs to find new avenues for their exports, reduce their dependence on traditional regional partners and strengthen their integration into global trade networks (Nurgozhayeva, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing academic literature on the increasing presence of China in Central Asia through the BRI indicates that there is a significant gap between the structural realism, liberal institutionalist design and dependency models. The scholars using structural realist approaches generally interpret the BRI as a revisionist grand strategy designed to expand China's exclusive sphere of influence, challenge the post-Cold War security order in Eurasia, and systematically counter American and Russian influence (O'Reilly, 2015). Under this arrangement, China's substantial financial and technological resources may generate forms of economic and political dependence in recipient countries, potentially constraining their foreign-policy autonomy and encouraging greater alignment with Chinese interest and policy preferences.

By contrast, liberal institutionalist and economic integration theories offer an alternative interpretation which is based on cooperation, connectivity and provision of regional public goods. Proponents of this view contend that a central objective of the BRI is to address the infrastructure

financing gap in Central Asia, which existing Western financial institutions and host governments have been unable to fully bridge (Nurgozhayeva, 2020). Chinese investment is consequently viewed as an important instrument for advancing regional economic integration and strengthening fragile economic systems by reducing the costs of cross-border transactions, establishing modern multimodal logistics centers and establishing direct connections between land-based transport networks and maritime shipping routes (Laruelle, 2018). From this perspective, rather than functioning as 'passive actors' in the strategic competition among great powers, the CARs are understood as strategic state actors that seek to leverage competition among external powers including China, to advance their own national development objectives.

Lastly, the dependency theory literature is used to analyze the structural inequalities and financial vulnerabilities associated with BRI projects. Studies have pointed to concerns regarding the sustainability of bilateral debt in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, noting that a substantial share of their sovereign external debts is owed directly to the Export-Import Bank of China (Rana & Ji, 2020). Researchers in this field contend that the concentration of Chinese capital may enforce an extractive economic dynamic in which Central Asian countries contribute primarily raw materials and hydrocarbons, while Chinese imports consist mainly of finished imported Chinese goods and Chinese labour (Paramonov, 2005). From this perspective, such asymmetries raise concerns about long-term debt sustainability, potential transfers of strategic sovereign assets and the possible socio-political backlash with regional populations as anti-China sentiments increase.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

China's strategic, economic and political agenda in Central Asia under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is examined through a qualitative and descriptive-analytical research design. Given the complexity of great-power competition and evolving regional foreign policies, a qualitative approach provides a unique capacity to expose the extent to which Chinese state actors and Central Asian governments respond to perceived threats, formulate their strategic choices and pursue their respective interest. The analytical framework draws on the neo-realist and geo-economic theories in IR, with particular emphasis on the use of economic instruments by major powers to pursue long-term security and geopolitical goals.

Data collection method is entirely secondary source documentary with material obtained from authoritative academic, policy and institutional sources. Primary research material include officially published policy documents and white papers issued by the government body 'the State Council of the People's Republic of China', the multilateral communiqué of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and economic reporting data sets published by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).These primary resources are complemented by extensive study of peer-reviewed sources from international relations journals, scholarly books and specialized research publications on regional security and political economy. Relevant policy and analytical reports published by institutions such as The Diplomat, the Jamestown Foundation and the Council on Foreign Relations reports are also consulted to contextualize and interpret the documentary evidence.

Qualitative content analysis and thematic process tracing are employed to analyze the collected data. The documents are systematically coded and organized according to four vectors: energy security corridors; counter-terrorism and domestic border security; economic dependency and

debt profiles; and great-power balancing behavior. The study examines these strategic dynamics by analyzing key themes within the broader context of post-Soviet Eurasian politics. It explores the relationship between regional economic dynamics, Chinese investments and territorial stability, while assessing the implications of shifting regional power equilibrium for the sovereignty and strategic autonomy of Central Asian states through 2021.

CONTEXTUALIZING HISTORICAL TRENDS

The contemporary geopolitical situation of integrating Eurasia under the BRI has historical antecedents that can be traced back to the ancient Silk Road. In ancient times, this vast and decentralized network of transcontinental trade routes facilitated commercial and cultural exchanges between successive Chinese dynasties and the civilizations of the Mediterranean, South Asian and the Middle East. (Duarte, 2014). The Silk Road facilitated the trade of high-value commodities, most notably, Chinese silk, which was highly sought after in the Roman Empire and Byzantine worlds. China was historically known as the "land of silk," but beyond commercial exchange, the Silk Road also played a significant role in the transmission of ideas, technology, languages, cultural practices and religious traditions across Eurasia, including the spread of Islam into and through Central Asia.

