

China's Economic Interests in Central Asia

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Abstract

The region of Central Asia is located at the intersection of East and Western world and has endured traditionally in interaction with the diverse cultures and market economies. It belongs to Mackinder's "heartland" and is at the core of the "black hole" of power by Zbigniew Brzezinski's equation. The CARs have remained to be a playground of power politics amid the British Empire and Russia, colloquially regarded as the "Great Game", which came to end in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The geographic contiguity and interests of China with respect to economy and security in the region as well as the needs and dependent position of CARs drew them close together. The main reason for the involvement of China in the CARs seems to be an attempt to meet increasing requirement of energy supplies, as well as security apprehensions along the Western frontier and the internal security of Xinjiang province. Central Asia provides China the possibility of a transportation route for overland trade between China and Europe, while China gives Central Asia a reliable access to the Pacific Ocean. This research aims to explore China's Economic Interests in Central Asia under OBOR, for which China has started utilization of commercial methodologies for the CARs reliance on China, to be built in terms of energy supplies as well as collaboration in political and military perspectives. This mutual interdependence has enabled Beijing for establishing economic and political influence in the Republics of Central Asia, and that China may have to revitalize the degree of strategic collaboration with the CARs in order to further heighten assistance in economic and energy perspectives for ginning mutual advantages in a win/win situation.

Keywords: Soviet Union, New Great Game, Economic Markets, Silk Road Economic Belt, Energy Supplies.

Introduction

Central Asia in terms of geography has been used jointly for the republics of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Marketos, 2016), which came into existence in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014). These countries are situated towards east and west sides of the Caspian Sea,

which is in possession of plentiful natural resources of oil and gas. The republics of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are having the largest deposits of oil and are amongst the major oil exporting states of the region. The exports of Turkmenistan's gas and oil have also rapidly increased in the recent times (Marketos, 2016). The CARs appears to be less established in terms of economy excluding Kazakhstan. These are

landlocked republics which remained disconnected from the outer world for the period of a long time. The CARs suddenly proclaimed their independence, as a result of the abrupt transition of power in the international affairs. The prompt declarations of liberty had a tangible impact on foreign and domestic affairs of the CARs. These states have had to adopt a torturous and extended path in order to find an appropriate role in the evolving perspectives of regional and international politics (Yujin, 2019).

The region of Central Asia is located at the intersection of the East and the Western world (Hussain and Hussain, 2017) and has endured traditionally in interaction with the diverse cultures and market economies. The Central Asian monarchies and khanates became culturally advanced and most powerful states of the region on the basis of their contact to the outside world in the previous history (Marketos, 2016). Because of its proximity to the major powerful nations of the Eurasian continent, Central Asia has long been a region of geostrategic prominence (Khan, 2006). The region of Central Asia belongs to Mackinder's "heartland" and is at the core of the "black hole" of power by Zbigniew Brzezinski's equating it to the "Eurasian Balkans" in the geopolitical terms, implying high risks for ethnic conflicts and rivalries of great-power politics in the region (Marketos, 2016). Central Asia has long been one of the world's most strategic regions, owing to its exclusive geographic position. Central Asia has also been one of the significant region of the world on the basis of possessing abundant resources of energy supplies since long times. The CARs have remained to be a playground of power politics amid the British Empire and Russia, colloquially regarded as the "Great Game", which came to end in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. China, together with other major world powers i.e. the US and Russia attained opportunities for economic foothold in the region

for benefits associated to the security of energy supplies and commodities markets. The subsequent politics of power amongst the major powerful states of the world is commonly referred to as the "New Great Game" in Central Asia (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017).

