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CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS' CHINA CONCERNS

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The fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) changed the nature of politics for years to come as it gave rise to various new states and nations. The Central Asian Republics (CARs) rose from the rubbles of the erstwhile USSR and now were tasked with the responsibility of charting their independent way in the world order. Traditionally they have maintained close ties with Russia. However, there has been a notable shift in their alliance and interests in the last few decades. The current political scenario regarding the resource-rich and geopolitically strategic CARs seems to confirm Mackinder's theory that the state that controls the "Heartland" controls the "World Island."¹ A complicated scenario is budding in the CARs as world powers vie for influence over these five countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. The main players in this arena as of today are - China, Russia, India and to an extent the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (USA). The reasons for various powers expressing their interests in the region are easy to understand. The CARs are rich in oil, gas, and uranium; they offer a great market for goods; they are strategically located and act as a link between Asia and Europe, and they play a key role in countering security threats.

Towards Greater Collaboration

As soon as the CARs gained independence, China approached them with the singular goal of establishing unambiguous borders with the new states. These borders had previously been a contentious zone between the USSR and China. China shares land borders with three of the five CARs- Kazakhstan (1,700 km), Kyrgyzstan (1,000 km) and Tajikistan (400km). As a result of these negotiations, all three nations were perceived to get the short end of the stick and ceded a considerable amount of land in favour of Chinese demands. Kazakhstan ceded 22%, Kyrgyzstan 32% and Tajikistan 3.5% of the total land claimed by China.² In Tajikistan, the decision to cede land was not consulted with the regional authorities of the Gorno-Badakhshan region as the eastern

¹ Xuanli Liao, Janet. "China's Energy Diplomacy towards Central Asia and the Implications on Its 'Belt and Road Initiative.'" *The Pacific Review* 34, no. 3 (2019): 492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2019.1705882>.

² Ayjaz Wani, "India and China in Central Asia: Understanding the New Rivalry in the Heart of Eurasia," *Observer Research Foundation*, February 2020, pp. 8, https://orfonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ORF_OccasionalPaper_235_India-China-CAR_NEW-19Feb.pdf

parts of the region were handed over to the Chinese government. Simmering ethnic tensions and dissatisfaction at the state's decision for this action still plague the citizens of the region and come to the forefront with incidents of routine violence in the area.³

To encourage greater relation with its close neighbours in 1996 China started the Shanghai five forum which has now transformed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).⁴ The SCO includes all the main players in this geopolitical space and is central to China's security concerns. Russia to ensure its presence in the region established the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Whereas, India has signed various multi and Bilateral agreements with the CAR nations on matters concerning security. India's "Connect Central Asia Policy" and the signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA)⁵ with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are examples of India's initiative for greater influence in the region. India has also been running various initiatives of cooperation under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and the revival of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme.⁶

Energy and Infrastructure

Xi Jinping in his speech at the opening of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) spoke of the "great Rejuvenation" a dream that aspires for closer ties with the CARs and aims to fulfil China's growing appetite for energy resources. Some projects underway as part of the BRI in the CARs are the China-Central Asia gas pipeline, the China-Kazakhstan crude oil pipeline, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan highway, the China-Tajikistan highway, and China-Euro railway.⁷ Ensuring a smooth inflow of energy requirements plays a central role in determining these projects. Half of Turkmenistan's gas exports and one-third of Kazakhstan's oil production find their way into China.

³ Bruce Pannier. 2022. "Central Asian Land And China". *Radiofreeeurope/Radioliberty*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asian-land-and-china/27711366.html>.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ayjaz Wani , "India and China in Central Asia: Understanding the New Rivalry in the Heart of Eurasia"

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Kemel Toktomushev. 2021. "China And Central Asia: Warm Politics, Cold Public - Central Asia Program". *Central Asia Program*. <https://www.centralasiaprogram.org/china-central-asia-warm-politics-cold-public>.

China is the main importer of fuels from CARs as well as the main investor in the infrastructure that makes this transportation possible. Exim Bank, China National Petroleum Corporation, and Sinopec are the leading investors and companies involved in such projects.⁸ China's choice to overlook factors such as democracy and human rights while investing in a country makes it a more willing investor in the CARs compared to western players such as the EU.

