

CHINA'S CENTRAL ASIA POLICY: A REGIONAL CHALLENGE TO THE RBIO?

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Abstract: *China has the potential to challenge the rules-based international order (RBIO). This challenge is evident worldwide. Through opaque economic methods, China is becoming an effective geopolitical power across diverse regions. Central Asia is one region where Chinese expansionism has become particularly evident. Central Asia is a major route for China's ambitious 'One Belt, One Road' (BRI) project. The revival of the modern Silk Road paves the way for China's global ambitions to take a geopolitical content. BRI is vital for the formation of a China-centred international system. In this context, China is gradually increasing its political, military, and cultural influence, as well as its economic presence, in Central Asia. China's growing presence in Central Asia reveals how it has transformed the economy into an effective geopolitical tool. After 2013, there has been a noticeable change in the asymmetric dependence of Central Asian countries on China. This situation poses many risks for the countries of the region.*

Keywords: *China, RBIO, BRI, Central Asia, expansionism, influence, geopolitics.*

Rezumat: *Politica Chinei în Asia Centrală: O provocare regională pentru RBIO? China are potențialul de a contesta ordinea internațională bazată pe reguli (RBIO). Această provocare se manifestă în toate părțile lumii. Prin metode economice de o transparență îndoielnică, China devine o putere geopolitică eficientă în diferite zone geografice. Asia Centrală este una dintre regiunile în care expansionismul chinez s-a manifestat în mod clar. Asia Centrală este principala rută a ambițiosului proiect chinez „One Belt, One Road” (BRI). Renașterea drumului modern al mătăsii deschide calea pentru ca ambițiile globale ale Chinei*

să capete un conținut geopolitic. BRI este vital pentru formarea unui sistem internațional centrat pe China. În acest context, China își sporește treptat influența politică, militară și culturală, precum și implicarea economică în Asia Centrală. Prezența crescândă a Chinei în Asia Centrală arată modul în care aceasta a transformat economia într-un instrument geopolitic eficient. După 2013, a avut loc o schimbare notabilă în dependența asimetrică a țărilor din Asia Centrală față de China. Această situație prezintă numeroase riscuri pentru țările din regiune.

INTRODUCTION

Radical changes in the international system have led to a world of uncertainty. This situation calls into question one of the most important inferences about the system's functioning: predictability. China's ambitions pose the greatest challenge to the future of the international system. The fact that China's economic power, which it has enjoyed for many years, will translate into a political and military challenge is increasingly recognised as a critical problem in the relevant literature.

One of the most important areas of Chinese expansionism is undoubtedly Central Asia. Central Asia is the region where China's expansionist policies are felt most acutely. In this context, Central Asia is a favourable region in which to test China's global ambitions and the extent to which they have been realised.

The article comprises three parts. The first part evaluates the concept of the rules-based international order (RBIO) and China's challenges to it. The second part analyses the economic dimensions of China's expansionism in Central Asia. In particular, the One Belt One Road initiative (BRI) is emphasised as a key instrument of Chinese expansionism in Central Asia. It is concluded that China uses its economic power as an instrument in its policies towards Central Asia. The third section analyses regional reactions and potential risks to China's growing presence in Central Asia. This section explains in detail why the countries and peoples of the region face numerous risks from Chinese expansionism.

THE CONCEPT OF RBIO

Today, the international system is highly fragile. This fragility greatly increases the dimensions of threats and risks in the global system. Challenges to the predictable international order based on rules, principles, norms and norms pave the way for systemic uncertainty and instability. This uncertainty leads to the

formation of a serious bloc against the functioning of the liberal order and its conceptual integrity. The revisionist bloc posing a threat to the rules-based international order (RBIO) not only limits predictability but also diversifies the nature of threats. Increasing challenges to the RBIO have led Western countries to adopt this concept as a core policy. In this context, Western policymakers prioritise the strengthening of the RBIO and, most importantly, its acceptance as a common mechanism.

The term RBIO has been used frequently in government statements and joint declarations over the past few years. For many, the implicit message is that the necessary conditions for peace and stability must be maintained. Proponents of this view advocate strengthening the RBIO. Others see the RBIO as a tool used by a select group of states to advance and consolidate their hegemonic and exploitative ambitions. The only commonality between the two sides making these arguments is that neither defines the RBIO nor explains its importance.¹

Byrne states that the RBIO is “most visibly based on the United Nations (UN) and Bretton Woods institutions under US global governance.” Byrne emphasises that “to the greatest extent possible, ensuring that all nations can enjoy the benefits of peace and prosperity is the great purpose of the RBIO today.”²

Lieberherr defines “the RBIO concept broadly as a shared commitment by states to conduct their activities in accordance with an existing set of rules.”³ According to Martel, “a fair assessment of the current ‘challenge’ to RBIO forces those involved in the clash of narratives to recognise a bitter truth: there is currently no neutral perspective from which to assess which version of RBIO is most legitimate in a normative sense.” Martel emphasises the importance of understanding the RBIO crisis in the context of ensuring a more stable, compelling and legitimate global order for the 21st century. In this context, he emphasises that a better understanding of the social, normative, and discursive dimensions of the RBIO crisis is an essential first step.⁴

¹ Parley Policy Initiative, *The “Rules-Based International Order”, explained*, Parley Policy Cable no. 29, May 3, 2023, pp. 1-4.

