

ASIA PROGRAMME

SECURITY DIMENSION OF CHINA'S PRESENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

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APRIL 2019

ASIA FOCUS #108

In the early 1990s the five Central Asian states¹ stepped up to the international arena as independent actors for the first time since the 19th century. From the moment the Russian empire launched its expansion policy in Central Asia in the 18th century and till the collapse of the Soviet Union, the five regional republics existed within the political space dominated by Russia. Composed of diverse 'socio-cultural' minorities, that political space presented a certain kind of a 'world-empire' driven by a "heavy administrative, fiscal and bureaucratic apparatus".² The Central Asian states -then Soviet republics - were allowed the role of the imperial periphery. Isolated from foreign powers' influence, they had been conducting the policy oriented on and controlled by Moscow.³

Today, no longer dependent, the five Central Asian states have partially taken control of their economic and political potential that they seek to develop via discovering new external connections and partnerships. They have thus begun to open themselves up to the powerful actors of their immediate neighbourhood, or, to be more precise, it is the dominant actors who have started to explore the region.⁴ China, being no exception, has become today an indispensable commercial partner of the five states and at the same time a vital, though not explicit, actor of the regional security agenda.

Despite the fact that Central Asia has been in the focus of its foreign policy for a relatively short period of time, China has already demonstrated a significant progress. Holding mainly economic interests in the region, it is today one of the most engaged actors in Central Asia whose presence is translated in its full scope by the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) or the new silk road initiative. It has already become a buzz word in the Central Asian republics that are eager to benefit from the Chinese project. Though China – Central Asia cooperation began to develop even before 2013, the official launch of the BRI

¹ Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan

² Bihr Alain, "Immanuel Wallerstein, Comprendre le monde. Introduction à l'analyse des systèmes-monde", in *¿ interrogations ?*, N°7. Le corps performant, décembre 2008 [en ligne]

³ S. Omarova, "Проблемы интеграции в Центральной Азии на современном этапе", *Vestnik KazNU*, 2010

⁴ Marc Julienne, "Le défi terroriste : enjeu de sécurité nationale et déterminant de la politique régionale" in *Chine dans le monde*, dir. by Alice Ekman, CNRS Editions, 2018

initiative has given a designated orientation to previously unitary commercial activities and has indirectly given them political tint.

Though BRI is first and foremost recognized as a commercial project, different facets can be revealed at a closer look. Notwithstanding its official declarations, China's implementation of its foreign policy strategy can be characterized as a global power's behaviour summarized by Alexander Iskandaryan as the objective to "become a neighbour in each corner of the world". Along with economic expansion, China is boosting its presence in a number of other spheres, such as diplomatic, military, including peacekeeping, and cybersecurity. In addition, its expansion is measured not only in different areas of specialization, but also has a geographical dimension: The Belt and the Road serving to rewrite the world political map.

The political aspect of the BRI initiative is also stressed by the fact that it is not a strictly planned project with a specifically delimited list of activities, but it is instead a "metadiscourse on Silk Road and a new manifestation of China's soft power, of its "peaceful" and "multilateral" rise"⁵, given to already existing commercial activities of China abroad. This specifically created narrative aims at assuring patronage of the Chinese state with regards to its nationals, more importantly to those who are implanted abroad, reflecting the close connections that traditionally exist between the Chinese state and its nationals. The Silk Road discourse goes beyond a simple promotion of Chinese commercial activities, but is intended to proliferate a Chinese "model" - model of state organization, of the economic system and, on a higher level, model of conducting international relations. It is thus an effective soft power tool, which at the end serves to promote Chinese national interests and establishing what it considers its "rightful place" in the international political system, the BRI initiative being an essential part of its foreign policy strategy.

⁵ Marlene Laruelle, "China's Belt and Road Initiative. Quo Vadis?", OBOR CAP, 2018

CHINESE ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

The choice made by Xi Jinping to announce the launch of his signature project in Astana, Kazakhstan, is not a matter of coincidence. The biggest state and the most advanced economy in the region, Kazakhstan plays a key role in the implementation of the BRI. Following the impetus given by China, the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev has been actively promoting national project, part of the Kazakhstan-2050 strategy, *Nurly Zhol* ("the Bright Path") that is aimed at development of transportation networks, logistics, housing and education, as well as of industry and energy sectors.⁶ In essence, the Kazakh initiative corresponds entirely⁷ to the logic of the BRI and serves as a gesture of appreciation of the new Silk Road project.