This venture of Pipeline democracy or "strategic partnership"⁹ has often taken a predatory turn as failure to pay loans results in a transfer of control over such natural assets to Chinese state-owned/backed enterprises. China is not a member of the Paris Club,¹⁰ a group that encourages lender countries to make their lending records public. This has raised eyebrows due to the lack of transparency over such investments in the country and has acted as a means of facilitating a debt-trap policy. The handover of a lucrative gold mine in Tajikistan to China for exploration¹¹ and additionally leasing of 2000 hectares of land to Chinese farmers¹² for agriculture has at times left a sour aftertaste amongst the local population. The Khorgos dry port in Kazakhstan has become a destination of the inflow of cheap Chinese goods into the CARs. This has severely challenged the traditional artisanal market as they have not been able to match the cheap prices offered by the Chinese competitors. This has encouraged the CAR states to look for alternative investors and development plans. Kazakhstan's Nurly Zhol¹³ (Bright Path) an independent infrastructure building initiative is an example of such an alternate measure. Kyrgyzstan's choice to not incur further debt from China-backed Exim Bank and borrow from the International Monetary Fund (IMF)¹⁴ to deal with the pandemic economic backlash is another example of such alternative methods adopted by the CARs.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Lea Melnikovová, "China's Interests in Central Asian Economies," *Human Affairs* 30, no. 2 (January 2020): pp. 239-252, <https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2020-0022>, 241.

¹⁰ Ibid, 242.

¹¹ Lea Melnikovová, "China's Interests in Central Asian Economies," *Human Affairs* 30, no. 2 (January 2020): pp. 239-252, <https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2020-0022>, 243.

¹² Bruce Pannier. 2022. "Central Asian Land And China". *Radiofreeeurope/Radioliberty*. <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asian-land-and-china/27711366.html>.

¹³ Ayjaz Wani, "India and China in Central Asia: Understanding the New Rivalry in the Heart of Eurasia ," 18.

¹⁴ Dirk van Der Kley, Niva Yau. 2021. "How Central Asians Pushed Chinese Firms To Localize". *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/10/15/how-central-asians-pushed-chinese-firms-to-localize-pub-85561>.

As CARs look for alternatives to supply their energy resources to the markets in South East Asia and Europe and reduce their reliance on China as the sole moderator of these resources. A few projects have come up but have stalled due to various reasons. Russia has stood opposed to the proposed Trans Caspian pipeline citing environmental concerns. The real motive for their objection can be noted as this supply route will cause a threat to their monopoly over the European market as a supplier for hydrocarbons. The CARs entering the market would only increase competition in the field and avoiding the same is in Russia's best national interest. Previously energy resources in the CARS were largely controlled by Russian firms. Gazprom,¹⁵ a Russian state-owned firm exercised a monopoly over Turkmenistan's resources. The inability of Russia to provide a stable market and economy has prompted the country to look for assistance elsewhere. Russia's attempts to stall alternative¹⁶ routes ally with China's interests. China needs to have a monopoly over the CARS resources as it faces competition and a threat of disruption of supply from other sources. The South China Sea dispute and the possibility of a blockade over the Malacca and Hormuz straits¹⁷ put their inflow of energy resources in a precarious position.

To counter BRI, Russia introduced the EAEU, which is a plan focused on infrastructure and trade development in the region. However, this gained limited success as only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan joined the initiative. In 2015 China's BRI and Russia's EAEU signed a joint declaration of Cooperation¹⁸ to avoid a clash between the two parallel programs. The sanctions on Russia following their annexation of Crimea severely impacted the economy and this has reduced Russia's capability for foreign investment. The resultant fall of the rouble also affected the value of remittances that traditionally flowed from CARS migrants in the nation to their respective home countries. The share of remittances does play a significant role in the CARS economies. As the rouble becomes more unstable with the ongoing Russia- Ukraine war this may encourage skilled migrant workers to look elsewhere as places of destination.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Lea Melnikovová, "China's Interests in Central Asian Economies," *Human Affairs* 30, no. 2 (January 2020): pp. 239-252, <https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2020-0022>, 246.

¹⁷ Pier Paolo Raimondi. "CHINA IN CENTRAL ASIA." *Central Asia Oil and Gas Industry - The External Powers' Energy Interests in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan*. Fondazione Eni Enrico Mattei (FEEM), 2019. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21861>, 10.

