

## **New Great Game in Central Asia: The Return of China**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the evolution of China's relations with Central Asia. The region has been of strategic importance to China. Prior to the discovery of the maritime route, Central Asia used to connect China to the outside world. The region was part of the ancient "Silk Road" that linked China with the Middle East and Europe. Therefore, various Chinese dynasties had made it a point to ensure the security and stability of Central Asia. For centuries China has been engaging the Central Asian kingdoms. However, the Chinese influence started to decline in the 19th century and eventually Russian influence monopolized the region. This study explores the resurgence of Chinese influence in Central Asia. It also discusses the growing influence of China in Central Asia within the context of the new great game which involves the power play between the major powers such as Russia and the United States. The paper focuses on China's contemporary interest in the region especially in view of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the revival of the "Land Silk Road". In addition, this study also looks into the prospects and challenges the Chinese BRI encounters in contemporary

Central Asia, and analyses the role of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in enhancing China's interest in the region. In conclusion, the study will look into China's interests and challenges in Central Asia.

**Keywords:** *Central Asia, China, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Xinjiang*

## **1. Introduction**

Central Asia has been a major concern of China in terms of trade and commerce, security, diplomacy, religion and culture for many centuries. In fact, prior to the development of the ancient maritime route, Central Asia was the gateway for China to the outside world. For centuries, the Chinese dynasties had established diplomatic missions and military outposts in the region.

Therefore, it is not surprising for China to continue focussing its attention on the political, security and economic development of the Central Asian states. This paper argues that China had already demonstrated a keen interest towards Central Asia prior to the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and it continues to do so till now. The Chinese started to explore the region as early as 2 BC; in fact, it was very much earlier than the Russian expansion into Central Asia in the 18th century.

This study aims to answer the following questions – first, historically what was China's interest in Central Asia? Second, what were the strategies adopted by the Chinese dynasties in the early dealings with the Central Asian kingdoms? Third, why is contemporary China still keen on Central Asia and how is China managing its relations with the current Central Asian republics. Fourth, what is the role of SCO

in the region? Fifth, what are the challenges contemporary China needs to overcome, especially in Central Asia specifically in promoting the New Land Silk Road via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)? This paper demonstrates that China has been an important player in Central Asia's politics and economy. Therefore, this study argues that it is not a new phenomenon for contemporary China to return as a revisionist power in the region.

The presentation of this paper is divided into four sections. It begins with a brief background of Central Asia. This section will primarily deal with the geo-strategic and economic importance of the region. Section 2 discusses the historical links of the Chinese dynasties in Central Asia. This section also focuses on China's past interest and strategies towards the kingdoms of Central Asia.

Sections 3 and 4 deal with the contemporary issues and challenges in the relations between China as a member of the SCO with the Central Asian republics. The objective of this paper is to analyse the continuity of China's engagement in Central Asia and identify the factors that influence China to return to the region in post-Soviet Union. In addition, this study analyses the strategies adopted by China in dealing with Central Asia. Lastly, this study concludes by highlighting the link between the past and present Chinese concerns in the region.

## **2. Geo-Strategic and Economic Importance of Central Asia**

Central Asia is also known as Inner Asia or Middle Asia. The idea of Central Asia originated from the Russian concept of *Tsentral'naya Azia* or Central Asia which comprises Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Dani and Masson, 1992). It is a landlocked region – bordering Russia to the north and west; China to the east; Iran and Afghanistan to the south. The concept of *Tsentral'naya Azia* was used by

the Russians to refer to the non-Slavic areas of Eurasian continent. The idea of Central Asia as a distinct region in the world was first mentioned in the works of Alexander von Humboldt, a German geographer in 1843.

Central Asia occupies an area of over 1.5 million square miles. Almost 60 per cent of the area is covered by desert. Kazakhstan is the largest state in Central Asia with over a million square miles whereas Tajikistan is the smallest state with only 55,000 square miles (McCauley, 2002). Central Asia has a large amount of oil deposit estimated at 200 billion barrels of oil or 20 percent of the world's total oil deposit (Shimizu (ed.), 1998).

The early inhabitants of the Central Asian region consisted of Huns, Turks, Indo-European ethnicities such as Scythians, Saka, Persians, Tocharians, Yuezhi, Wusun (Valerie, 2012). In addition, there are ethnic Mongols in Central Asia. However, the Turk population is among the largest in Central Asia. Hence, it is unsurprising that the region is also known as Turkestan or "land of the Turks" (Ahmed Rashid, 2003). Language and religion are the two factors that unite the peoples of Central Asia. Almost all the Turks in Central Asia speak the Turkic language. However, it is noteworthy to mention that apart from the Turkic language, other languages such Russian, Persian and Arabic are also spoken in the region.