² Caitlin Byrne, *Securing the ‘Rules-Based Order’ in the Indo-Pacific. The Significance of Strategic Narrative*, in “Security Challenges”, Vol. 16, 2020, No. 3, Special Issue: *The Indo-Pacific: From Concept to Contest*, pp. 10-15.

³ Boas Lieberherr, *The “Rules-Based Order”: Conflicting Understandings*, in “CSS Analyses in Security Policy”, 2023, No. 317, pp. 1-4.

⁴ Stéphanie Martel, *Unpacking the “Crisis” of the “Rules-Based International Order”: Competing Hero Narratives and Indo-Pacific Alternatives*, Defence Security Foresight Group, Working Paper, July 2020, pp. 1-20.

Sharma, in his Martel-inspired article, underscores that there is no consensus on the definition of RBIO, contrary to prevailing assumptions, and that there is, in fact, a power struggle among competing authorities, driven by conflicting ideologies, values, and interests, that does not define the “legitimate order”. The lack of a global consensus on the “rules of the game” makes it difficult for states to understand one another and to predict and interpret one another’s actions. This is the biggest obstacle to a precise definition of RBIO.⁵

The international order established by the victors of the Second World War was permanent, durable and stable. The liberal political and economic rules implemented during this period proved durable enough both to solve the problems that led to the war and to lead the world into a completely new era.⁶ The spread of democracy, increased economic interdependence, the effects of rising income and educational attainment, and the deterrence provided by nuclear weapons have undoubtedly played an essential and decisive role in the relative peace the world has enjoyed since the Second World War, compared with previous periods. According to Chalmers, “international rules and the international agreements and organisations they established and developed were also important causes of this relative peace.”⁷

The post-war international order is a complex and comprehensive set of norms, institutions, agreements, and other mechanisms. It was created to serve the basic principles of economic stability, non-aggression, coordinated action against common challenges and the promotion of liberal values.⁸ Ikenberry believes that this process, which he defines as liberal internationalism, is part of the American hegemonic order. According to Ikenberry, “this order involves economic transparency and security cooperation, as well as collective efforts to maintain peace, promote the rule of law, and ensure the sustainability of a range of international institutions.”⁹

⁵ Sarah Sharma, *The “Crisis” in the Rules-Based International Order (RBIO): Recommendations for Canadian Engagement*, Defence Security Foresight Group, Policy Brief, July 2020, pp. 1-4.

⁶ Chatham House, *The London Conference 2015*. Background Papers, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2015, pp. 1-14.

⁷ Malcolm Chalmers, *Which Rules? Why There is No Single ‘Rules-Based International System’*, RUSI Occasional Paper, April 2019, pp. 1-43.

⁸ Michael J. Mazarr, Miranda Priebe, Andrew Radin, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *Understanding the Current International Order*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016, pp. 1-64.

⁹ John Ikenberry, *The end of Liberal International Order?* in “International Affairs”, 2018, Vol. 94, No.1, pp. 7-23.

Ikenberry argues that the future of this liberal internationalism depends on two questions. The first question is whether the US and other liberal democracies can recoup their progressive political orientation. A positive answer to this question depends on how the US promotes liberal values globally. The American “brand” is perceived in some parts of the non-Western world as neo-liberal, that is, single-minded in its commitment to capital and markets. It seems essential for the US to overturn this perception and this way of thinking. In this context, the US need to articulate its postwar vision of liberal democracy. This vision combines progressive concepts such as economic growth, stability and social protection. There are historical examples of this. Second, the United States and its allies need to build and further expand a broad coalition of states willing to cooperate within a reformed global order. In particular, it is essential for the United States to actively embrace and draw the world of emerging democracies into its strategic vision as an integral part.¹⁰

The RBIO, established by the United States, its allies, and partners in the aftermath of the Second World War, was never perfect. Still, it contributed to decades without a major-power war, extraordinary economic growth, and a reduction in global poverty. Today, however, the system faces challenges ranging from pandemics and climate change to economic disruption and the resurgence of great power rivalries.¹¹ These challenges increase the scale and, perhaps most importantly, the spatial scope of systemic vulnerabilities in a multifaceted way, giving the issue a global dimension.

As we have noted, the post-war international system was a significant effort to create “the foundations for global peace and prosperity.” Today, however, this system is being violated to a great extent. According to Gewirtz, the most obvious violation is Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.¹²

The October 12 National Security Strategy of the United States of America (US), President Joe Biden, 2022, outlined the threats to the RBIO and identified that we are in the midst of strategic competition to shape the future of the international order. The document emphasised the need for global cooperation and the fulfilment of nations’ responsibilities to address common challenges

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Matthew Kroenig, Jeffrey Cimmino, *et al.*, *Global Strategy 2021: An Allied Strategy for China*, Atlantic Council Strategy Papers, July 2021, Washington D.C., pp. 10-83.

¹² Paul Gewirtz, *China, the United States, and the Future of a Rules-Based International Order*, 22 July 2024, Brookings, in <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/china-the-united-states-and-the-future-of-a-rules-based-international-order/> (Accessed on 28.09.2024).

affecting people worldwide. In this context, deepening and expanding relations not only with the United States' democratic allies but also with all states that share the vision of a better future has been adopted as a priority strategy.¹³ In this context, the 2022 National Security Strategy prioritises the development of favourable conditions for competition against the US's strategic competitors, based on shared interests and values, and increased cooperation in the face of everyday challenges. The document strongly emphasises the need to minimise challenges to the RBIO, particularly from China and Russia, and the necessity of international cooperation to that end.