¹⁸ Lea Melnikovová, "China's Interests in Central Asian Economies," *Human Affairs* 30, no. 2 (January 2020): pp. 239-252, <https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2020-0022>, 248.

India has attempted to provide alternative routes for the outflow of energy resources from the region into the Asian market. The CARs have included India in the Ashgabat Agreement¹⁹ which allows India to use the existing routes to carry out trade and commercial ventures utilising these connectivity networks. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan- India (TAPI)²⁰ pipeline has been stalled numerous times since 2006 but is finally edging towards the possibility of being fully functional with the latest visit of the President of India to Ashgabat. The further development of the Chabahar port²¹ in Iran to improve connectivity is another attempt by India to provide routes leading from the CARs into Asia. India has also invested 1 billion dollars²² in new projects concerning the pharmaceutical and auto industry in the region. The richness of CARs in energy resources and the growth in appetite for such resources in Southeast Asia and China have made the CARs countries important players on the world stage.

Security Concerns

The CARs have experienced their share of political turbulence post-independence. These instances have raised concerns regarding the security of the region and the neighbours of the CARs. As the CARs are Islamic nations the threat of their populations acting as fertile recruitment grounds and the government acting as sponsors of international Islamic terrorism is a prevalent fear. The Tajikistan civil war, the Kyrgyzstan revolution and the rise of Pan-Islamic extremist movements and groups such as Hizbut-al-Tahrir and the Islamic movement for Islam in Uzbekistan have raised concerns regarding the stability of the states in these nations. Post 9/11 USA marked its military presence in the region by establishing bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan²³ to carry out operations in Afghanistan after seeking Russia's permission. As USA's military advent in the Middle East

¹⁹ Ayjaz Wani, "India and China in Central Asia: Understanding the New Rivalry in the Heart of Eurasia ," 21.

²⁰ Sutirtho Patranobis, "China Joint Statement Signals Revival of Tapi Gas Pipeline via AF-Pak to India," Hindustan Times, April 1, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-joint-statement-signals-revival-of-tapi-gas-pipeline-via-af-pak-to-india-101648804560322.html>.

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Janet Xuanli Liao, "China's Energy Diplomacy towards Central Asia and the Implications on Its 'Belt and Road Initiative,'" *The Pacific Review* 34, no. 3 (2019): pp. 490-522, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2019.1705882>, 493.

comes to a close it is accompanied by their move away from the CARs as well. The decline of USAs security investment in Kazakhstan from 450 million dollars in 2010 to 11 million in 2020²⁴ is an example of this move.

Russia has been the historic security and military ally of the region and in this sphere, the pre-eminence of Russia remains mostly intact. As the recent protest across Kazakhstan against the government was contained using the Russian forces. The presence of the permanent Russian 201st motorised rifle division in Tajikistan and the CTSO agreement²⁵ between the countries to collaborate on issues regarding security and counterterrorism are examples of the close military ties between the countries. India too has signed multiple bilateral security and counter terrorism-related agreements with the countries in the region.

China's concern for security in the CARs can be linked to its control over the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region (XUAR) in China. Uyghur agitation has taken place in 1980, 1981, 1985 and 1987²⁶ intending to establish a Muslim Eastern Turkestan country and secede from China. The XUAR region borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It's in China's best interest to collaborate with the countries to counter organisations that encourage secessionist movements in the XUAR. China's draconian policies carried out in XUAR have garnered international scrutiny over human rights abuses against the Uyghur population facilitated by Uyghur Re-education camps that force the Uyghur Muslim population to give up their linguistic, cultural and religious practices in favour of mainstream practices prevalent in China.

There are roughly 22,000 ethnically Kyrgyz and 10,000 ethnically Kazakh Muslims detained²⁷ in the Xinjian Camps by China. This has led to a rise in suspicion over Chinese policies in these countries. The 2018 protests in Kyrgyzstan against Chinese policies in XUAR against ethnic Kyrgyz people is an example of an incident where such concerns have boiled over into mass action.

²⁴ Yogesh Gupta. 2022. "China's Expanding Central Asian Footprint Worries Russia". *Deccan Herald*. <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/chinas-expanding-central-asian-footprint-worries-russia-1067740.html>.

²⁵ Niklas Swanstrom "China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 45 (January 22, 2007): pp. 569-584, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560500205001>, 582.

