

## China's Interests in Central Asia

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### ABSTRACT

The study of the relationship between China and the peoples of Central Asia, which have a deep history, shows its relevance in the modern conditions of world development. Despite this, the study of Chinese civilization, politics, economy and culture of China is one of the priority topics in academic and analytical circles in the Central Asian countries. In the modern conditions of globalization, economic cooperation between the two sides is increasing. China is increasingly present in the socio-economic space of Central Asia. Analytical centers of China play an important role in this process.

Keywords: China, Central Asia, SCO, migration, soft power.

### INTRODUCTION

Relations between China and the peoples of Central Asia have quite ancient roots. Nevertheless, Central Asia faces an urgent question of historical, civilizational and geopolitical nature - do we know China?

Leading scientist-sinologist, Doctor of Historical Sciences A.Khodjaev notes that China has maintained close ties with Central Asia since ancient times. Through it, the achievements of science and art of other peoples, Buddhism and Islam penetrated into this country, having a great influence on Chinese culture. Moreover, the spread of Islam led to the emergence of a new ethnic group in China, called "Dungan" ("Huizu"), the formation of which was influenced by people from modern Uzbekistan and neighboring republics. Chinese goods went to Central Asia and further to South Asia, the Middle East and Europe. At the same time, Chinese culture spread.

Professor N.E.Karimova notes the importance of Kumul in the trade and embassy relations of China

and Central Asia during the period of Amir Temur and the Temurids, which in the Ming era was an important point on the Great Silk Road.

Subsequently, several reasons influenced the development of relations.

The first is the issue related to the borders between the two empires. There are enough agreements on this issue in bilateral relations.

The second is the influence of internal political processes in Russia and China on the resolution of issues regarding borders.

During the Soviet period, the border issue still remained an important component in bilateral relations and had a conflict-generating nature. Thus, the border settlement issues that arose in the 19th century became a kind of legacy of the past for the newly independent countries of Central Asia. This issue is relevant from the point of view of studying Chinese political and strategic culture, as it allows for a more in-depth study of the behavior of the Chinese as neighbors of Central Asia.

When it comes to modern relations between the

Central Asian states and China, it is necessary to take into account the geopolitical situation in the region after the collapse of the USSR, thanks to which China began to border with new sovereign states - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. At the end of the 20th century, the nature of bilateral relations began to transform. This was primarily due to several circumstances:

1. The Central Asian countries became independent subjects of international relations, which allowed Beijing to begin resolving the most important issue - border regulation with the Central Asian countries.
2. The PRC economy needed markets and natural resources and transport and communication capabilities of Central Asia.
3. The need to ensure the security of the XUAR borders with Central Asia.

As a result, on September 8, 1992, an agreement was reached in Minsk on the formation of a commission consisting of representatives of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to conduct border negotiations with China. A principled approach to them was also developed based on the recognition of the results of the negotiations conducted by the former USSR, including an agreement on the numerical reduction of border troops. According to R.M.Alimov, Central Asia, which is of strategic importance to China as a supplier of energy resources, various raw materials and a large market for Chinese goods, will continue to retain its significance in the process of socio-economic transformations in the XUAR.

Moreover, the issue of ensuring stability in the XUAR is more than relevant for Beijing.

It is also necessary to take into account the bilateral relations between Moscow and Beijing in the Eurasian space. Since they, having geographical advantages, are able to influence Central Asia.

It can be noted that control over space, being a sphere of geopolitics, has always been relevant in the relations between China and Central Asia.

Later, border issues were touched upon during meetings of delegations of China and the three Central Asian states at the highest level.

On April 26, 1996, in Shanghai, the Chairman of the PRC and the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed the "Agreement on Strengthening Confidence in the Military Sphere in the Border Area".

In accordance with it, the parties committed to:

- refrain from military maneuvers that threaten the other side;

- limit the scale, zones and number of military exercises;
- notify each other of important military actions in the 100-kilometer border strip;
- strengthen friendly ties between military units in the border area and border troops;
- notify each other in advance of the movements, exercises and other actions of their troops;
- strive to transform areas near the border into a zone of trust and stability.

As A.Khodjaev notes, the emergence of the SCO was due to the new geopolitical situation in the world, Central Asia and the surrounding regions after the collapse of the USSR. The past years have shown that the SCO has become a key mechanism for cooperation between members of this organization.

The SCO summit, which took place in September 2022 in Samarkand, on the one hand, showed that the organization's activities have already reached a qualitatively high level.