The trade networks later known as the Silk Road emerged during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) experienced periods of significant expansion when strong regional empires provided greater political stability and facilitated relatively secure passages through areas vulnerable to attacks by nomadic groups. The Kushan Empire, which prospered between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, served as an important administrative and economic link connecting China with Rome, Persia, and India (Duarte, 2014). The Kushan state was characterized by a cosmopolitan and pluralistic society. Its numismatic history was very interesting since it includes Greek and Kharosthi inscriptions alongside representations of Hindu, Buddhist, Zoroastrian and other religious traditions. Post-Kushans, the Hephthalites and Sogdian merchants sustained these trade routes, bringing sophisticated luxury goods to Sassanid Persia (Duarte, 2014). What is important is that, the historical Silk Road was neither single, centrally managed route nor a unified trading system; rather, it functioned as an informal multipolar commercial network. The overland trading routes were structurally disrupted when the Mongol Empire collapsed and took place in the 13th century, and again when maritime traffic routes became the norm in the 15th century with the rise of the Ottoman Empire.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent Central Asian states have experienced structural isolation and fragmented economies, with less than 7 per cent of economic activity involved in intra-regional trade (Aminjonov et al., 2019). As a result of this “fragmentation”, the CARs were highly vulnerable to the Russian Federation in terms of trade connectivity, transit and remittance flows. These remittances have traditionally sustained more than one-third of GDP in economically vulnerable countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. (Vakulchuk et al., 2019). However, since 2014, amid international sanctions and the volatility of hydrocarbon prices, this stream of remittances has contracted dramatically, highlighting the need for Central Asian states to redirect their foreign economic relations and seek alternative sources of development finance.

Deciphering China's Geographical Visions in Central Asia

The BRI comprises two principal components, the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”, and represents a grand strategy for reshaping patterns of economic connectivity across Eurasia (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). Through the BRI, Beijing seeks to use the massive capital surpluses, industrial might and engineering capabilities to develop interconnected trade and infrastructure tele machines linking China with major consumer markets around the world. This represents a large-scale strategic undertaking aimed at expanding economic connectivity across parts of the world with about a third of the world's wealth and a huge chunk of people (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). Within this framework, Central Asia occupies a strategically important geographical position, serving as an irreplaceable corridor through which China can strengthen its economic and strategic connectivity across Eurasia.

Rise of China as a Global player

One of the principal objectives of the BRI has been to strengthen China's position in the international sphere and to assert political, economic and strategic influence over Eurasia. After the fall of the Soviet bloc, Central Asia became a strategic focus for Chinese strategists over time. In the past decade, Beijing has systematically expanded its regional presence, outnumbered, albeit not overwhelmed, by the presence of the old power tsar, namely Russia, with behind-the-scenes pressures from the cash-flowing statesman, namely the United States (Ermito, 2016). The BRI was advanced during a period that coincided with Washington's "Pivot to Asia" idea, leading some international relations realists to interpret the BRI as China's broader effort to counterbalance U.S. influence and expand its own regional and global position. It has also been characterized by some analysts as China's "Marshall Plan for Asia," although this comparison remains subject to debate. Currently, China has been able to assert itself as the primary economic anchor and leader of development through the institutional arrangement of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and dynamic operations of powerful State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) in the CARs.

Energy Security: Prerequisite for the BRI and CCP Priority

For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the diversified energy corridors are a primary tenet of their national security, making stable and diversified energy supplies an important component of the BRI’s engagement with Central Asia. China’s rapid industrialization and urbanization have generated a huge home market for hydrocarbons while increasing its exposure to potential disruptions along maritime supply routes, especially choke points such as the Malacca Strait (Niquet, 2006). As a result of this vulnerability, China's energy companies have been making large acquisitions of oil and gas resources throughout Central Asia supported by substantial credit facilities from state-funded financial institutions to build safe overland pipeline infrastructure (Paramonov, 2005). Central Asia is an important terrestrial energy corridor for Beijing, over 50% of China's natural gas imports come from Turkmenistan through the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline (Aminjonov et al., 2019). In 2020, bilateral trade with energy-rich Kazakhstan was worth an expansive $52 billion, highlighting the scope of economic interdependence (Vakulchuk et al., 2019). Disruptions to such energy supply chains would directly undermine China's industrial production and the country's own economic growth, which in turn is key to the political legitimacy and stability of the CCP’s governance model.