²⁶ Ashok Sajjanhar. 2022. "China And Central Asia: An Uneasy Coexistence". <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/china-central-asia-relations-an-uneasy-co-existence/>.

²⁷ Aruuke Uran Kyzy. 2019. "Why Is Anti-Chinese Sentiment On The Rise In Central Asia?". *TheDiplomat.Com*. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/why-is-anti-chinese-sentiment-on-the-rise-in-central-asia/>.

The governments in CARs have acted strategically and cautiously when dealing with the issue of China's XUAR policies. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are three of the fifty signatories that have shown international support for China's XUAR policies. Sayragul Sauytbay²⁸, a former detainee and teacher at a Xinjiang re-education camp managed to flee to Kazakhstan and acted as a whistle-blower against the policies employed by China. She received a comparatively mild sentence of seven years in prison for the illegal border crossing into Kazakhstan but was not deported back to China. In a similar instance of moderate action by the state, Serikzhhan Bliash; the leader of the Kazakhstan based human Rights group - Nagys Atajurt Eriktileri²⁹. A group that focuses on the advocacy for Uyghur detainees has been released from his house arrest sentence in exchange for not engaging in Political activism for a period of seven years. The CARs need to manage the expectations of China and its citizens in a well-balanced act. As taking a firm stand with any one of the parties will either worsen their debt situation with China or stoke mass protests ignited by Anti-China sentiments.

In 2019 reports indicated a brief build-up of Chinese troops at the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border.³⁰ Afghanistan's stability is important to China due to its economic investments in the country and the security risks a porous border into the CARs could pose. Hence, China was one of the first countries that took a step to establish relations with the new Taliban government in Afghanistan. China has also been involved in conducting anti-terror drills in the region along with the CARs' security and military. This military presence marked a diversion in the policies adopted by CARs which traditionally relied on Russia for all security-related concerns.

This foray into security by China has a digital element as well. As there have been concerns about Chinese Tech companies such as Huawei sharing user data with the Chinese government in the West. The CARs have offered a more accepting market for the companies. China's export of surveillance technology disguised as "safe city"³¹ technology to the relatively authoritarian governments of the CARs will prove to be an important asset of surveillance for the states as the

²⁸ Mohamad Adnan. 2020. "Minority Groups Archives - ICS Research Blog". *ICS Research Blog*. <https://icsin.org/blogs/category/minority-groups/>.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Alexander Cooley. 2020. "Securing The Neighborhood: China's Evolving Security Footprint In Central Asia". *Trendsresearch.Org*. <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/securing-the-neighborhood-chinas-evolving-security-footprint-in-central-asia/>

³¹ Ibid

space of the digital world expands. The use of technology such as the FacePay application by Hikvision³² in experimental phases across Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan showcases that the process of collection and collation of data by such tech giants is well underway. While these developments mark a shift in the CARs policy concerning security it is evident that Russia remains their major ally in this area. The extensive Chinese dominance in the economic sphere has not yet translated into military presence.

Rise of Anti-China Sentiments

The rise of China's influence in the CARs has been accompanied by a rise in Sinophobia in the region. Multiple reasons contribute to the rise of these sentiments and in such a scenario one can observe a class divide between the government and elite on one hand and the common populace on another. While the governments of the CARs are apprehensive of their growing dependence on China and its influence in their states; the perks of foreign investment and developmental projects are a benefit to the powerful and influential in the CARs. However, anti-China fears are more pronounced amongst the common populace in the region.

There has been an uneasiness growing around the inflow of Chinese workers into the CARs. These workers are part and parcel of China's foreign investment and developmental policy. The rise of Ultranationalist groups such as the Kyrk Choro³³ in Kyrgyzstan have developed in reaction to the rise of Chinese influence. The group stands against the practices preached at the many Confucius Cultural Centres set up by China to advance its soft power, the presence of the Chinese Diaspora and the westernisation of the country. There have been 97 Anti- China protests in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan between 2019 and 2021³⁴. These protests are most common in Kyrgyzstan which ranks highest on the Democracy Index compared to the other CARs and is comparatively accepting of

³² Bruce Pannier. 2020, "The Four Big Issues Central Asia Faced in 2019 (and They're Not Going Away)." *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-2019-challenges-security-china-facial-recognition/30356077.html>.

³³ KemeI Toktomushev. 2021. "China And Central Asia: Warm Politics, Cold Public - Central Asia Program". *Central Asia Program*. <https://www.centralasiaprogram.org/china-central-asia-warm-politics-cold-public>.