In the relations between the Central Asian states and China, in addition to border territory issues, there are equally important components - this is the issue of Chinese emigration to Central Asia and the energy factor.

Professor Zhuang Guotu notes that, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), more than 10 million Chinese currently live outside their country. If their descendants are included in this figure, the total number of Chinese emigrants will be about 60 million people. This is one of the highest rates in the world. However, this is not surprising, because the history of Chinese emigration, which began with the creation of the Maritime Silk Road, has been going on for about two thousand years. At first, the main destination for Chinese migrants was Southeast Asia. At the beginning of the 15th century, Chinese quarters - each of which housed several thousand people - began to appear in Sumatra and Java, now part of Indonesia. However, mass emigration began only in the 16th century.

It is noted that today China has become one of the largest financial donors and investors in the development of transport, communications, energy (oil and gas, uranium, coal, rare earth) infrastructure in the countries of Central Asia. China is an important trade and economic partner and supplier of almost the entire range of everyday goods. For 25 years, trade has been a source of bilateral small and individual trade business and migration in countries bordering China. China has also become a source of skilled labor, which is

lacking in the region. By now, this migration has become a fairly stable trend, which is constantly strengthening in the context of actively developing trade and economic cooperation between the two countries.

Chinese labor migration in Uzbekistan includes trade migration, business migration and employment. Today, there is a stable presence of Chinese labor and business. Chinese managers, engineering and technical personnel, other professionals and workers are employed in priority sectors of China's cooperation in Uzbekistan. They work mainly in large Chinese and joint ventures, companies, contractors in the energy, construction, and service sectors.

The main reasons that force the Chinese to leave the country are as follows:

1. Overpopulation of the country;
2. Lack of land;
3. The problem of employment;
4. Social problems;
5. The influence of traditions.

This process manifests itself differently depending on the legal, cultural, and specific features of the countries in the region.

The key issue for China is how to provide its rapidly developing economy with natural resources. As noted by the scientist and sinologist A.Khodjaev, its own production cannot meet China's needs. In 2019, the volume of gas extracted in China amounted to 173.3 billion cubic meters. According to the plan, by the end of 2020 it should reach 360 billion cubic meters. According to 2019 data, gas reserves in China amount to 1.4 trillion cubic meters.

The fuel and energy complex of the PRC performs a serious task in developing the country's economy and ensuring China's energy security. However, China's own resources are limited.

China currently relies on foreign exports for almost 60% of its oil, with Saudi Arabia, Angola and Russia being the largest oil suppliers. China also obtains more than 30% of its natural gas from foreign sources.

According to Chinese researchers, the following three areas are currently the priority in China's energy security strategy:

- 1) Diversification cooperation;
- 2) Economy (energy efficiency);
- 3) Technological innovation.

China has achieved great results in searching for and finding new energy sources, but on the other hand, the issue of transport communications

remains relevant, since ensuring transit security is complicated by the dominant position of the United States and its allies in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, through which about 80% of crude oil supplies to China pass. In this sense, the situation around the Strait of Malacca is extremely important for China.

Over the past few years, due to the diversification of energy, the structure of energy consumption in the country has begun to change in favor of cleaner energy sources - hydropower (8%), natural gas (8%), nuclear energy (2%) and other renewable energy sources (RES) (almost 4%).

In terms of energy security, China is developing nuclear energy. Nuclear energy is a dynamically developing sector of the economy PRC. As of 2019, China had 48 operating nuclear power units located at 17 stations, 11 power units were under construction.

Cooperation in the field of nuclear energy is currently one of the most promising for China, but the development of the country's nuclear industry seems difficult without the proper amount of nuclear raw materials, which China does not have. In this regard, cooperation with Central Asia is of paramount importance for China. According to researcher K.Khakberdiev, cooperation between Uzbekistan and China in the field of mineral resource extraction is one of the significant and successful areas of bilateral relations. The most significant areas of joint cooperation in this area should be noted as the extraction and transportation of hydrocarbon raw materials, as well as the development and operation of deposits. In 2004, China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) signed a contract with NC Kazatomprom for uranium mining until 2020, which was accompanied by an agreement on strategic cooperation between China and Kazakhstan in the field of nuclear energy.