Islam is the dominant religion in Central Asia. It was first introduced to the region by Arab traders in the 7th century. However, it was not until the 14th century that Islam was adopted throughout the entire region (Muhammad Anwar Khan, 2001). Prior to the arrival of Islam, other religions such as Buddhism and Zoroastrianism were practised in Central Asia.

In the past, the Turks established their empires, however, the Mongols led by Genghis Khan invaded the region in the early 13th century. Ever since then, the region had been under foreign occupation

until the late 20th century. By the 18th century, during the decline of the Mongols, the Russians started to expand its territory into Central Asia. Peter the Great from Russia invaded Omsk (modern Kazakhstan) in 1716 (McCauley, 2002).

By the end of the 19th century, the Russians were able to capture the entire region. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Central Asia was incorporated into the Soviet Union. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the five Central Asia republics gained independence. It is noteworthy to mention that although they are Muslims, administratively they practise secularism and have no intentions to establish an Islamic state.

Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, China aspires to reconstruct the ancient Silk Road in Central Asia by sponsoring the building of modern highways and railroads that will connect China with the Central Asian republics. Similarly, China has forged trade agreements with the Central Asian republics. Caravans that travelled the ancient Silk Road have been replaced by pipelines, highways and railroads on the modern Silk Road.

In the past, China always considered Central Asia to be an important region for its security against foreign invaders such as the Mongols, Arabs and Russians. Similarly, at present China is concerned about the security and stability of Central Asia because it is challenged by the rise of Islamic militancy. China regards its security interests as advancing by its economic well-being (Ahmed Rashid, 2003). Unlike the Russians in the 18th century, China has never intended to establish any colonies in Central Asia. In fact, China continues the policy of peaceful co-existence and promoting joint development with its Central Asian neighbours.

### 3. Historical Links of the Chinese Dynasties in Central Asia

Geographically, Central Asia has always been a strategic region for China which is surrounded by the Gobi Desert and steppe-land to its northwest and the Tibetan Plateau at its Southeast borders. These two landmasses are obstacles for China to India and the Middle East. Therefore, prior to the advancement of ship-making and navigation techniques, Central Asia was the only way for the Chinese to get connected with the outside world.

China defines its interest in Central Asia in terms of security and economy. China sees itself as a historically active international player in Central Asia. Relations between China and Central Asia can be traced back to the Han Dynasty about 2000 years ago (Yom, 2005). The Chinese Emperor Han Wudi (141–187 BC) who expanded his empire into Central Asia had commissioned Zhang Qian, a Chinese explorer, to make official visits to Central Asia and seek out tributaries from the Central Asian kingdoms

Although Zhang Qian took almost 13 years to complete his tour of duty, he was one of the first Chinese to travel across Central Asia. The route taken by Zhang Qian later came to be known as the “Silk Road” which resulted in many historians regarding Zhang Qian as the “Father of the Silk Road” (Wild, 1992). The Silk Road was an ancient highway that connected China with the outside world; traders and merchants used the Silk Road to enter China (*ibid.*). China established and maintained its influence in Central Asia until the rise of the Russian Czarist Empire in the 19th century.

Zhang’s mission combined with Emperor Han Wudi’s military and diplomatic skills enabled the Chinese to exercise control over Central Asia and protect its interest in the Silk Road. It is noteworthy to mention that the tributary system in Central Asia initiated by the Han Dynasty continued despite of the collapse of the dynasty in 221 AD. In aftermath

of the fall of Han Dynasty, China was divided into several kingdoms. Though China was reunited under the Sui Dynasty in 581 AD, it was short-lived due to internal uprisings (Wright, 1979). Li Yuan, an aristocrat of the Sui Dynasty managed to defeat the uprisings and eventually established a new regime known as the Tang Dynasty in 618 AD.

The new dynasty faced serious external threats from the Eastern Turkish Empire (modern day Xinjiang) that constantly attacked the Chinese borders. However, in 630 AD under the command of Li Shimin, the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty (618-907), the Eastern Turks were defeated during the Battle of Yinshan. In order to further secure the Chinese interest along the Silk Road, the Tang Dynasty established Protectorate General of Pacifying North as an approach to control the vast steppe (Xiong, 2009). In addition, the Tang Dynasty expanded its military and political influence over the western region (Central Asia). The Tang Dynasty also set up the Protectorate General of Pacifying West which enabled the enhancement of its influence into Central Asia and secured Tang's control over Silk Road.