The China Buying Strategy: Expand West

The BRI is closely connected to China's domestic security concerns, notably with the Chinese Uygur region of Xinjiang through the country's “Go West” development initiative for peace in the region. Xinjiang is a key strategic region along China's trade and transport corridors to Central Asia, but has long been a source of internal security issues, arising from ethnic tensions, socio-economic inequalities and separatist sentiment among the indigenous population, the Uyghur. The ethnic groups of the Uyghur are linguistically, culturally and religiously connected to the ethnic groups of bordering Central Asian countries. China has significant concerns that the region's instability, the porous borders and transnational militant networks in Central Asia might allow weapons smuggling or militant groups to operate in Xinjiang (Lynch, 2020). Beijing is attempting to suppress domestic unrest through state-led economic development, while using economic leverage to secure active cooperation from the Central Asian governments in monitoring and restricting Uyghur diaspora activities in their countries, by inserting Xinjiang into the wider BRI infrastructure network and building economic interdependence with the CARs.

Increased Influence in the Muslim World

One major diplomatic priority for Beijing is to build closer relations with the predominantly Muslim countries of Central Asia, reflecting importance of the region to China’s economic, diplomatic and security interests. Although government-to-government ties between the CARs and China are highly cooperative, many of the populace in Central Asia has shown considerable xenophobic feelings towards China and fears of China's intentions on the long run (Hashimova, 2020). This opposition from the public is driven by worries at heavy labour inflows from China, rising sovereign debt and widespread foreign reports on securitization and forced assimilation of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. To counter the "China Threat Theory" and to stabilize BRI projects and prevent grassroots anti-Chinese sentiment to disrupt these activities, Beijing has expanded its institutional engagement, cultural diplomacy and soft power initiatives, painting a benign, cooperative image of itself as a partner who strives for the common good of the Islamic world.

Prospect of ‘The New Great Game’ in Central Asia

The intensifying competition among global powers in Central Asia has led many geopolitical realists to characterize the region as the primary arena for a "New Great Game." This interpretation draws a historical parallel with the nineteenth-century rivalry between the Brits and the Russians, who were battling for control of the Eurasian heartland and territory (O'Reilly, 2015). This contemporary competition is well informed by Halford Mackinder's classic Heartland Theory (1904), which states that Central Asia is the pivot geographic area of the global landmass and that control over this pivotal gives a structural geopolitical dominance over the wider Eurasian continent. In view of its rich mineral resources, significant oil and gas reserves and its close proximity to the volatile conflict areas of South Asia and the Middle East, Mackinder's strategic viewpoint is highly relevant in formulating foreign policy today (1904).

The competitive dynamic surrounding Central Asia intensified following the fall of the Soviet Union, as the emergence of independent states created new opportunities for external powers to expand their economic political and strategic engagement in the region. The newly independent sovereign CARs faced huge foreign investments and loans requirements for developing their stagnant

economy, which provided an opportunity for the global hegemons to broaden their policy, economic and military footprints (Kevlihan, 2011). In this landscape, it is clear that China has become the main economic power player, with more than $150 billion invested throughout the region to ensure the central overland routes of the Eurasian trade network (Aminjonov et al., 2019). As part of the BRI, political instability and civil turmoil in Central Asia could pose significant risks to Beijing's strategic and energy goals.

In order to safeguard such investments and minimize regional security risks, China has been incrementally stepping out of the realm of economic diplomacy to include a greater security dimension. Beijing has signed bilateral defense pacts, conducted combined counter-terrorism training and drawn up security treaties with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in exchange for military equipment and financial assistance and to guarantee its porous borders along Afghanistan (Lynch, 2020). This growing security footprint operates alongside the old interests of the United States and the Russian Federation. Since 9/11 terrorist attack, U.S. policy in the region has been geared more towards securing tactical military corridors, cooperation in the fight against terrorism and presence near the energy reserves of both Europe and Asia, while sidelining democracy promotion as a tool for the effective cooperation with authoritarian states (Omelicheva, 2015).