Taking into account the current state of the energy sector, Beijing's plans include the following tasks. The PRC energy development strategy states:

- promote energy conservation in key areas and key links, reasonably control overall energy consumption while consuming less energy and quickly supporting economic and social development.
- accelerate the development of pure electric vehicles, hybrid vehicles and vessels, natural gas vehicles and vessels, and expand the use of alternative fuels for transportation.
- high-energy-intensive industries and industries

with excess capacity should implement overall energy consumption control and strict restrictions, other industries should implement strict restrictions in accordance with advanced energy efficiency standards, the energy efficiency of existing capacity should have a deadline for compliance, and should meet the advanced energy efficiency standards of domestic production capacity.

In relations between China and the Central Asian countries, where the interests of the world's leading actors are present, the investment sphere is a clearly expressed component. In this regard, the leadership of the PRC was in no hurry and waited, closely monitoring the complex and changeable situation in the Eurasian region.

The PRC acted in a targeted manner, carefully studying the situation in each of the countries. The priorities were built on the principle of maintaining strong relations with large CIS countries and moving "from near to far", first establishing friendly relations with neighboring CIS member countries, and then with others of strategic importance for China. As a result, in the security sphere, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have become the most important partners for China in the post-Soviet space, along with Russia. In the economic sphere - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Belarus and Ukraine - countries that either have rich energy resources or are capable of playing an important role in the economic development and modernization of China's national defense.

Today, the process of expanding China's presence in the five countries is proceeding at different rates. However, somewhere sooner, somewhere later, but all the countries of the region are gradually focusing on China as a key partner in the economic sphere.

The China-Central Asia Summit, which was held on May 18-19, 2023, opened a new stage in Chinese policy in the region. Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech in which he outlined the role of Central Asia in China's long-term plans. China expects to increase the supply of transit cargo in the China-Europe direction. This should contribute to the development of China's trade and economic relations with Central Asia, which is assigned the role of a bridge in the supply of transit cargo to Europe. China is interested in building the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China railway.

The implementation of the projects discussed at the summit could create conditions for increasing China's trade turnover with Central Asian

countries. In 2022, the volume of trade between China and Central Asian countries reached a record high and amounted to more than 70 billion US dollars.

On January 24, 2024, in Beijing, negotiations were held between the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh.Mirziyoyev and the Chairman of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, following which the leaders adopted a Joint Statement and signed a solid package of bilateral documents. Today, the total volume of Chinese investments amounted to over 14 billion dollars. The number of enterprises with Chinese capital has tripled. As noted by researcher from Kazakhstan R. Izimov, judging by the plans of the Chinese leadership regarding Central Asia, Beijing's participation and presence in regional affairs will only increase in the future. Beijing sets ambitious goals, the implementation of which will further increase the dependence of the countries of the region on China, and the Chinese authorities will receive even more levers of political influence.

In this case, the role of Chinese think tanks should be noted. In this regard, the following approach is of research interest. Sinologist, Professor A. Maslov offers his typology of Chinese think tanks. "We will use the term "think tanks" as a synonym for think-tank or, as it is often translated into Russian, "think tanks". It should be noted that in Chinese there is a similar term "zhiku" 智库 — literally "storage of wisdom", which is to some extent an analogue of the term think-tank.

According to the Global Go To Think Tank index 2020 report, Chinese "think tanks" are in second place (1413) after the United States (2203), and these two countries are significantly ahead of India (612) and Great Britain (515), which is in third place." It should also be noted that China's think tanks are seen as part of the country's soft power. In Chinese historiography, there are a number of different designations for "soft power," including ruan shi li, ruan li liang, and ruan quan li. All of these terms, despite reflecting the same concept, carry slightly different semantic loads. The first, most frequently used, is literally interpreted as "soft real/actual power," which somewhat contradicts the assertions that "soft power" is immaterial. The second term means "soft power," as a rule, the term li liang (Yash) is more often used to denote the physical power of the subject, which again emphasizes the very pragmatic and quite material approach to the term. And, finally, the third concept ruan quan li reflects more of the legal



nature of "soft power," and can literally be interpreted in several ways at once, namely: "soft power," "soft authority/right," etc.

In official statements by the Chinese leadership, the term *ruan shili* is predominantly used, usually in conjunction with the adjective *wenhua* - culture or cultural, which in fact dictates the direction of the state's "soft power". The concept introduced by J.Nai was by no means new to China; the practice of peacefully achieving political goals has always been used in this country. Many Chinese researchers believe that the concept of "soft power" is consistent with Sun Tzu's statements about defeating the enemy without a fight, as well as with the category of the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius "the way of the sovereign", which implied humane rule and which was contrasted with the category "the way of the hegemon", which is actually based on "hard power".