Kazakhstan is not the only one to respond favourably to the Chinese project. Other Central Asian states political elites have shown themselves enthusiastic to welcome Chinese investors, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in particular. Yet, a "welcome approach" to the China's economic advancement in the region should be viewed without neglecting a significant gap between high and low politics. Foreign policy choices are made and carried out mainly by the political elites on the highest levels and do not necessarily correspond to the public interest. That is what can be observed in some Central Asian states. While high authorities and their entourage strive to attract Chinese investments to their countries, public opinion is much more reticent. Protests fomented by xenophobic sentiment occur from time to time in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, bordering states, but also in Kazakhstan, like the one in 2016. Following the newly introduced amendments to the Cadastral Code allowing henceforth foreigners lend land for up to 25 years, massive protests with a strong anti-Chinese connotation took place in several Kazakh cities. Even before the land reform, public poll showed that in 2007 18% of the interrogated shared a negative attitude towards labors migrants from China, their number reaching 33% in 2012.⁸ Negative attitude has been even more aggravated after the Human Rights Watch

⁶ Official website of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Republic of Uzbekistan

⁷ Китайский шелковый путь и Нурлы Жол пойдут одной дорогой", *Forbes Kazakhstan*, May 12, 2015

⁸ Manchouk Asaoutai, "La sinophobie au Kazakhstan s'est renforcée-t-elle ?", *Radio Azattyk*, 24 avril 2018

report on detention camps in Xinjiang was published in September 2018 revealing massive oppression of ethnic Kazakhs living in China⁹.

However, China is determined to expand its engagement on the Central Asian market countries notwithstanding the difficulties such an undertaking implies. In that regard, the region caters for China's domestic and overseas interests. Firstly, it meets the needs of the China's own development by diversifying the provenance of its hydrocarbon imports and at the same time by fuelling its economic growth. After having experienced a spectacular increase as a result of the policy of reform and opening in 1980s, China has been experiencing a certain decline starting from 2000s. Oscillating between 14% and 7% in 1992-2007, China's GDP growth has been progressively falling since then.¹⁰ Thus, it reached a 6.7% mark in July 2018.¹¹ Central Asian market offers commercial opportunities, which can help China manage its production surplus, in particular in its steel industry. Beijing is therefore making important investments in construction of railroads, airports and electrical grids, in other words, in what can be defined as hard infrastructure.¹² By the means of such "infrastructural diplomacy",¹³ China counts on balancing the domestic economic situation and providing stable economic growth.

In addition, establishing energy cooperation with China who became in 2017 the world's biggest oil importer with 8.4 Mb/day, surpassing the United States,¹⁴ is a not-to-be-missed opportunity for Central Asian economies that rely largely on the hydrocarbons' exports. Even with the decline of its economic growth, China's energy needs remain colossal. It has to resort to imports not only because its own deposits are not sufficient for its numerous population, but also due to an urgent need to move from coal reserves which constitute the major part (70% in 2015) of Chinese energy mix. Being the world's biggest consumer of coal (50.7% of world consumption in 2017¹⁵), China is suffering from a severe environmental impact caused by the coal industry. Thus, to balance its ever-growing energy needs and degrading pollution crisis, China is forced to import the

⁹ "Обострение казахского вопроса в Китае связано с активной урбанизацией в СУАР", *StanRadar*, October 26, 2018

¹⁰ The World Bank official website

¹¹ *China GDP Annual Growth Rate*, Trading Economics

¹² Marlène Laruelle, "China's Belt and Road Initiative. *Quo vadis ?*" in *China's Belt and Road Initiative and its impact in Central Asia*, George Washington University Central Asia Program, 2018, p. XI

¹³ Hao Tian, "China's conditional aid and its impact in Central Asia", *ibid.*, p. 26

¹⁴ Jeff Barron, "China surpassed the United States as the world largest crude oil importer in 2017", *U.S. Energy Information Administration*, February 5, 2018

¹⁵ BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2018

resources from abroad increasing its dependence *vis-à-vis* international markets. Today, the largest part of crude oil imported by China comes from the Middle East, in particular from Saudi Arabia, Oman, Iraq and Iran. Any destabilization affecting these countries, a quite probable outcome for some of them, would imply aggravating consequences for China. Therefore, to minimize the effects of its vulnerable position, China endeavours to diversify the provenance of its natural resources imports by discovering new geographical areas. In this regard, central Asians states' proximity is a crucial element.

The Central Asian republics owe their hydrocarbon reserves primarily to the Caspian Sea coast, which harbours important energy resource deposits. In particular, the two countries boarding the sea, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are today the biggest regional exporters of oil and natural gas respectively. Chinese majors like CNPC, Sinopec and CNOOC are highly interested in the Central Asian oil and gas deposits and they have contributed largely in the construction of gas and oil pipelines connecting the two states to Chinese territory. While China is thus diversifying its hydrocarbons provenance, the Central Asian states are multiplying their trade partnerships, though with varying success. If in case of Kazakhstan, trade deal with China represents one of the possible options, Turkmenistan finds itself in a much more vulnerable position. Following several disputes over the prices, it has lost Russia and highly likely Iran as commercial partners and can count from now on China exclusively. Therefore, Turkmenistan confers to the latter an important advantage in price negotiations, a large part of its economy being now sustained by China.