The CARs and China geographically occupy significant strategic position in the region to the extent that they may be capable of exercising immediate impact on the development of economy as well as stability and security of the entire world. China and the CARs are novel emerging powers in the multidimensional economic and political affairs (Khan, 2006). The Economic insecurity in Central Asia, as well as its effect on the political instability of the region has become a major source of concern for Beijing (Swanström, 2015). The strategic clock of geopolitics is ticking towards the back in Central Asia with the reappearance of the late 19th century disorders, and has been influencing regional foreign policy. The Central Asia, which was once a pawn of the Great Game in the region among Russia and the British Empire in the 19th & early 20th centuries to achieve militaristic hegemony in the areas has now, set another stage for major contending powers of the world for militaristic supremacy. This latest "New Great Game" has not been a re-emergence of the old 19th century "Great Game," where the CARs had been a pawn of power politics between dominant states in the past, but are vibrant actors in this battle for dominance now (Khan, 2006).

The involvement of China in the "New Great Game" in the region of Central Asia began in the aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union. China was the first republic to recognize the independence of the CARs and established diplomatic ties in 1992 (Liao, 2006). The Grand Strategy of China has been achieved to a greater extent in Central Asia rather than any other region of the world (Swanström, 2015). The geographic

contiguity and interests of China with respect to economy and security in the region as well as the needs and dependent position of CARs drew them close together (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017). The economy of China became larger and more incorporated into the world economic markets during the period of 1990s and 2000s, on accounts of which ambitions of its national interests inevitably expanded in the regional framework (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014). China's major intents in Central Asia, manifested to the economic domains may unlikely be restricted to viable investment, trade and flow of energy supplies (Rumer, 2006). The significance of this region for Beijing is not merely because it is not only providing strategic depth but also abundance of natural resources (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014).

China has responded to the economic exit of Russia from the area with the independence of the CARs since 1991, and has gradually sprinkled its economic involvement with greater security engagements with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states of the region (Swanström, 2015). The CARs have been remarkably prosperous throughout the 21st century, but it may have to be a stretch for SCO for taking credit of comparative regional peace and stability (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014). China and Russia are increasingly attempting to counteract the US influence in Central Asia through enhanced collaboration under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Rumer, 2006). The influence of China in the CARs has risen considerably during previous decades in terms of political, military and economic spheres, although beginning from initial stages. The CARs would most definitely continue working for preserving good ties with China, partly in a desire to prevent antagonizing China and comparatively to maintain balance of power against Russia (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014).

The CARs have therefore been granted a more influential position in China's foreign and security strategy under President Xi Jinping, and there has to be vibrant debate regarding Beijing's approach of "March West" (Swanström, 2015). Beijing deliberates that western region of China is of extensive significance to the future of country (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014). The region of western China is now almost entirely reliant on the continued economic and commercial collaboration with the CARs, which depends on people-to-people contacts (Swanström, 2015). The instantaneous threats to Beijing are linked directly to the ethnic group of the Uighur population. The diaspora of Uighur is estimated to about 11 million people, with nearly 10 million of them living in Xinjiang province of China, whereas between 300,000 to 1 million are residing in the CARs (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014). China has long regarded Central Asia as its own trade zone and an area strongly influenced by the culture of China. The most remarkable trade centers of history, such as Jarkhand, Samarkand, Urumuqi and Kokand were situated in geographical proximity to Xinjiang, which being the west of China's current boundary. The commercial activities between the CARs and China have always remained to be significant as well as preferential by both (Marketos, 2016). The economic growth is a key component of China's policy to appease the separatists, while stabilizing the country's western boundary (Swanström, 2015).

China's "strategic partnerships" rhetoric proclaims formation in Central Asia (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014). China aims to minimize one of the extreme challenges to its internal security by means of establishing Xinjiang as a doorway to the "Eurasian Land Bridge" by the CARs towards Europe (Zimmerman, 2015). For the development of commercial and economic relationship of China with the CARs, a geo-economic policy may have

to be implemented for ensuring regional peace and security (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017). For China, the economic development has earlier been persisted for prevailing considerations of the interior security (Swanström, 2015). The main reason for the involvement of China in the CARs seems to be an attempt to meet increasing requirement of energy supplies, as well as security apprehensions along the Western frontier and the internal security of Xingjian province, both of which are dependent on the maintenance of peace in the CARs and relationship of Beijing with them (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017).