³⁴ Ibid

dissent. The demand by the Kyrgyz people to curb the number of Chinese workers taking up jobs in the country has led the government in reducing the number of work visas issued for the same. Popular outrage against the increase in China's influence and the country's dependence on the same led to the cancellation of a 275-million-dollar China financed project that sought to set up a logistics centre at Naryn in Kyrgyzstan.³⁵

Instances of lower wages being paid to local workers compared to their Chinese counterparts employed in the same company have sparked tensions in CARs. The CITIC Group Corporation, a Chinese firm faced backlash for such practices in Kyrgyzstan.³⁶ However, it is important to note that this is not always an instance of exploitation and discrimination. As most of the Chinese workers present in such companies are in comparison better skilled than the local populace they hold better positions in the company.

The history of ceding land to China and its current approach to accepting the rights to explore mines and utilise other natural resources in exchange for loan repayment has stoked fears and challenged the livelihood of many groups. The leasing of land to Chinese farmers in Kazakhstan as the country grapples with unemployment has not been received well by the locals. The environmental damage and the death of affected livestock caused by the mining at the Solton-Sary³⁷ gold mine run by a Chinese mining company in Kyrgyzstan led to violence as 20 Chinese workers needed to be hospitalised. The pollution from exploratory mining ventures affects the environment and resultantly the lives of all those that depend on it. It additionally challenges the artisanal and traditional mining practices that have historically existed in the region. Due to the pandemic, corruption and poor planning the CARs struggle to repay their loans to various Chinese Banks it is likely that this pattern of repayment might increase and along with it the strife it causes.

The role of the elite in the CARs and their role in supporting China's presence in the region comes to the forefront when examining cases such as the modernisation of the powerplant at Bishkek.

³⁵ Catherine Putz. 2020. "Kyrgyz-Chinese Joint Venture Scrapped After Protests". *The Diplomat.Com*. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/kyrgyz-chinese-joint-venture-scrapped-after-protests/>.

³⁶ Ashok Sajjanhar. 2022. "China And Central Asia: An Uneasy Coexistence". <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/china-central-asia-relations-an-uneasy-co-existence/>.

³⁷ Isabelle DeSisto. 2021. "Competing For Cake Crumbs: Why Chinese Mining Leads To Conflict In Kyrgyzstan But Not Tajikistan - Central Asia Program". *Central Asia Program*. <https://www.centralasiaprogram.org/competing-cake-crumbs-chinese-mining-leads-conflict-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan>.

Officials from the government lobbied for the project to be handed to the Chinese Tebian Electrical Apparatus Stock Company. This modernisation project and the reports of corruption involving it landed two former prime ministers in jail.³⁸ Tajikistan has spent 530 million dollars gained from trade with China on projects such as building the world's tallest flagpole, the largest tea house and the grandest presidential housing.³⁹ Such investments don't cater to the larger needs of the people showcase the beneficiaries of China's influence are often the already well off.

China has tried to deal with the rise of Anti- China sentiments by localising its projects and shifting interest from investing in only energy and infrastructure projects to other employment providing ventures such as the glass, pharmaceutical and cement industries in the region. It has also launched various programmes for the upskilling of the local populace. The China factor has to an extent become a scapegoat for the myriad of problems facing the citizens of the CARs such as corrupt, authoritative governments and unemployment.

Conclusion

The Central Asian region once again is likely to become the centre stage for great power struggles in the International Arena. As Russia's economy is hit with international condemnation and sanctions over its war in Ukraine and with the pandemics' economic impact on the global economy one might assume a further shift by the CARs towards China. However, with the rise of Anti-China sentiments accompanied by Russia's inability to be a constant ally and the West's demands for improvements in the domestic political sphere provide the perfect environment for another power to showcase itself as a reliable ally to the region. Various states such as India, Turkey and others are contenders to fill this space. As major players in the international arena are keen to establish their foothold in the region for its market capacity, energy resources, and security concerns; the possibility of contention amongst such powers increases.

³⁸ KemeI Toktomushev. 2021. "China And Central Asia: Warm Politics, Cold Public - Central Asia Program". *Central Asia Program*. <https://www.centralasiaprogram.org/china-central-asia-warm-politics-cold-public>.

³⁹ Ibid

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