Yet, the energy resources potential of Central Asian deposits should not be overestimated. Not only they remain incomparable to those of Russia for instance, but they are also hardly exploitable and require costly cutting-edge technologies.¹⁶ In the end, their exploitation does not prove to be profitable since local oil and gas companies do not possess the necessary financial resources and technology equipment. Russian brand enterprises that have been present in the region for a while, dispose as well of limited capacities, notably due to the economic crisis affecting Russian economy since 2014. In this context, the biggest Chinese companies face few obstacles in accessing successfully to the Central Asian hydrocarbon market and even taking control over its part. After having

¹⁶Céline Bayou, "Les hydrocarbures centrasiatiques à la croisée des chemins", *Questions internationales*, n°82, November-Décember, 2016

established a foothold on the regional market and arranged the flow of hydrocarbons toward its territory¹⁷, the Chinese enterprises proceeded to gain access to the European market *via* Central Asian companies. For instance, as early as in 2013, Chinese companies in Kazakhstan possessed shares in some twenty local enterprises, their participation varying from 50% to 100%.¹⁸ Correspondingly, statistics demonstrate that Kazakh exports of crude oil to China decreased from 19% in 2013 to 5% in 2016, while its exports to Europe represent now approximately 80% of total exports.¹⁹ We may presume that Central Asian hydrocarbons market is an interlink between Chinese energy majors and the European market, and not an ultimate goal itself.

The transit potential of Central Asia seems to be predetermined by its geographical position. Enclosed between dynamic regional players, the five states serve as a connecting hub, in particular between China and Europe, which is the principal (final) destination of the BRI. Central Asia's location offers an alternative way to deliver Chinese goods to Europe. As of today, maritime routes are exploited to a much larger extent in comparison with Central Asian transport corridors, due to greater capacities of ship cargoes. Nevertheless, China is accentuating overland routes as well since land transportation is known to be faster. It is for instance the case of the Trans-Caspian transport corridor which stretches over 6500 km. It starts off in China and crosses Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and comes finally to Europe. According to estimations, the corridor can be covered in 14 days instead of 60 days when travelling by sea.²⁰

The benefit that Central Asian states can derive from its transit potential, besides the material ones, consists in reinforcing the interregional connectivity, which is essential for the implementation of China's trans-regional commercial projects, and for the positive dynamic of the region itself. As for the moment, difficulties of circulation among the Central Asian states persist and create serious complications for trans-regional commercial activities, as it was illustrated by the diplomatic dispute between the former Kyrgyz president Almazbek Atambaev et the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev in October 2017, when large-scale traffic jams were provoked at the border between the two states. Similarly, visa regimes have for a long time been a major issue impeding

¹⁷Gazoduc Turkmenistan-Chine, oléoduc Kazakhstan-Chine

¹⁸ "В РК 22 нефтяные компании с китайским участием", *Forbes Kazakhstan*, January 12, 2013

¹⁹The Observatory of Economic Complexity

²⁰ Fuad Shahbazov, "China to Europe by way of Azerbaijan's Trans-Caspian gateway", *The Diplomat*, February 16, 2018

commercial exchanges, as in case of the visa regime on the Tajik-Uzbek border which has been abolished no earlier than in March 2018.²¹ Though a significant progress has been made, in particular with the new political elites coming progressively to power, there is still ample room for improvements.

Acceleration of goods' circulation and diversification of means of their delivering would present an apparent asset for China, allowing to, on one side, expand its commercial activities, and on the other side to have various logistics options assuring its economic independence. It is particularly relevant in the light of the United States' wariness towards "peaceful rise of China" and its efforts to contain its economic expansion.

In overall terms, the Central Asian states' participation in the BRI has a two-fold dimension. As declared by Chinese officials, the new Silk Road project complies with Central Asian states' interests and is beneficial for the region. The hard infrastructure diplomacy has indeed known success in the five republics, which consider it as an alternative to the European and American soft infrastructure that aims at fighting corruption and promotion of free and independent market economy. Though the latter seeks to resolve fundamental problems rather than their consequences, the Chinese approach appears to be more attractive for the Central Asian states since it offers more practical solutions in a short- and middle-term perspectives. Soft infrastructure strategy is hardly applicable in this region, given the nature of local governments. Mostly authoritarian, they seek to consolidate power and to ensure their continuity by exposing tangible and visible results of their governing. Hard infrastructure projects are thus much more consistent with the local governments' logic rather than 'abstract' democratic reforms.