Given its economic power, China stands out as the state with the most tremendous potential to challenge the rules-based order. "Like all fast-rising powers, China aims to reshape the international system to reflect both its values and interests, aligning institutions and norms to its worldview."¹⁴ Ho emphasises that, in contrast to the US vision of multilateralism and RBIO, China has a much narrower, more limited perspective for a revised RBIO that prioritises domestic stability in a changing international environment. In this context, while the US and the West view multilateralism as a means to consolidate global leadership and promote a vision of a liberal world order, China regards multilateralism and RBIO more broadly as diplomatic tools to protect Chinese national interests and legitimise one-party rule.¹⁵

The "appetite" to reshape the world order is leading China to "increasingly undermine the influence of liberal democracies in international institutions." According to Carlson, "some of China's actions suggest that it seeks to subvert the basic elements of the international system."¹⁶ The discussion of the conditions under which China supports multipolarity is essential at this point. Despite China's frequent expressions of support for multipolarity, it remains unclear whether this is, in fact, China's long-term vision. Currently, China supports the concept of multipolarity because the presence of other powerful countries, especially Russia, which opposes the US, reduces the pressure on China. If the

¹³ *National Security Strategy*, The White House, 2022, pp. 6-48.

¹⁴ Nadège Rolland, *China's Vision for a New World Order*, NBR Special Report 83, 2020, pp. 3-56.

¹⁵ Benjamin Tze Ern Ho, *Chinese Vision of a Rules-based Order International Order with Chinese Characteristics*, in "Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs", Air University Press, 2020, pp. 12-15.

¹⁶ Brian G. Carlson, *China, Russia, and the Future of World Order*, in Brian G. Carlson, Oliver Thränert (Eds.), *Strategic Trends 2023. Key Developments in Global Affairs*, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zürich, 2023, pp. 11-38.

world rapidly shifts to a US-China bipolarity and Russia is unwilling or unable to provide meaningful support to China, China could find itself isolated from the US and its allies and partners.¹⁷ In this context, it remains unclear how China will approach the various and multidimensional strategic issues.

Jones and Yeo argue that China's challenge poses an existential threat to the global economic and political order and illustrate its dimensions through a historical comparison. According to this comparison, "the Soviet Union was also an existential threat to the United States, but in terms of global economic or international institutions, the Soviet challenge was modest. China, by contrast, currently poses a modest security threat to the United States, but a major challenge to the global economic and political order."¹⁸ This approach stems from Beijing's scepticism of the RBIO. China's leadership views it as a system designed to serve the ultimate interests of the United States and its allies.¹⁹ In this context, China is fundamentally critical of the RBIO. The potential for China's criticism to evolve into ambitions for the global economic and political order entails several risks. The primary factor that concretises these risks is China's economic power.

Masayuki identifies three major schools (revolutionary, linkage, and traditional) that shape China's perspective on the international order. The revolutionary school recognises that China is a socialist state ruled by the Communist Party, and that this character contradicts the existing capitalist, state-led international order. Accordingly, the liberal international order is unfavourable for China. The revolutionary school tends to regard "building a socialist order" as China's international strategy. The linkage school is relatively liberal-leaning. According to this school, the existing international order is generally favourable to China and does not require change. Many international relations experts in Shanghai advocate these views. The traditional school emphasises China's civilisational formation. This school argues that "rising China can offer the international community more options than the Western model, not only in material terms, but also in terms of the institutional design, norms and principles of the international order."²⁰ The revolutionary and traditional schools have a

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Bruce Jones, Andrew Yeo, *China and the Challenge to Global Order*, Brookings Policy Brief, November 2022, pp. 1-16.

¹⁹ Richard McGregor, *The Challenge of China for the Liberal International Order*, in Yuichi Hosoya, Hans Kundnani (Eds.), *The Transformation of the Liberal International Order. Evolutions and Limitations*, Springer, The International House of Japan, 2024, pp. 91-96.

²⁰ Masayuki Masuda, *China and the Liberal International Order: Decreasing Affinity, Seeking Primacy*, "Security & Strategy", 2023, Vol. 3, pp. 19-37.

more ambitious and revisionist paradigm of China's place in the world. An ideological framework guides the revolutionary school, while the notion of civilisation guides the traditional school. The linkage school has a relatively more moderate approach. However, this school also tends to consider China's place in the liberal order as "decisive and directive."

Especially since the 2008 financial crisis, China has sought to turn its economic power into a political instrument. Hence, this economic power has the potential to acquire political and geopolitical content. Given the potential for this to shape China's grand strategy, there is a serious risk to the RBIO. This would multiply the threat to the RBIO's functionality, integrity and predictability. Thus, China's defiant behaviour and the factors that can direct it will take concrete form.