The year 2002, when Hu Jintao came to power in the PRC, heading the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the country, and a year later became the Chairman of the PRC, can be considered the start of the implementation of Chinese "soft power". It was with the arrival of Hu Jintao that accents related to the use of "soft" power instruments began to appear in China's foreign policy. The starting point for launching projects in the sphere of "soft power" can be considered the 17th Congress of the Communist Party of China, when the policy of cultural and humanitarian interaction was proclaimed as an independent direction of the country's foreign policy. One of the main instruments of cultural influence of the PRC is named after Confucius. The activities of Confucius Institutes around the world are aimed at spreading the Chinese language and culture.

The main functions of Confucius Institutes include: developing Chinese culture and art; meeting the needs of people from various countries studying Chinese; and humanitarian cooperation between China and other countries; building a "harmonious world". Confucius Institutes have become a world-famous brand in the field of language and cultural communication, which, based on quality and intensive development, has created an authoritative and influential international educational community.

Currently, there are 548 Confucius Institutes and 1,193 Confucius Classrooms in 154 countries and regions around the world. The number of students

who have participated in various programs of Confucius Institutes exceeds 12,720,000 people.

This indicator for Central Asia looks like this. Since 2004, China has opened 13 Confucius Institutes and 24 Confucius Classrooms in Central Asian countries, which currently have over 18,000 students.

From 2010 to 2018, the number of students from Central Asian countries studying in China increased from 11,930 to 29,885. The average annual growth rate was 12.33%.

Since 2013, in addition to the successfully established Confucius Institutes, the Chinese leadership has sought to use the broadest possible toolkit to form a positive image of the country abroad. Among these tools are traditional media, social networks, research apparatus, and the cultural industry.

It should be noted that despite the powerful economic development of the PRC, in relation to investments and other resources from this country to Central Asia, the countries of Central Asia need more than balanced cooperation with the PRC. And on the other hand, take an example from the field of education in the PRC.

In this regard, Professor N.E.Karimova notes that the capabilities of modern China on the world stage exceed the capabilities of all previous Chinese empires. China and its capabilities can be assessed only in their entirety and only in a global context.

The Central Asian countries have a very important choice - how to diversify investment sources, since at present their main source is Beijing. Despite the reforms being carried out, the PRC is not yet an innovative country, not counting some companies. Perhaps in the future, thanks to the reforms being carried out, including achievements in the field of R & D, this will become a reality.

According to the scientist-sinologist Sh.I.Shazamanov, in mid-2005, approximately 400 thousand Chinese youth received education abroad.

In China, obtaining an education abroad has long been considered important for the country's development. It is believed that the first Chinese people to travel abroad for educational purposes was in the mid-18th century. In 1872, the Qing government selected 30 teenagers from three provinces: Fujian, Guangdong, and Zhejiang, to study in the United States of America. In just four years, 120 children were sent, including Zhang Tianyou, Ta Shaoyi, Yang Fu, and others, whose names are widely known in modern China. This

marked the beginning of China's initiative to educate young people on a large scale in the United States. In the mid-19th century, Germany's success in higher education attracted the attention of the ruling Qing dynasty and the educated Chinese public, making the country one of the main European destinations for Chinese students. In 1978, the 3rd Plenum of the 11th CPC Central Committee decided to reform the country and open its borders. Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping made important remarks regarding the number of Chinese students sent abroad: "I agree to increase the number of students studying abroad, and they will mainly study natural sciences. We will send tens of thousands of students abroad." On December 26, 1978, for the first time since the Cultural Revolution, 52 students were selected to go to the United States at government expense to study advanced technology. In modern China, the flow of people wishing to go abroad for educational purposes is growing every year. Thus, from 2001 to 2018, the number of students who left increased by 7.9 times, including from 2001 to 2010 - by 3.4, and from 2010 to 2018 - by 2.3 times and amounted to 662.1 thousand people in 2018.

In conclusion, it can be noted that Beijing will further promote its interests in Central Asia, primarily through the economy and soft power. Education is one of the factors for the further development of the country. Thanks to such foundations in the field of human capital, the Chinese government adopts and implements strategic plans for the development of the PRC, which ensure not only economic, technological, but also geopolitical positions of the country in the world. As an example, we can note the program "Made in China-2025".

The current "Made in China 2025" program has key directives in the field of artificial intelligence (AI), where China wants to become a global leader by 2030 and is already ahead of its competitors in terms of research papers, patents, cross-border and global AI funding. In 2017, 48% of the world's AI startup funding came from China (up from 11.3% in 2016), compared to 38% from the United States and 13% from the rest of the world.

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