However, apart from evident advantages, the Chinese economic expansion implies the risk of developing a relation of dependence for the Central Asian republics, their economies being lagging largely behind the Chinese one, which can be avoided only if major political and diplomatic efforts are consolidated.

²¹ «The ice has melted: visa regime is abolished between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan», *Sputnik Tajikistan*, March 9, 2018

THE SECURITY COMPONENT OF CHINA'S INTEREST IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE NECESSITY TO MAINTAIN STABILITY IN CENTRAL ASIA

China's growing engagement in security affairs of the Central Asian states

The logic of the BRI initiative does not confine itself to commercial profit exclusively. To explain a close connection between China's economic objectives and security concerns in Central Asia, it might be interesting to look into the cause-and-effect relationships between these two spheres.

Contrary to other actors with global ambitions, China shows itself quite reticent when it comes to projecting its military power abroad. Its only overseas military base is located in Djibouti and still, China insists on considering it to be its "support facilities" or "logistics centre" indispensable for the BRI activities instead of a "military foothold".²² In addition, apart from military exercises and peacekeeping missions of the United Nations, Chinese military personnel has not taken part in any campaign outside the countries' borders since the Vietnam War.

Yet, a deeper study into China's strategy reveal certain discrepancies between its image of a purely economic power reluctant to take an active standpoint in security and military affairs and its continuing military expenditure increase and a growing network of security cooperation agreements. The China's expenditure rate has been growing steadily since 1995, amounting to about 23 billion USD in 2000 and attaining 228 billion USD in 2017. In other words, since the beginning of 2000 China has multiplied its military budget almost by ten times. It is necessary though to place these figures in the overall context: if military expenses made up 11.7% of China's total expenditure in 2000, they make 6.1% only in 2017. Correspondingly, with regard to the GDP, there has not been any significant change since 2000: military budget constitutes 2.2% of the country's GDP in 2000 and 1.9% in 2017.²³ Thus, while the proportion of the military expenses in the total budget

²²Tyler Headley, "China's Djibouti Base: A One Year Update", *The Diplomat*, December 4, 2018

²³Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Yearbook: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security.

remains more or less at the same level, its quantitative value is yet gradually increasing. Today, China has the world second largest military budget after the United States, surpassing "recognized" as such military powers like Russia, France and India.²⁴ If China has definitely become one of the military powers, it is for the moment uncertain if China is aspiring to be a *global* military power. The observation of its foreign policy leads to the conclusion that its military potential is mostly projected on a regional scope, notably in the South China Sea, with regard to which China holds concrete interests and an intrinsic political stand. As for the remote geographical zones, its military participation remains more an exception than a rule.

In this case, how to combine its military potential exceeding its - officially declared - military ambitions? In media and academic circles, speculations on its "coming-out" are quite common, the scenarios remaining so far uncertain. Yet, what can be derived from this source data is China's perception of power. More specifically, the question of the actual usage of its military contingent is not *per se* relevant. It is the *possibility* to put it into action, in a short period of time and in any strategic zone what matters and therefore it presents a fundamental component of its power more generally.

Security landscape of Central Asia

This conclusion can be applied to the case of the Central Asian states as well. As for now, China's engagement in the region is significant when it comes to economy, though less tangible in the security sphere. Interestingly, the two spheres are highly intertwined here since economic success of China in Central Asia depends directly on the security situation of the latter. It would be necessary to specify what is meant here by security. First of all, this term a twofold dimension: on the one hand, it's a question of the political, economic and military security of the Central Asian states which guarantees "fluid" implementation of the BRI projects; on the other hand, it's the security of the China's presence itself which is at stake. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, various foreign powers have been trying to "conquer" the Central Asian market and challenging each other. Thus, for instance, one can observe a major shift of economic influence from Russia to China, the latter now being

²⁴SIPRI Military Expenditure Database

interested in preserving its advantageous position. In terms of security affairs, the competition concerns primarily the United States, Russia and again - China, for whom security is a *sine qua non* condition for economy and economy is a tool to ensure security.

In this part, we will give a general overview of the domestic factors in the Central Asian countries that constitute the security landscape of the region and, in a second time, of how China contributes to this security agenda in order to ensure its economic presence and protect it from external threats.