THE AIMS AND TOOLS OF CHINA'S CENTRAL ASIA POLICY

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 presented China with a series of opportunities. The fall of the Soviet Union reduced China's primary security threat. However, it also led to a decline in China's strategic importance. According to Walsh, optimistic assessments of China's role in a more multipolar post-Cold War world were shelved with the emergence of US-dominated unipolarity.²¹ Walsh notes that China gained some status as a global actor during the 1991 Gulf War but was alarmed by the swiftness of the allied victory. In this context, China became critical of the "new world order" proclaimed by the United States. In the process, China sought a role in regional affairs in which it could best utilise its political, economic and military capabilities. The emergence of the Central Asian Republics on the world political map has allowed China to realise its traditional regional interests.²²

Zhuangzhi views the end of the bipolar system as positive for China. Zhuangzhi emphasises that the disintegration of the old system has brought significant advantages to China and improved its international standing. Under the bipolar system, China had strained relations with both the United States and the Soviet Union.²³ "Although China was the best beneficiary of the international

²¹ J. Richard Walsh, *China and the New Geopolitics of Central Asia*, "Asian Survey", Vol. 33, 1993, No. 3, pp. 272-284.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Sun Zhuangzhi, *The Relationship between China and Central Asia*, in "Slavic Eurasian Studies", 2007, No. 16, *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia*, Vol. 1, *Russia and Its Neighbors in Crisis*, Hokkaido University, Slavic Research Center, 2007, pp. 41-63.

system established by the United States after the Cold War, Western efforts to include China in the international system and to ensure that China democratises and accepts Western values have not yielded results.”²⁴ In this context, following the end of the bipolar system, China began to pursue ambitious, assertive policies across various regions, including Central Asia. China's Central Asia policy has evolved in economic and security-oriented directions. In particular, in the context of access to energy resources, China has emphasised cooperation with neighbouring Central Asian countries. However, China does not regard regional cooperation mechanisms solely as a means of meeting its energy needs. In this context, as Azer points out, “China's investments in Africa, the Caucasus and Central Asia not only aim to meet its energy needs but also aim to rise as a global power by investing in regions with energy resources in order to ensure energy security.”²⁵ According to Swanstrom, China's real intention was to use Central Asia as a region in which Beijing could invest, provide security, and secure political stability and influence. In this way, China sought to establish a model of relations with Central Asia akin to the traditional vassal relationship.²⁶ The power vacuum in the region created by the end of the bipolar order enabled China to realise this grand ambition.

China's strategy towards the region became even more pronounced with the establishment of the Shanghai Five. The Shanghai Five, which emerged in 1996 at a summit in Shanghai and included the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, was established to build military confidence and reduce the presence of armed forces in the border regions. Markova argues that, in the late 1990s, the accumulation of economic power, amid Russia's declining influence, enabled China to claim leadership in regional security. In the process, China treated security issues as a means to advance its interests and expand its influence over Central Asian countries. Based on these considerations, China played an active role in establishing the Shanghai Five, which later evolved into the Shanghai Forum in the late 1990s.²⁷ In this context, it was evident that the

²⁴ Erkin Ekrem, *Çin'in Orta Asya Politikaları. Rapor* [Central Asian Policies of China. Report], Ankara, Hoca Ahmet Yesevi Uluslararası Türk-Kazak Üniversitesi, 2011, pp. 5-69.

²⁵ Özlem Arzu Azer, *Çin'in Enerji Güvenliği Bağlamında Kafkasya ve Orta Asya Politikası* [The Central Asia and Caucasus Politics of China in the Context of Energy Security], International Conference on Eurasian Economies 11-13 October 2012, Almaty, 2012, pp. 233-240, <https://doi.org/10.36880/C03.00441>

²⁶ Niklas Swanström, *China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?* “Journal of Contemporary China”, Vol. 14, 2005, No. 45, pp. 569-584.

²⁷ Elena A. Markova, *Politika Kitaya v Tsentral'noy Azii (90-ye gody XX veka – nachalo XXI*

Shanghai Five was an important mechanism for China to pursue its regional interests fully.

During this period, it can be said that China's security-oriented perspective proved effective in its regional strategy. This is because China shares a common border of approximately 3,300 km with three of the five countries in the region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan).²⁸ This factor shapes China's security-oriented perspective on its regional policies following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Another issue shaping China's security paradigm towards Central Asia is the Uyghur issue. China's Xinjiang region, where the Uyghurs live, neighbours Central Asian countries. This situation significantly affects China's security-centred view of Central Asia. The Xinjiang region is strategically located at the crossroads of the Historic Silk Road. Moreover, being far from the seas and surrounded by high mountains and deserts, it is a rare "defence and attack" centre in the world. The region is a gateway for China and a key location for China's plan to dominate Eurasia.²⁹

According to Laruelle & Peyrouse, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, China's diplomatic relations with Central Asia developed slowly. China's primary objective during this period was to resolve border disputes with post-Soviet Central Asia and to end the painful history of "unequal agreements." At the same time, another key objective was to promote the stability and security of Central Asian regimes to avoid exacerbating the Uyghur issue.³⁰ Thus, it is possible to state that the first phase of China's strategy toward Central Asia was based on security concerns.

Usupova notes that in the first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, China pursued a somewhat cautious policy in the region, primarily aimed at resolving security issues and border disputes and at developing trade relations. Usupova emphasises that this situation "changed dramatically after 2010. Since the early 21st century, China's rapid economic growth has increased its need for

veka) [China's Policy in Central Asia (1990s - Early 21st Century), "Post-Soviet Issues", Vol. 9, 2022, No. 1, pp. 121-129.

²⁸ Nazira S. Usupova, *Central Asia and China: Main Aspects and Directions of Interaction in Modern Realities*, "Russia and the World: A Scientific Dialogue", 2022, No. 4, pp. 33-49.

²⁹ Süheyl Çobanoğlu, *Avrasya, Çin ve Doğu Türkistan* [Eurasia, China and East Turkestan], in Reyhan Aktaş (Ed.), *Trans Pasifik Ortaklığı, Asya Ülkeleri ve Türkiye* [Trans-Pacific Partnership, Asian Countries and Türkiye], İstanbul, Tasam Yayınları, 2017, pp. 45-50.