At the same time, the Russian Federation continues to regard Central Asia as their own legitimate "near abroad" and exclusively as their zone of security responsibility. Moscow remains the leader of the regional arms market and demonstrates its military force through cooperation in tactical military-political treaties such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), alongside extensive economic ties, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Vakulchuk et al., 2019). Rather than undermining their multipolar cooperation, Moscow and Beijing share a pragmatic relationship on the international plane, but the increasing security involvement of China in Central Asia means there are potential structural tensions there. China's expanding presence within Russia's traditional sphere of influence may generate strategic concerns in the Russian government and might create intense strategic rivalry as China's economic influence naturally flows over into security concerns, as Mearsheimer (2014) says.

Belt and Road Initiative for Central Asia: Opportunities and Implications

Central Asia's participation in the BRI presents a complex combination of development opportunities and structural vulnerabilities for the countries involved. On the one hand, Chinese capital offers an exceptional opportunity for the CARs to modernize their deteriorated Soviet-era transport network, to create modern logistics hubs and to acquire modern industrial technology (Nurgozhayeva, 2020). Given their limited fiscal capacity to undertake large-scale infrastructure development independently, these states have relied on Chinese state-backed loans to support construction and expansion of national road and railway networks (Vakulchuk et al., 2019). The ongoing projects, including the "Vahdat" Uzbekistan-Tajikistan railway extension and the great-size Kamchiq tunnel on "Angren-Pap" Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan railway line have greatly facilitated the internal connectivity, potentially reducing the transit costs and opening up the markets of Central Asian countries for export products (Mashrab, 2020). Moreover, the infrastructure development may generate indirect economic advantages, including job creation during the development process, cash flow to transit systems, and potential long-term economies of scale arising from technological innovation (Rana & Ji, 2020).

However, it is accompanied by high potential long-term costs and vulnerabilities. Regional analysts have identified environmental degradation as a major risk associated with BRI projects. The rapid expansion of transport infrastructure has, in some cases, raised concerns about the adequacy of environmental oversight, while the construction of large-scale industrial facilities and extraction operations (often without respect to ecological awareness), may further intensify the existing ecological challenges, including water scarcity and land degradation (Laruelle, 2018). From a macro-economic perspective, the growing presence of well-financed Chinese companies may poses a considerable threat for the local industries, which often lack comparable levels of scale and financial strength. Consequently, there are concerns that local industries may be disadvantaged in their home markets. (Paramonov, 2005).

Moreover, Chinese companies have at times been reported to employ their own engineers, managers and specialist work crews, therefore reducing the need for a high number of long-term skilled jobs for local Central Asian populations and potentially creating social discontent (Sydykova, 2018). Such practices have also contributed to concerns over the creation of a "debt-trap" situation, similar to Sri Lanka's concession of the Hambantota Port as a result of SR's unsustainable indebtedness (Rana & Ji, 2020). If states such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan become unable to meet their debt obligations, they may be required to surrender control of, or share ownership of, important national assets such as military bases and airports to the lender, thereby jeopardizing their capacity to govern themselves. This deepening economic integration also involves risks of cultural and demographic change, because the consistent presence of foreign workers generates social tensions and public worry over maintaining the cultural identity of the local population and the balance of various populations (Laruelle, 2018).

CONCLUSION

China's ambitious strategy to revive the historic Silk Road trade routes through the Belt and Road Initiative has generated unprecedented flows of capital and infrastructure development across Central Asia. Chinese loans and the massive engineering projects constitute a glimmer of hope for macro-economic stabilization, modern transport connectivity and integration into the global market for economically constrained countries such as Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan. This dependence, however, may generate significant long-term strategic risks, particularly through rising debt accumulation and eventually unsustainable credit, while also raising valid concerns about the possible transfer of strategic asset and even constraints on sovereign political autonomy. At the same time, Beijing's regional policy is partly driven by domestic security concerns, to ensure that there is no international backing for insurgent movements and to promote stability in its western border region of Xinjiang, through a drawstring "hungry belt" of close economic ties with its neighbors in Central Asia. However, China is by no means in a vacuum; it operates within a complex and crowded geopolitical environment in which Russia maintains longstanding political, economic and security ties and an institutional leadership position, while the United States continues to pursue its interests in areas such as counter-terrorism and energy security. The convergence of these competing great-power interests has contributed to the dynamic regional environment in which Central Asia is frequently characterized as an arena of the “New Great Game.” Overall, the long-term development prospects of the Central Asian Republics' will depend in part on their ability to balance the competing external pressures,

diversify their diplomatic and economic partnerships, reduce excessive dependence on any single external power and strategically leverage foreign investment to achieve their national development objectives amid an evolving global landscape.

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