Multiple facets of regional security in Central Asia

As we have mentioned before, security is a polysemic term which should be considered not *stricto sensu*, but with the understanding of its multidimensional nature. According to Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, a subdivision can be made between military, political, economic, societal or environmental fields.²⁵ The advantage of this interpretation consists in the fact that it reflects not only interstate relations, but also those between an individual, society and the state, allowing the possibility to form a bigger picture composed of their intersecting perceptions. In other words, the state is no longer presented as a "dehumanized institutional apparatus".²⁶

Political and societal security. The early prerequisites for the instability in the Central Asian region can be found in the Soviet authorities' nationalities policy and border demarcation, when some ethnic groups appeared to be minorities and distanced from their own people (e.g., Kyrgyz enclaves in Uzbekistan). If at that time the borders separating the Soviet republics were of a little importance and served mainly as administrative markers, starting from 1991 they have become tangible obstacles for establishing stable and friendly relations between the regional states. As a result, the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union has witnessed ethnic conflicts, territorial disputes and a civil war in the Central Asian states. The clashes have been in particular frequent in the Fergana Valley where meet the boarders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and where armed conflicts occur up to now (Osh, Andijan)

²⁵Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, Jaap de Wilde, *Security, A new Framework for analysis*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998

²⁶Giovanni Arcudi, "La sécurité entre permanence et changement" dans *Relations internationales*, 2006/1 (n°125), pp. 97-109

Besides, since the failure of the communist state, Central Asian countries have been undergoing political transformations seeking a new "appropriate" political regime. As in the case of Russia, the democratic option was open to them and, for instance Kyrgyzstan, has been consistently trying to apply the "Western" model.²⁷ The other states, however, have found it incompatible with their original social order. Marked by patrimonial and sporadically clan social organization, these states have not experienced the same historical path leading to democratic perception of political organization as Western countries. Therefore, promotion of human rights and transparency, condition of major cooperation agreements with the United States and the European Union, is not being done effortlessly. Let alone, until recently, Uzbekistan and, still, Turkmenistan remain(ed) the most authoritarian and closed regimes in the world.

After having experienced major turbulence (civil war in Tajikistan in 1992-1997, the Andijan incident in 2005, political crisis in Kyrgyzstan in 2010), the Central Asian states made a significant progress. Notably, power transitions in Uzbekistan in 2016 (following the death of a highly controversial, but doubtlessly preeminent political leader Islam Karimov) and in Kyrgyzstan in 2017 have passed peacefully and the new leaders seem to be in favour of regional cooperation and a "good-neighbour policy". As noted by Julien Thorez, "engaging frankly in regional diplomacy previously abandoned by his predecessor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev has demonstrated as aspiration to "cast aside the logic of confrontation for the benefit of the logic of cooperation".²⁸

Economic security. In this perspective, the problem stems from the weak economies of the Central Asian states relying either on the agriculture sector (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) or on the energy sector (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan), which creates a major vulnerability towards foreign states. Due to the lack of financial resources, they turn out to be unable to construct comprehensive regional infrastructure systems which once

²⁷ "Western observers were quick to put Kyrgyzstan on a pedestal as the regional leader in its efforts to introduce democracy and political pluralism after independence. In reality, the country's democratic initiatives have come in fits and starts, but its leaders astutely perceived the financial and political rewards for cultivating an image as a bastion of democracy surrounded by a sea of authoritarianism. The image of Kyrgyzstan as the 'Switzerland of Central Asia' is cliché, but it has helped the country's leaders foster positive relations with the West." Natalie Koch "Disorder Over The Border: Spinning The Spectre Of Instability Through Time And Space In Central Asia" in *Central Asian Survey*, 21 Feb 2018, 37:1, p. 19

²⁸In the original source : "[...] s'impliquant franchement dans une diplomatie régionale que son prédécesseur avait délaissée. La volonté du nouveau pouvoir d'abandonner une logique de confrontation au profit d'une logique de coopération a permis de lever plusieurs points de désaccord." Julien Thorez, "L'Ouzbékistan après Islam Karimov: continuité institutionnelle et changements structurels" in *Regards sur l'Eurasie. L'année politique 2018*, CERi, n°241-242, février 2019, pp. 18-23

existed, but have ever since become outdated or destroyed. The Soviet economy based on the division of labour functioned normally as a result of a close connectivity of the Soviet republics which is, in Central Asia, no longer a case. Numerous trans-regional projects, such as hydro and electricity systems, as well as trade relations fell ever since into decay. Reviving of infrastructure and communication systems and economic growth stimulation is essential not only for the regional development itself, but also for attracting foreign investments, including those from China. So far, the development gap between Central Asian states and their Eastern neighbour is self-evident. It has been vividly demonstrated by the notorious²⁹ dry port *Khorgas*, a vast duty-free zone on the Kazakh-Chinese border leaving a "strong impression of a unilateral interaction".³⁰ Whereas the Chinese side of the hub offers a broad range of commercial activities, the Kazakh side leaves a scarce choice.