³⁰ Marlène Laruelle, Sébastien Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program – A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center, Washington, D.C. – Stockholm, 2009, 201 p.

resources and markets. Therefore, China has entered into more comprehensive economic cooperation with Central Asian countries.³¹

The One Belt One Road (BRI) project, announced by Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, in 2013, revealed that economic expansionism has entered a new phase within Beijing's regional policies. In this context, economic expansionism has become an essential and functional mechanism of China's grand strategy. The BRI is an ambitious attempt to revive the historic Silk Road in the 21st century by connecting China to Europe through Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, West Asia, East Africa and the Middle East.³² The BRI covers more than 65 countries, representing more than 62% of the world's population. The BRI consists of six main land corridors (New Eurasian Land Bridge, China-Central Asia-West Asia, China-Mongolia-Russia, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar, China-Pakistan, China-Indochina Peninsula) and a maritime route (from China's southern coast to the Mediterranean Sea). Recently, the expansion of the BRI to the Arctic has also been on the agenda. China prioritises the main land corridors within the project, aiming to reduce dependence on maritime routes by establishing multi-directional land corridors.

Bird, Lebrand, and Venables point out that the benefits of building new infrastructure in each country affected by the BRI remain uncertain. In this context, the spatial incidence of impacts can vary widely across countries. Building roads and rail links and reducing border times may facilitate trade, but industry growth in some regions may come at the expense of others.³³ This can also result in significant victimisation of countries.

Kokushkina and Soloshcheva formulate the strategic importance of Central Asia in the BRI framework as follows:³⁴

- The need to develop infrastructure to reduce the cost of transit to the Middle East and, in the future, to Europe.
- The need to develop China's impoverished western regions neighbouring Central Asia and provide them with raw materials and markets.
- The possibility of exporting Chinese labour for infrastructure development

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Kemel Toktomushev, *Central Asia and the Silk Road Economic Belt*, Policy Brief 2016-1, Bishkek, University of Central Asia, 2016, pp. 1-6.

³³ Julia Helen Bird, Mathilde Sylvie Maria Lebrand, Anthony J. Venables, *The Belt and Road Initiative: Reshaping Economic Geography in Central Asia?* Policy Research Working Paper No. WPS 8807, Washington, D.C., World Bank Group, 2019, pp. 1-36.

³⁴ Irina V. Kokushkina, Maria A. Soloshcheva, *The Role of Central Asia in the "One Belt-One Road" Initiative*, in "Iran and the Caucasus", Vol. 23, 2019, No 3, pp. 283-298.

projects.

- Strengthening China's political influence in countries with Turkic-speaking populations.
- In the security context, helping counter-terrorism policy, achieving stability and regional security through BRI.

Given China's global geopolitical ambitions, Serikkaliyeva pays particular attention to relations with Central Asia and Eurasia as a whole. Infrastructure projects in Central Asia under the BRI provide logistical diversification for both the region and China. Ongoing implementation indicates that Central Asia is a key strategic partner for the project and plays an essential role in China's global strategy.

Lain notes that "the five Central Asian countries that are particularly important for BRI constitute a gateway for China's increasingly diversified land routes to other markets to the west."³⁵ In this context, the BRI represents a strengthening of China's existing economic policy in the region. Since the BRI was announced in 2013, both existing and new Chinese investments have been brought under the BRI umbrella.³⁶ Meanwhile, China is using its BRI investments not only for external development but also for internal economic stabilisation.

According to Lain, because the underdeveloped Xinjiang Autonomous Region borders three of the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), Chinese investment in Central Asia encourages Beijing to create markets to stimulate trade with a region that is highly active. Further economic development in Xinjiang will not address the concerns and discrimination suffered by Uyghurs, and there is no guarantee that Uyghurs will feel the effects of economic growth. However, Chinese policymakers tend to assume that efforts to promote economic development will help bridge social, political and financial gaps.³⁷

Akmataliyeva emphasises the geopolitical and geoeconomic aspects of the BRI. From a geopolitical perspective, the BRI is seen as an opportunity for China to alter the existing world order in its favour, and, in this context, to shift the balance of power, particularly in Eurasia and the Pacific. From a geoeconomic perspective, the BRI is seen as a model for China to export its "economic miracle"

³⁵ Sarah Lain, *The Potential and Pitfalls of Connectivity along the Silk Road Economic Belt*, in Marlene Laruelle (Ed.), *China's Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact in Central Asia*, Washington, D.C., The George Washington University, Central Asia Program, 2018, pp. 1-10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

to neighbouring regions. At the same time, Beijing uses the BRI to promote China's internal development by linking the country's underdeveloped areas with neighbouring countries. Akmataliyeva notes that the BRI may evolve into a full-fledged geopolitical strategy of China.³⁸ Therefore, in the medium and long term, the BRI may come to the fore as one of the main instruments of China's geopolitical ambitions. China's ambitions will undoubtedly push the US to take further measures. Duarte makes a remarkable observation about the BRI's place in Eurasian geopolitics, drawing on a quotation from Khanna. In what Khanna calls a post-American conceptual context, given the reconfiguration of Central Asia's role, the Eurasian Heartland could gradually emerge from isolation, and a world in which more people travel by rail across Eurasia rather than fly across the Atlantic to America could affect the future position of the United States.³⁹ Duarte further argues that the East-West rail lines that China is pushing for would have military capability, allowing the rapid mobilisation of Chinese troops. Most importantly, through the BRI, China seeks to revitalise continental unity and to weaken the long-standing transatlantic momentum.⁴⁰