China has strengthened its relationship with the CARs by means of enormous investments in the economic markets of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Disputes alongside boundaries between China and its resource-rich neighbors have become major irritant for China, on the basis of which China has been working quickly to eliminate the irritants for establishing friendly relations with neighboring states (Marketos, 2016). The region has been witnessing the tides and waves of disorder and instability in the region, which are exacerbated by foreign players like Russia, China, USA, Japan, EU, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, which have been trying for controlling the movement of oil and gas supplies for the furtherance of their own energy interests (Khan, 2006).

China's Economic Interests in Central Asia

Geographically, China and Central Asia are neighbors (Zimmerman, 2015). China shares a 3300 Km extensive boundary with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017). China and the CARs have shared the gains of prosperity through the "Silk Road" for thousands of years ago (Yujin, 2019). China developed its early communication with Central

Asia 2,000 years ago through the fabled ancient Silk Road, but direct ties with the area were detached after it turned out to be a part of the Czarist Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union (Swanström, 2015). Central Asia provides China the possibility of a transportation route for overland trade between China and Europe, while China gives Central Asia a reliable access to the Pacific Ocean (Blank, 2008). China and Central Asia are geographical neighbors. China is oceanic outlet for the CARs, whereas Central Asia may be helpful to China for establishing inland communications with Europe and West Asia (Yujin, 2019).

Central Asia, a landlocked territory in the center of Asia, is remarkable because it had to be buffer zone of Russian and British empires in the nineteenth century and retains that significance today, albeit amid the other novel players of the region. Central Asia is not a peaceful region since two decades of independence because several political crises remain unresolved. This condition is created by certain actors both trans-regional and regional, which have been looking out for their own interests (Blank, 2008). The disintegration of the USSR provided China with an ability to completely utilize Xinjiang's geopolitical position in order to increase China's political, economic and military dominance in the region of Central Asia (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017). Beijing has pursued pragmatic, fixated and indomitable policies in an impassive manner in order to be recognized as a major player of the world in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union (Hussain, 2020) in 1991, China has emerged to be a key player of Central Asian geopolitics (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017).

It has been described as an opportunity for reformation of Central Asia's and Asian Pacific's political and economic order by fostering the networking of trading outlets, political collaboration and socio-cultural exchange, on the

basis of which China aims for placement of its western regions at the core of interaction with the CARs in an attempt for accelerating growth and promotion of regional stability (Zimmerman, 2015). The access of the CARs to international economic markets would enable regional governments to diversify their economies where they may export their goods at market rates (Blank, 2008), which has been viewed by China for being an chance to establish ties with the CARs in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR and the consequent reduction of its hegemony in the area (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017).

The CARs joined economic system of world as autonomous economies becoming novel commercial allies of China. China may have several commercial advantages with respect to the CARs encompassing commercial trading, development of infrastructure, and manipulation mineral resources (Yujin, 2019). China's Xinjiang province serves as interlink between CARs and China (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017). Xinjiang province is surrounded by Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan (Zimmerman, 2015). The Chinese western province of Xinjiang has a 60 per cent population of Uyghur Muslims, as well as CARs also have significant number of groups of this ethnic community, which shares mutual culture, religion and history (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017). Eighty-three percent of Xinjiang's overall trade with the CARs, and 80 percent of China's total trade with CARs is carried through Xinjiang (Swanström, 2015).

The demand for energy in China has risen as a result of prompt industrial growth. The requirement of oil remained to be 1.7 to 3.4 million barrel per day since 1985 to 1995, which had reached to the needs of about 6.8 million barrels in 2004. China's 40 percent of the demand for oil has to be met through outside supplies of resources (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017). Since

1993 the needs for supplies of energy especially demands of natural gas and oil grew faster than the domestic supplies could meet. As a result, China became a key importer of natural gas & oil. Within a period of two decades, China turned out to be the largest user of energy supplies in the world on the basis of which China had to fulfill 57% requirement of oil from external supplies by 2012. If current trends hold, China's demand may even rise to about 66% in the coming years. China has emerged as a 2nd largest buyer of hydrocarbons in the world after the USA (Guo, 2006). China was self-sufficient in demands of energy resources for many years since inception; however, as the country's economy population grew, so did the demand for energy supplies (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017).