Military security. Security landscape in Central Asia is largely determined by external factors, notably the proximity of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, directly concerned by their southern neighbours, have to deal with the threat presented by their unstable political regimes, drug trafficking problems and terrorist movements. As noted by Marc Julienne, "These states are at the same time the cradle and the destination of jihadist groups, and besides they represent vulnerabilities for domestic political situation because of the unstable nature of their weak political systems that can swing into instability as a result of power transition". So far, any attempts to stabilize Afghanistan have been unsuccessful and the deployed NATO forces have not created a positive precedent either. Since their consequent withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, the Taliban regime has once more resurrected and gained territory. As a result, in its actual state the Afghan state is not capable of ensuring neither its internal security nor the security of its frontiers. According to the Russian-American work group on the Afghan drug, along the Afghan-Tajik border stretching over 1206 km (the longest border of Afghanistan) there is only one guard deployed over 50 km. The surveillance is even more complicated because of the mountainous landscape, which makes the border hardly

²⁹The commercial hub *Khorgas* has made papers' headlines several times due to corruption scandals, customs bribery and construction delays. Read more in : Catherine Putz, "Silk Road Fever and Another Corruption Report", *The Diplomat*, January 6, 2018 and Emily Feng, "China-Kazakhstan border woes dent Silk Road ambitions", *Financial Times*, December 21, 2017

³⁰Dana Kruglova, "По обе стороны Хоргоса. Репортаж Informburo.kz из зоны беспошлинной торговли", *Informburo.kz*, April 16, 2018

accessible. Therefore, smugglers cross easily the Afghan-Tajik and Afghan-Turkmen borders, which serve as main passageways for terrorists and drug traffickers to Central Asia and then to Russia and China.

Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have suffered from several terrorist attacks starting from 1990s, performed mainly by the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan), like those in Tashkent (1999, 2004, 2005³¹), Bishkek (2002) and Osh (2003). Following the repressive measures aimed at countering the IMU's activities, its combatants had to flee the two countries and refuge themselves in Afghanistan. Eventually, they merged with the Taliban and they operate ever since in this new quality. The two other Central Asian states that remained preserved from terrorism, have recently also been targeted by the Islamist radicals as well. Kazakhstan, which population is 70% Muslim, suffered from terror attacks in 2016 in Aktobe and Almaty. Similarly, in Tajikistan a terror act took place in July 2018, being the first armed incident of this kind since 2010. The terrorist issue has thus been introduced to the two states' agenda.

Central Asia is now running an even greater risk of the exposure to the terrorist threat due to the military failures of IS (Islamic state) in Syria. According to the Crisis Group report of January 2015, between 2000 and 4000 Central Asia nationals have left their countries to join the IS forces. Consequently, their eventual return menaces the stability of their countries of origin.³² In addition, it is not impossible that IS moves to the Central Asia, seeking for new areas of deployment. Though currently the Taliban movement is opposed to IS ambitions and declares that their political goals do not go beyond the Afghanistan borders, the possibility of their collaboration remains the subject of speculations in media and academic circles. If his outcome were to be achieved, the situation in Afghanistan and eventually in Central Asia would be likely to escalate. Such security context casts a shadow on the regional economic initiatives and not without a reason. Remarkably, in several cases Chinese assets have been aimed specifically. Thus, copper mine Mes Aynak in Afghanistan has been attacked a number of times; in Baluchistan province of Pakistan the Gwadar port and the Saindak mine have also been

³¹"Теракты и беспорядки в Узбекистане в 1999–2005 гг. Справка", *RIA Novosti*, May 26, 2009

³² The recruitment concerns normally the most vulnerable social groups, those living in the countryside and possessing a low income. Interesting fact, a great number of them is recruited in Russia, common destination of Central Asian (mainly Tajik and Kyrgyz) work immigrants. Living in unfamiliar environment and often in precarious conditions, there are much more inclined to follow the promised "combat for justice".

targeted, while Chinese nationals have repeatedly been kidnapped and killed in both countries.³³

HOW IS CHINA CONTRIBUTING TO THE SECURITY AGENDA IN CENTRAL ASIA?

Exploring the multiple facets of security issues in Central Asia allows to determine the forms of China's engagement in the regional affairs which in its turn can also appear in various configurations. Generally, to ensure stability in Central Asia it operates on two grounds. On the one hand, it employs economic leverages to aim profound causes of terrorism and separatism. On the other hand, China is engaged in diplomatic and military cooperation with the Central Asian States, but also with external actors with tangible presence in the region.

In China's perspective, environment is a crucial element in shaping of social dynamics. Whereas economic conditions are favourable enough to meet the needs of the population, the risk of proliferation of radical and extremist movements is much lower. As notes Antoine Garapon, "the Chinese have an unwavering confidence in the strong potential of economy for resolution of problems"³⁴ and in this sense economic development is not only the ultimate goal, but at the same time an efficient means of ensuring stability and security. In this sense, the BRI itself can be viewed as a part of China's security strategy.