Kireeva argues that the BRI will significantly increase China's presence and position, with long-term implications. The full-fledged implementation of the BRI and the creation of a "community of common destiny" could lead to asymmetric economic dependence on China and ultimately increase its political influence. This could create an open but China-centred order across the expanded macro and interregional space of Asia and Eurasia. The emergence of an economic interdependence in which China's position is stronger than that of any other country will mean that its partners will need to take China's interests into account, including its foreign policy decisions, and adapt to them in order to continue enjoying the benefits of a "community of common destiny".⁴¹

Kireeva underscores that the BRI has a strategic goal of consolidating

³⁸ Aynura Akmataliyeva, *Initsiativa "Odin Poias – Odin Put'" v Tsentralnoi Azii* [The Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia], in "Comparative Politics Russia", Vol. 9, 2018, No. 4, pp. 139-146.

³⁹ Paulo Duarte, *China in the Heartland: The Challenges and Opportunities of OBOR for Central Asia*, Marlene Laruelle (Ed.), *China's Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact in Central Asia*, Washington, D.C., The George Washington University, Central Asia Program, 2018, pp. 11-20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Anna Kireeva, *"Initsiativa Poyasa i Puti": soderzhaniye, tseli i znacheniye* [Belt and Road Initiative: Contents, Objectives and Significance], in "Comparative Politics Russia", Vol. 9, 2018, No. 3, pp. 61-74.

China's periphery, primarily through economic instruments. She concludes that the BRI can be regarded as a component of China's strategy to attain the status of a dominant power in East Asia and Eurasia, and potentially in the world system as a whole.⁴²

While some observers highlight the economic benefits of China's investments in developing countries, others argue that China has exploited unsustainable debt obligations to secure concessions. Rather than forgiving debt repayments, China has tended to extend the duration of its loans, creating long-term financial dependencies.⁴³ For example, in 2017, when the Sri Lankan government was unable to repay Chinese loans, China Merchants Port Holdings Company, Ltd. acquired a majority stake in the firm operating Sri Lanka's Hambantota port and the right to manage the port for 99 years. Controversy over China's lack of transparency in its lending peaked in 2019, when the U.S. government questioned whether International Monetary Fund (IMF) aid to Pakistan could also be used to repay China.⁴⁴ In this context, the BRI has also been "characterised in some quarters as a Chinese ploy for vast empire-building. According to critics, China aims to hegemonise and exploit particularly underdeveloped countries along the BRI route through tactical means such as aid, grants and cooperation."⁴⁵ According to Kurtbaşı, "Since 2013, the global impact of the BRI has put China in the spotlight and led to the search for colonial intentions behind every step of this country."⁴⁶

As noted earlier, there are many questions about the BRI's sustainability and economic success due to transparency issues. In this context, Chinese banks "are unlikely to outperform their international competitors in terms of efficient resource allocation."⁴⁷ "China is more closed to the outside world and more

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Karen M. Sutter, Michael D. Sutherland, *China's "One Belt, One Road" Initiative: Economic Issues*, In Focus, Congressional Research Service, May 2024, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF11735> (Accessed on 28.09.2024).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Ihsan Kurtbaşı, *Çin'in Dış Yardımları: Örtülü Bir Kolonyalizm mi, İdealist bir İnisiyatif mi? Çin ve Batı Dış Yardımlarının Karşılaştırmalı Analizi* [China's Foreign Aid: A Covert Colonialism or an Idealist Initiative? A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and Western Foreign Aid], in "Uluslararası İnsan Çalışmaları Dergisi [International Journal of Human Studies]", Vol. 7, 2024, No. 13, pp. 9-44.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Marlene Laruelle, *Introduction. China's Belt and Road Initiative. Quo Vadis?*, in Marlene Laruelle (Ed.), *China's Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact in Central Asia*,

authoritarian than Western states. In this context, China's foreign aid is more controversial and open to criticism than that of many other countries, as there is no transparent and publicly available information on which countries, under what conditions and in what amounts Chinese aid is provided."⁴⁸

China's Central Asia-centred economic expansionism and its political dimension pose risks to the countries and peoples of the region. In this context, the medium- and long-term regional and global side effects of China's use of the economy as an effective geopolitical tool for expansion in Central Asia should not be ignored. These side effects could, in turn, become an ontological problem. In this context, it is necessary to analyse the BRI and regional economic activities within the framework of the risk that it could become an effective instrument of domination over Central Asian countries.

REGIONAL SENTIMENTS AND POTENTIAL RISKS

China has become the most important player in Central Asia today. China's economic expansionism in Central Asia has several geostrategic implications. "On May 18-19, 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping held a grand and spectacular C+C5 summit, with the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. At the summit, the Central Asian heads of state were welcomed in China with very high-level programmes. The opening ceremony of this summit was held at the Purple Cloud Pavilion in the Heavenly Park, north of Shian, built for the Tang Dynasty, which ruled China between the 7th and 10th centuries. In this programme, sites such as the Tang Dynasty palace were decorated with elements of Chinese history and mythology, which, according to Buyar, were clearly intended as a message to participants and the world."⁴⁹

"China is the largest trading partner of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It is also the largest foreign investor in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. China's total foreign trade with the Central Asian states exceeds twice the region's current foreign trade with Russia. Russia's trade volume with Central Asian countries in 2023 was around \$42 billion."⁵⁰ "The most

Washington, D.C., The George Washington University, Central Asia Program, 2018, pp. x-xii.

