

# Central Asia under the Influence of Russia and China: A political perspective from Kazakhstan

|| Marian Abisheva

A new wave of geopolitical activity is emerging around the Central Asian Region (CAR) and a whole range of political instruments are employed to influence the Central Asian countries. The following paragraphs give a brief overview on the Chinese and Russian strategies in the different dimensions of their involvement in the Central Asian Region.

## Russia's Policy

Returning to its ambitious projects in the post-Soviet countries, Russia is trying to avoid past mistakes when its large resources were spent on unfulfilled political promises of the Central Asian partners. Today, Russia is placing its stakes on guarantees of maintaining its influence, first and foremost through the control over strategic infrastructure facilities and the transfer of some functions in economic and customs policy to supranational bodies, where Moscow, of course, will retain its dominance. Thus, the main features of Russia's new strategy in Central Asia are pragmatism, political and economic expediency, systemic approach, and comprehensiveness with a focus on the following dimensions:

*Strategic Dimension:* Russia is streamlining its long-term policy in Central Asia. Moscow is aware that it is in Central Asia that Russia still can maintain a dominant role and advance its interests from the perspective of a geopolitical leader. At the same time, the Kremlin does not yet have enough

financial, information, military and other resources to pursue a more active policy.

*Economic Dimension:* The Kremlin's main competitive tool is the expanding integration process under the Eurasian Economic Union. Another leverage of Russia's influence is the provision of economic assistance to the countries of the region, mainly Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

*Military Dimension:* Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is a key project in the field of Russia's military policy in the Central Asian Region. Russia has proceeded with a practical stage of the progress of the Organization; consistent work is underway to develop clear contours of a controlled military-political structure. In a bilateral format, the Kremlin's efforts are focused on strengthening its military-political positions. Even Russia's economic integration with Central Asian states is clearly linked to guarantees of military security.

*Political dimension:* Moscow moved on to an active foreign policy in Central Asia. Russia requires its partners to define their explicit political position in accordance with the principle: "Whoever is not with us is against us". The Kremlin's new approaches are also based on asymmetric response measures. One can recall a past conflict with Tajikistan (fast deportation of Tajik migrant workers in response to arrest of Russian pilots). At the same time, the political and diplomatic line of Moscow is becoming more subtle.

*In the social and Humanitarian Dimension*, an important leverage for Russia's influence on the region is a new diaspora strategy. Moscow has changed its tactics in migration policy - now priority is given to preserving the Russian Diasporas in the countries of Central Asia, as well as building stable channels of interaction and support for compatriots.

The main channels for implementation of Russia's policy will be the expansion of Russian capital in the economy of the CAR countries, protection of the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots, strengthening the positions of the Russian language and culture through Slavic associations and Russian ethnic organizations.

### **China's Policy**

Beijing continues to adhere to a cautious, non-conflict policy of "creeping" economic expansion. At the same time, every year China faces a serious informational and ideological blockage of its economic and demographic presence in Central Asian states (*the "Chinese threat" factor*).

In general, for China, Central Asia first and foremost represents a large provider of resources and a sales market. Through its wide economic presence in each Central Asian country and through development of transport communications from Central Asia to China, Beijing seeks to establish conditions to provide China with long-term access to the Regions resources and local markets. Today specifics of China's politics in Central Asia are focusing on the following dimensions:

*Strategic Dimension:* The PRC's approach towards Central Asia is to solve its long-term, mainly economic objectives without causing irritation with and active counteraction from the key regional competitor - Russia. The main regional project for China is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a long-term and strategically important mechanism for a legitimate and widespread Chinese presence in Central

Asia. Beijing flexibly uses the SCO platform in its interests: it is actively conducting collective negotiations on security issues but is evading joint economic projects (*with Russia*), preferring to work with Central Asian countries in a bilateral format.

*Political Dimension:* China has steadily pursued a diplomatic line on the country fragmentation of Central Asia. Beijing is building a one-on-one political dialogue with the states of the region and is actively tying them with credit-related obligations. Generally, the system of relations of the states of the region with external partners can be viewed through the prism of long-term scenarios - Eurasian and Sinocentric ones (there is also a "Pro-American" scenario, but it is not considered in this article).

*Economic Dimension:* China is heavily dependent on supplies of oil, gas, coal, metals, and minerals, and for China the CAR has a geographically advantageous position. The main instruments of China's resource and economic policy in Central Asia are unprecedented concessional credit lines, long-term investments and financing of infrastructure projects. The hidden specifics of infusion of Chinese money into local deposits are their tight binding to Chinese producers, labour sources and market.

*Infrastructure Dimension:* There is an active process of pegging Central Asia to the Chinese economy through an extensive communications network. This long-term initiative aims to ensure an uninterrupted supply of Central Asian resources to China. This comprehensive project is implemented through the construction of a wide net of oil and gas pipelines, highways, as well as railways.

*Security Dimension:* In security issues, Beijing heavily relies on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization SCO platform. The SCO acts as a key mechanism of interaction and enhances China's ability to counter drug trafficking and religious extremism. Beijing's approaches to bilateral security coop-

eration are determined by the prospect of implementing large energy and infrastructure projects, as well as the position of a concrete state takes in the Chinese general economic strategy.

To achieve their goals, both Russia and China are actively using political, economic, infrastructural and socio-humanitarian tools that are systematized into interconnected long-term initiatives. Other major external actors - the EU and other European countries, Turkey, Iran, India, and the Arab states currently do not have strategic interests or enough resources to form an independent strategic vector of development of Central Asia and, thus, complement to some extent the development of the above scenarios.

Russia uses close existing ties with the countries of the region, single economic and infrastructure systems and a guarantee of military-strategic protection.

China manipulates by affordable credit lines, expands its presence in the resource sector, and captures alternative energy routes and infrastructure projects.

However, Central Asian states will not develop within a single strategic scenario orientated at one geopolitical centre. At the same time, considering the prevailing geopolitical situation in the region, as well as due to the current development processes of Central Asian countries, Russia will still retain dominant political positions in the region in the medium term. Most parts of the Central Asian region (except for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) will develop under the Eurasian scenario.

In the long term, the states of Central Asia will orient themselves at various geopolitical vectors. This might lead to the fact that in the future the republics of Central Asia will not be considered as a single geopolitical space.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the scenarios offered to the Central

Asian countries today – Russian through close military-political and economic integration, Chinese through fragmentation and bilateral economic cooperation – in addition to their own geopolitical goals, also represent stabilising factors.

In general, the states of the region are still at the stage of determining their geopolitical future, choosing between traditions (Russia) and tactical economic benefits for possible further independent strengthening (choice in favour of Beijing). At the same time, there is clear understanding that the choice in favour of one centre of power does not exclude the possibility of “geopolitical flirting” with other strong players. This approach enables the states of the region to balance between centres of power, while defending their long-term national interests.

At the same time, every year the field for strategic manoeuvres is constantly narrowing, and the Central Asian countries will be limited by more rigid formats of cooperation, while new geopolitical initiatives are penetrating the region.

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