However, China's response to the security threats in Central Asia appears to go beyond the purely economic logic of maintaining regional stability and engages progressively in the security affairs by the means of political actions and diplomatic coordination. Already in the late 1990s, China has joined its efforts in Central Asia with Russia, the cooperation that materialized in the creation in 2001 of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Initially, the SCO was conceived as a purely security cooperation, a domain where it remains the most present external actor in Central Asia.³⁵ Together with Russia, on the

³³Martin Breitmaier "China's rise and Central Asia's security", *Issue Alert*, EUISS, n°21, June 2016

³⁴Antoine Garapon, "Les « nouvelles routes de la soie »: la voie chinoise de la mondialisation?", *Institut des hautes études de la justice*, November 2017

³⁵Russian engagement in the local security affairs is mainly expressed by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), military alliance uniting Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The CSTO offers itself as a principal security organization in the ex-Soviet space. To support its political ambitions, it has created veritable armed forces capable of intervening in one of the states demanding military support. Since 2001, there exist Collective forces of rapid deployment composed of Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Tajik and Russian battalions. It is for the first time that multilateral forces have been assembled in Central Asia. Though regular military exercises take place in the framework of the CSTO, its military forces have not yet been proven efficient in any regional conflict.

tribune of the SCO China launched its fight against “three evil forces’: terrorism, separatism and extremism. As part of this policy, China has concluded anti-terrorist cooperation agreements with Central Asian republics during the first decade of the 2000s. It provides material aid, such as military equipment for Tajikistan since 2003. In 2015, the mass media have mentioned the trade deal between China on one side, and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan on the other side about the selling of sophisticated air defence systems. Though the SCO forces have not been engaged in real combats in Central Asia (neither have the CSTO’s ones), China has conducted joint anti-terrorist military exercises, the first having united Kyrgyz and Chinese armed forces in 2002 (“*Exercise-01*”). A joint Chinese-Tajik exercise took place in 2006 (“*Coordination-2006*”). The same type of exercises has been organized with the participation of Kazakhstan (“*Tianshan I*”) in 2006, and with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (“*Tianshan II*”) in 2011. In addition, the SCO has created the Regional Anti-terrorist structure (RATS) with an objective to collect, analyse and share relevant information, to create databases of terrorist networks and to maintain connections with other security organizations.

Though stable on paper, the evolution of the SCO, in particular in the second decade of the 2000s, has known some ‘political zigzags’. To start with, the form that the SCO took is quite different from a “traditional” security organization. Unlike the CSTO, it is not a veritable alliance, but more of a regional forum, as described by Yulia Nikitina. «This organization is closer to the non-institutionalized formations like G8* or G20, rather than to the EU or the OSCE». To work on the goals set by the SCO, it has opted for an “amorphous forum structure” which serves as a “convenient platform for multilateral coordination of interests and exchange of opinions”.³⁶ Thierry Kellner noted that “it is a reassuring framework under the cover of which Beijing has managed to become a complete actor in Central Asia and to introduce smoothly its influence with causing any confrontation with its Russian neighbour”.³⁷ It seems to be indispensable in actual political context where Russian-Chinese confrontation is largely discussed in media and academic circles.³⁸ Initially, the SCO sphere of specialization was limited to cooperation on security matters. However, China has progressively introduced economic cooperation as the second

³⁶Yulia Nikitina, “ОДКБ и ШОС как модели взаимодействия в сфере региональной безопасности” (“the csto and the sco as cooperation models in the domain of regional security”), *Индекс Безопасности* n. 2 (97), v. 17, p. 48

³⁷Thierry Kellner, “La Chine et l’Asie centrale vingt-cinq ans après... de la marginalité au centre de la scène régionale”, *L’Esprit du temps*, « *Outre-Terre* », 2016/3, n°48, pp. 268 - 304

³⁸Speculations concern specifically the possibility of a new “Great game”, in this case between Russia and China.

component of the organization. Considering Central Asia as its zone of political "allegiance" and well aware of growing economic capacities of China, Russia is reluctant to lose its positions in the region. Yet, its disapproval can hardly be translated into any concrete political move in the light of the circumstances it finds itself in. Following the military conflict in the East in Ukraine, Russia has to deal with problematic relations with its former Western partners and with the economic crisis it experiences since 2014. Therefore, in face of a spectacular "rise of China" and its launching of the BRI, Russia prefers to make some concessions and thus preserve amity relations with a new-born power.