⁴⁸ Ihsan Kurtbaş, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁴⁹ Cengiz Buyar, *Çin, Orta Asya'daki Varlığını Güçlendiriyor mu?* [Is China Strengthening Its Presence in Central Asia?], "Kriter", Vol. 9, 2024, No. 90, <https://kriterdergi.com/dis-politika/cin-orta-asyadaki-varligini-guclendiriyor-mu> (Accessed on 30.09.2024).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

important sectors of national economies in the region, such as the oil and gas industry in Kazakhstan or the mining industry in Tajikistan, are controlled by Chinese companies.”⁵¹

China’s trade, investment, infrastructure projects, and other instruments underpin the *Pax Sinica* and its future dominance across Eurasia. However, Umarov notes that this process is not proceeding as smoothly as the Chinese leadership would like. The fear of “Chinese expansion” is intense in Central Asian countries, and people in the region harbour deep fears of Chinese expansionism. Sometimes these fears lead to protests and clashes against Chinese workers, businesses and businessmen.⁵² Chinese investments and loans are sometimes seen as the cause of rising government debt and as fuelling fears of debt traps. This fuels anti-Chinese sentiment and arouses suspicion in regional societies. Concerns that China will seize land or natural resources in exchange for loans have fuelled protests in recent years.⁵³

Moldashev links China’s influential position in Central Asia to its policy of erasing ethnic and religious identities and “Chineseising” minorities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Some influential Kazakhs who have moved from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan have not yet obtained Kazakh citizenship and are finding it difficult to renounce their Chinese citizenship. Children cannot be reunited with their parents due to total control in Xinjiang. For example, the case of Sairagul Sautbai, an ethnic Kazakh woman who crossed the border between Kazakhstan and China to reunite with her family, attracted public and international media attention. These developments are not entirely consistent with China’s positive image construction. The language of power, total control, denial of cultural diversity, and especially the attempt to erase the national identities of the peoples of Central Asia create the image of an aggressive

⁵¹ Eduard Petrov, Mikhail Semerkov, *Geopoliticheskie riski vliianiia Kitaia na strany Tsentralnoi Azii* [The Geopolitical Risks of China's Influence on Central Asian Countries], in “Comparative Politics Russia”, Vol. 8, 2017, No. 3, pp. 114-119.

⁵² Temur Umarov, *China Looms Large in Central Asia*, March 30, 2020, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/03/china-looms-large-in-central-asia?lang=en> (Accessed on 30.09.2024).

⁵³ Aygerim Ryskulbekova, *Obrazovatelyniye proyekty Kitaya kak instrument myagkoy sily v Kazahstane* [China’s Education Projects as an Instrument of Soft Power in Kazakhstan], Cabar.asia, Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, June 26, 2023, in <https://cabar.asia/ru/obrazovatelnye-proekty-kitaya-kak-instrument-myagkoj-sily-v-kazahstane> (Accessed on 11.10.2024).

neighbour.⁵⁴ Moldashev emphasises that China's approach is creating a hotbed of tension near Central Asia and warns that attempts to erase identity will lead to the growth of extremist sentiments in the Xinjiang region.⁵⁵

The debt trap plays a vital role in China's economic expansionism towards Central Asia. "China lends grave amounts of credit to many countries. Loans that are not repaid on time are then used as collateral for other purposes. This situation makes the people of Central Asian countries uneasy; thus, taking loans from China is perceived as a risk. Nevertheless, according to 2023 data, China's loans to Central Asian countries total approximately 15.7 billion dollars." In particular, China is lending significant amounts to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. In Tajikistan, in particular, China is known to have received the rights to operate many mines and certain concessions in border disputes in exchange for irrevocable loans. Buyar emphasises that the people of the region "oppose taking loans from China and see it as a threat to their sovereignty."⁵⁶

Petrov and Semerkov note that most Central Asian peoples believe that the BRI serves China's interests. In this context, the BRI serves China's interests rather than those of the regional states.⁵⁷ The means and methods used to address the tasks that arise for China in Central Asia do not always align with the principles of "mutual benefit" proclaimed by the Chinese leadership, thereby creating risks and threats.⁵⁸

China has gradually expanded its military engagement with Central Asia by leveraging its economic power. Dunay emphasises that the nature of China's presence in the region is sophisticated and grounded in mutual advantage. "First of all, China has provided material aid to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to support their police forces. This included building a facility to combat drug trafficking in southern Tajikistan. China has purchased military equipment in Central Asian countries, including 40 Shkval torpedoes from Kazakhstan in 1998. Since some Central Asian states (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) export energy to China,

⁵⁴ Kayrat Moldashev, *Riski v realizatsyii initsyativi 'Odin Poyas, Odin Puty' v Tsentralnoy Azii* (Risks in the Implementation of the 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative in Central Asia) Cabar.asia, Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, January 11, 2019, in <https://cabar.asia/ru/riski-v-realizatsii-initsiativy-odin-poyas-odin-put-v-tsentralnoj-azii> (Accessed on 11.10.2024).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Cengiz Buyar, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ Eduard Petrov, Mikhail Semerkov, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-119.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

military deliveries are often made to reduce the trade surplus.”⁵⁹

Initially, China pursued its military interests in the region through the SCO and by relying on Russia’s military presence. However, Umarov states that this approach has changed in recent years. China’s first border post in the region was a base in the Murghab district of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast of Tajikistan, near the border with Afghanistan and China. It is officially a Tajik border post funded by China. In 2016, the governments of Tajikistan and China signed an agreement to build seven border posts and training centres along the Tajik-Afghan border. Three command offices, five border posts and outposts, and a training centre were built here with Chinese funding.⁶⁰