China and the CARs have established strategic relationship based on mutual trust and economic benefits, after the breakdown of the USSR (Yujin, 2019). The commercial footholds of China in the region of Central Asia have expanded considerably in the twenty-first century. China has emerged for being a predominant trading partner of the regional states, and surpassed in 2012 to Russia for being one of the top most economic trader of Central Asia (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014). The relevance of Central Asia to China has grown in response to changes in the system of world's power politics, economic development, rapid industrialization, and population growth (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017).

President Hu Jintao of China proclaimed regarding region of Central Asian that it is significant for the economic development of China (Marketos, 2016), which has further grown as a result of changes of the division of power politics in the contemporary world affairs, the development of economy and industrial progression (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017). China has started utilization of commercial

methodologies for the CARs reliance on China, to be built in terms of energy supplies as well as collaboration in political and military perspectives. This mutual interdependence has enabled Beijing for establishing economic and political influence in the Republics of Central Asia (Marketos, 2016). China and the CARs have formed a relationship of strategic nature with multifaceted collaboration in political, economic, cultural and security parameters during the period of about 30 years (Yujin, 2019).

Since the economies of the CARs and China are complementary to each other, the enhancement of developing joint commercial ties among Republics of Central Asia and China had to be a relatively an easier task. China required raw materials from the CARs, whereas they were in need of end-user consumer products generating incentives for development and commercial growing of China (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017). The Expansion of economic collaboration has provided China with prospects to capitalize benefits in the region of Central Asia (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014). China's priorities in Central Asia are centered on security of territorial boundary, counteracting radicalism and terrorism, attaining admittance to smooth supplies of energy sources as well as to the emergent foreign economic markets and advantages of investments (Yujin, 2019). The trade of China with the CARs has been expanding exponentially, with an official trading surplus of more than \$25 billion in 2008 (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014).

During a speech in Kazakhstan, Xi Jinping in 2013, proposed "Silk Road Economic Belt" initiative of China. The aim was to build stronger trade relations, deepen collaboration, and expand growth in the Euro-Asia regions (Zimmerman, 2015). The Central Asian region has not only been a significant area for development of "Belt & Road Initiative", but it will also play a crucial role for its success in future (Yujin, 2019). The

delineations of China's stratagem started to appear by the year 2015 on accounts of which the leadership of Beijing rolled out strategies for "Silk Road Economic Belt" via Republics of Central Asia (Zimmerman, 2015). The trading of China with the CARs has risen to the extent that Beijing has emerged to the status of a top-ranking economic partner in Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014).

China's proposed \$40 billion Silk Road Fund, which was formally formed in 2014, is widely regarded as being jointly initial investment for schemes under OBOR initiative, of which \$16 billion may be allocated for ventures in Central Asia (Zimmerman, 2015). Central Asia is essential to China because of its low-cost raw materials and vast demand for finished products (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017). China withstands itself to play intermediating part in Central Asia by means of economic pursuits (Zimmerman, 2015). The region of Central Asia has excessive potentiality for Northwestern areas of China from economic point of view, because it has been located in the midst of the continent of Eurasia, which remained to be part of ancient "Silk Route" as a trading route between the East and West. The restoration of this conventional trade route may have potential for the Northwestern landlocked areas of China (Afridi, Iqbal and Hussain, 2017).