In addition, the conflict with Ukraine in 2014 (and earlier with Georgia in 2008) raised certain concerns in the SCO's member states. It was a crucial moment when the gravity centre of the organization shifted to China defending with determination a non-interference principle. The member states of the CSTO, the majority of them belonging to the SCO, have restrained from recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and Crimea as part of Russia.

In general, these difficulties of cooperation on the SCO's basis have provoked some disappointment in Chinese government and have pushed it to act individually. In December 2015, the first anti-terrorist law granting the right to Chinese military forces to operate abroad to combat terrorism and to defend China's interests was promulgated. "To formulate a specific anti-terrorist law is both an actual need and a matter of international responsibility for our country", explained An Weixing³⁹, chief of the anti-terrorist department at the Ministry of public security. In 2016, during his visit to Kabul, General Fang Fenghui proposed to create a military alliance composed of China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, the so-called Quadrilateral cooperation and coordination mechanism. This said, in February 2018 an Afghan military reported that China was planning to build a military base in Tajikistan, on the Tajik-Afghan border in the province of Gorno-Badakhshan. Though China denies the existence of such a project, the reports claim the contrary, as shown by the recent report made by the *Washington Post* that a Chinese base is already present on the territory of Tajikistan.⁴⁰ If its existence is yet an

³⁹François Bougon et Florian Reynaud, "La Chine se dote d'une loi antiterroriste", *Le Monde*, December 29, 2015

⁴⁰Gerry Shih "In Central Asia's forbidding highlands, a quiet newcomer: Chinese troops", *Washington Post*, February 18, 2019

object of speculations, the idea itself does not seem improbable, since it meets the security interests of China in the region close to the location of the China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC). Part of the BRI, the CPEC is essential to the latter for it can provide access for China to the Indian Ocean.

For the moment, the engagement of Beijing in security affairs in Central Asia is quite reticent and it is motivated mostly by the pursuit of its pragmatic interests and less by the ambition to become a regional arbitrator. Its implication is not homogeneous and differs from one state to another in its form and scope. Even though institutionalized structures exist, such as the SCO, China consistently privileges security cooperation in the framework of bilateral relations. Whereas it has established ties with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan who exploit Chinese pilotless aircrafts, and Turkmenistan disposing of its air defence systems and armoured vehicles, its imports are limited when it comes to states with limited financial capacities - Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. These states benefit mostly from financial aids or unconditional supplies, such as military vehicles and communication tools.⁴¹

In addition, one of the obstacles to "go global" in terms of security is presented by the national sovereignty dilemma. Engaging in the regional security issues implies inevitably interference in their domestic affairs that goes against China's official stance. In this perspective, China opts to what Zhao Huasheng defines as 'constructive engagement' which implies that China is to assist in putting an end to a conflict and in facilitating negotiations in compliance with the international law and with respect for the states' sovereignty. ⁴²

However, China has been recently exploring another option, which allows to elude any direct affiliations to the Chinese government and, consequently, does not necessarily comply with the official government position. As noted by Odil Gafarov, "decisions made by these Chinese companies are dictated by markets, not official Chinese policy".⁴³ A so-

⁴¹Vassily Kashin, "У Китая появятся возможности по обеспечению безопасности своих объектов вдоль «шелкового пути»", *Евразия Эксперт*, March 4, 2018

⁴²Zhao Huasheng, "China's View of and Expectations from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (May/June 2013), pp. 436-460

⁴³Odil Gafarov, "Rise of China's private armies", *The World Today*, February & March 2019

called "shadow army"⁴⁴ is presented by private security enterprises, legalized in 2009, which operate in the areas of strategic importance for the BRI. Specifically, China has signed a contract with the Frontier services group (FSG) directed by the founder of Blackwater, Erik Prince. The FSG is to assist China in ensuring security of its BRI projects in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

In this context, Central Asia is now emerging as a "front line for operations" by Chinese private security companies, a "central transport conduit for China's regional development project"⁴⁵, these companies being a major tool of guaranteeing successful implementation of the new silk road project. China's determination to expand its regional influence in Central Asia is a self-evident phenomenon and in order to preserve its regional interests, it is inevitably engaging in the security affairs as well. However, in that regard it has opted for a strategy of a non-demonstrative implication to prevent from being associated to a power with "expansion ambitions" and at the same time to avoid the discontent of the populations of the targeted states related to its growing presence. ■

⁴⁴Fatoumata Diallo, "Private Security Companies: The New Notch in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative?", Institute for Security and Development Policy, June 5, 2018

⁴⁵ Helena Legarda, Meia Nouwens, "Guardians Of The Belt And Road. The internationalization of China's private security companies", *MERICS China Monitor*, August 16, 2018, p. 4

ASIA FOCUS #108

SECURITY DIMENSION OF CHINA'S PRESENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

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APRIL 2019

ASIA FOCUS

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