Political scientist Dosym Satpayev, director of the Risk Assessment Group in Kazakhstan, emphasised in a commentary to 24.kg that China will gradually and cautiously increase its military presence in Central Asia. In this context, it will avoid direct confrontation with Russia. “China will start to increase its military-technical activities in Central Asia in various fields, such as military cooperation, exercises and possibly arms deliveries. China is trying to replace the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) by transforming the SCO into a security provider. In this context, Tajikistan is the first test base, a kind of springboard.”⁶¹ Satpayev argues that Russia would not dare to oppose China’s expanding presence in the region. This is because Russia is highly dependent on China both in terms of international support and economically. In a vulnerable position, Russia cannot dictate terms, and China is actively exploiting this.⁶²

China is keen to ensure regional security, particularly given the instability in Afghanistan. Militants in Afghanistan can reach western China via Tajikistan or directly through the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow, poorly controlled mountainous region. This corridor is therefore strategically important for stability in western China.⁶³

⁵⁹ Pál Dunay, *China’s Influence in Central Asia. Implications for the Euro-Atlantic World*, “Per Concordiam. Journal of European Security and Defense Issues”, Vol. 10, 2020, no. 3, pp. 36-41, https://perconcordiam.com/perCon_V10N3_ENG.pdf (Accessed on 11.10.2024).

⁶⁰ Temur Umarov, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ Daria Podolskaya, *Zachem Kitayu nuzhna voyennaya baza v Tadjikistane? Mneniye eksperta* [Why does China need a military base in Tajikistan? An expert's opinion], July 04, 2024, https://24.kg/vlast/298533_zachem_kitayu_nujna_voennaya_baza_vnbsptadjikistane_mnenie_eksperta/ (Accessed on 11.10.2024).

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Temur Umarov, *op. cit.*

Alongside its growing economic power, China is also seeking to consolidate its soft power in the region. Confucius Institutes and Chinese Studies have become the main symbols of China's soft power. Career opportunities linked to Chinese language skills are attracting the younger generation in Central Asian countries. In Kazakhstan, 14,000 students study at five Confucius Institutes, and in Uzbekistan, 1,500 students enrol each year at the Tashkent State Institute of Oriental Studies, the region's oldest Confucius Institute.⁶⁴ "Confucius Institutes generally operate as educational centres in Central Asian countries based on a co-financing model. Confucius Institutes operate in all republics in the region except Turkmenistan. The educational focus of these institutes is mainly on traditional Chinese culture and language, but modern aspects of Chinese political life and Chinese politics are also taught."⁶⁵ In recent years, the number of Central Asian students studying in China has increased. For example, Kazakhstan, one of the most important countries in the region, is among the top ten countries sending the highest number of students to China.⁶⁶

While Central Asian countries attach importance to economic relations with China, they are also sceptical of China's growing presence in the region. This scepticism is particularly pronounced among the local population. Increasing asymmetric dependence on China has made Beijing the dominant player in Central Asia not only economically, but also politically, militarily, strategically and geopolitically. This poses a serious threat to the sovereignty of the countries in the region.

CONCLUSIONS

Central Asia is key to the full realisation of China's global ambitions. In this context, the BRI has become one of the most essential instruments of China's regional ambitions. Since 2013, China's economic visibility in Central Asia has been further strengthened through the BRI. In the subsequent period, China's geopolitical transformation into the region's most influential power has become evident. Russia's war against Ukraine has crystallised China's global ambitions. Russia's increasing dependence on China confers significant advantages on

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Evgeniya Makhmutova, *Kitayskaya 'myakgaya sila' v Tsentralnoy Azii: perspektivy i ogranichitely* (Chinese 'Soft Power' in Central Asia: Prospects and Constraints), in "Kitay v mirovoy i regional'noy politike. Istoriya i sovremennost'", Vol. XXVII, 2022, pp. 268-283.

⁶⁶ Aygerim Ryskulbekova, *op. cit.*

Beijing, both regionally and globally. In this context, China is seeking to consolidate its unilateral dominance in Central Asia not only through economic but also through political means.

The main objectives of China's expansionism in Central Asia can be envisioned as follows:

- 1) Ensuring regional connectivity by making favourable use of Central Asia's geographical location
- 2) Access to different sources of raw materials, especially energy
- 3) Ensuring the development of China's poorer regions bordering Central Asia
- 4) Using Central Asia as a springboard in the context of global geopolitical struggle
- 5) Luring the countries of the region into a debt trap through economic methods and establishing unilateral supremacy
- 6) Turning economic supremacy to political ends.
- 7) Supporting cultural expansionism with economic factors

Central Asia occupies a decisive position in realising China's global ambitions. Undoubtedly, China's growing presence in Central Asia poses a problem for the sovereignty of the countries in the region. The region, which has been under Russian pressure for many years, is now becoming a significant area of Chinese expansionism. China is rapidly increasing its influence in Central Asia, not only economically and in security terms, but also politically and militarily. Moreover, China is seeking to consolidate its soft-power influence in the region. China's strategic dominance in the area may be an obstacle to the realisation of a balanced foreign policy strategy of the Central Asian states in the medium and long term. This situation leads China to see Central Asia and Eurasia at large as a living space and to challenge the RBIO through the region.

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