Chinese officials and academics have publicly contrasted their proposals regarding Marshall Plan by the USA after the 2nd World War to OBOR, which claims that it (OBOR) does not have any "hegemonic" aims (Hussain, Khan, Hussain, Nawaz, and Ahmad, 2021). The policy makers of Beijing have described OBOR for being a mechanism to foster tranquility and peace in the area by improving mutual ties of China with the neighboring countries (Hussain, Ahmad, Nawaz, Haider, and Atif, 2021) as well as to establish worldwide organizations which being not to be

dominated by the Western nations (Zimmerman, 2015). The CARs have been deemed closer for accomplishing status of the emergent market, which necessitates abrupt development of economy, manufacturing growth, and appropriate organizations (Stegen, 2015). China's reliance on foreign energy is growing in tandem with its economic growth. To reap the benefits of energy resources, China may work for ensuring Central Asia's energy supplies towards Beijing (Yujin, 2019). China expects that within a decade, the volume of its annual exchange with the countries concerned may surpass \$2.5 trillion. The trade of China to the CARs has increased sharply in the year 2000 from \$1 billion to the year 2013 about \$50 billion (Zimmerman, 2015). The share of China's economic volume with respect to FDI in the region has been growing significantly (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014).

China aims to foster Xinjiang's economic growth and opening up in the light of globalization by extending economic collaboration with the CARs. With the initiation of the "Belt & Road Initiative", the position of Central Asian region for Beijing has enhanced in terms of commercial linkages (Yujin, 2019). China characterizes its policies as an endeavor to promote Eurasia's consolidation and economic development, rather than an attempt to intensify its own political power in the area (Zimmerman, 2015). China has the most significant card of economics to play in the regional set up of Central Asia (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014) based on combined benefits and equality for all (Yujin, 2019). The strategic prominence of Central Asia in world affairs has been rising. The contending rivalries between the USA, China, Russia, Pakistan, India and Iran further increases the significance of region under the evolving dynamics of regional politics (Blank, 2008). This is also a necessary condition for Beijing to emphasize its energies on economic growth (Yujin, 2019). The competition between major

powers of the world in Central Asia will shape future scenario of the world politics (Blank, 2008). In terms of economics, China and the CARs have complementary advantages that allow for widespread cooperation. For China, the smooth supplies of energy, metals, leather goods and other imports, as well as the raw materials and markets of Central Asia are quite significant. China's manufacturing, agriculture & consumer goods and markets are quite appealing to the CARs (Scobell, Ratner and Beckley, 2014). China may have to revitalize the degree of strategic collaboration with the CARs in order to further heighten assistance in economic and energy perspectives for ginning mutual advantages in a win/win situation (Yujin, 2019).

Conclusion

It is imperative to conclude that Central Asia has long been one of the world's most strategic regions, owing to its exclusive geographic position. Central Asia has also been one of the significant region of the world on the basis of possessing abundant resources of energy supplies since long times. The CARs suddenly proclaimed their independence, as a result of the abrupt transition of power in the international affairs, which came into existence in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. China has responded to economic exit of Russia from the area and has gradually sprinkled its economic involvement with greater security engagements with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states of the region.

The CARs have therefore been granted a more influential position in China's foreign and security strategy under President Xi Jinping, and there has to be vibrant debate regarding Beijing's approach of "March West". It has been described as an opportunity for reformation of Central Asia's and Asian Pacific's political and economic order by fostering the networking of trading

outlets, political collaboration and socio-cultural exchange, on the basis of which China aims for placement of its western regions at the core of interaction with the CARs in an attempt for accelerating growth and promotion of regional stability. China's proposed \$40 billion Silk Road Fund, which was formally formed in 2014, is widely regarded as being jointly initial investment for schemes under OBOR initiative, of which \$16 billion may be allocated for ventures in Central Asia. The policy makers of Beijing have described OBOR for being a mechanism to foster tranquility and peace in the area by improving mutual ties of China with the neighboring countries.

Chinese officials and academics have publicly contrasted their proposals regarding Marshall Plan by the USA after the 2nd World War to OBOR, which claims that it (OBOR) does not have any "hegemonic" aims. The region has been witnessing the tides and waves of disorder and instability in the region, which are exacerbated by foreign players like Russia, China, USA, Japan, EU, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, which have been trying for controlling the movement of oil and gas supplies for the furtherance of their own energy interests. China may have to revitalize the degree of strategic collaboration with the CARs in order to further heighten assistance in economic and energy perspectives for ginning mutual advantages in a win/win situation.

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