After the fall of the Tang Dynasty, the Silk Road remained as a major trading route connecting China with other civilizations. The Mongols succeeded in ruling China and established their own dynasty known as the Yuan in 1271 AD. In the same year, Marco Polo visited China via the Silk Road and met with Kublai Khan. The Yuan Dynasty lasted for less than a century, whereby in 1368 AD the local rebels, led by Zhu Yuanzhang successfully expelled the Mongols out of China and established the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). It is interesting to note that during the early years of the Ming Dynasty, China conducted active diplomatic relations with neighbouring kingdoms in Central Asia and Southeast Asia. In fact, Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty dispatched Chen Cheng as his emissary to Central Asia. For example,

between 1414 to 1420, Chen Cheng led three diplomatic missions to the court of the Timurid Empire in Samarkand (modern Uzbekistan) (Tsai, 2002).

It is noteworthy to mention that during the early Ming Dynasty, China was politically skilful in dealing with the Central Asian kingdoms. It used diplomacy and established alliances with its former enemies such as the Mongols to establish a balance of power and safe guard its interest in the region. For example, Emperor Yongle defeated the Mongol Khanate and established the tributary system. It enabled the Ming Dynasty a safe access to the Silk Road. As mentioned earlier, the Ming Dynasty also established alliances with the Mongol Khanate and it acted as a buffer kingdom between the Ming Dynasty and the Timurid Empire. It was a strategic move which prevented the direct military confrontation between the Ming and the Timurid forces.

The strategy of tributary system adopted by the various dynasties had demonstrated the Chinese ancient method of international relations. Neighbouring kingdoms in Central Asia had paid tributes such as horses, gem stones, bows and arrows to the Chinese courts in exchange for China's gifts (Rossabi, 1975). These gifts from the Chinese dynasties such as silk, porcelain, lacquer, tea and medicine were usually much more valuable than the tributes received by China. By paying tributes to China, these kingdoms were granted the permission to trade with China (*ibid.*).

In addition, the tributary states, in return, received recognition and protection from the Chinese dynasties. This clearly shows that the tributary system was a win-win situation for both China and the Central Asian kingdoms. Through the tributary states in Central Asia, the Chinese dynasties such as Tang and Ming were able to balance the threat from the Turks and Mongols. It is noteworthy to mention that the tributary system was guided by loose agreements consented between the



Chinese dynasties and the tributary kingdoms in Central Asia. These agreements encompassed peace and trade with the Chinese dynasties which involved sending tributary gifts to the imperial court in China, sending top officials such as princes to the Chinese capital as special envoys, arranging royal marriages and creating military alliance against threats from the Eastern Turks and the Timur Empire towards Chinese economic and security interest in Central Asia.

In return, the Chinese dynasties would recognise the legitimacy of these kingdoms and provide them with military protection against threats from other local rulers. It is necessary to stress that these rules were based on the Chinese military capabilities. In other words, when the dynasties were strong, these rules would be implemented and adhered to. However, during the decline of the Chinese dynasties, these rules were not fully implemented. The Chinese dynasties also exercised influence in the domestic affairs of tributary states. Local rulers who challenged the rules were replaced with local princes who were pro-China.

Nevertheless, the Chinese dynasties still recognised the legitimacy of these kingdoms unlike the Western style of colonialization in the 19th century. Compared to Western colonization, the Chinese tributary system provided much freedom to the tributary kingdoms to conduct their own political systems and diplomacy. Another crucial point to highlight is that the aim of the Chinese tributary system was to maintain peaceful and harmonious relations with the Central Asian kingdoms as well as to protect the Chinese interest in the Silk Road. Unlike the Russian imperialism in Central Asia in the 19th century which aimed to maximize economic profit for Russia. It is noteworthy to mention that historically the Chinese dynasties had never ruled Central Asia directly, but these dynasties focused on getting local rulers, military leaders to cooperate with Chinese rules.

The decline of Chinese dynasties influence in Central Asia began in the 19th century during the Qing Dynasty (1641-1912). It was due to both internal and external turmoil that had contributed to the dynasty's withdrawal of its attention on Central Asia. These internal challenges included the constant uprisings of anti-Qing rule over China such as the Taiping Rebellion (1850 - 1864), Dungan Rebellion (1862-1877), and Nian Rebellion (1851-1868). In addition, the Qing imperial court faced issues of conservatism. The conservative Qing officials were persistent in retaining its ancient traditional practices. Their refusal to conduct any reforms led to the decline of China's power. This factor also deterred the Chinese from acquiring Western technology and scientific knowledge.

Some progressive Chinese officials within the Qing court embarked on efforts to conduct reforms and changed in accordance with time. It was initiated as a result of various humiliating defeats at the hands of the European powers. The effort was known as the Self-Strengthening Movement in China that occurred roughly during 1850-1890. The objective of the movement was to emulate Western science, technology and administration. Its ultimate aim was to transform China into a modern country like its contemporaries in European states.

However, this movement failed to gain the support of the conservative high officials of the Qing Dynasty such as the Empress Dowager Cixi (1836-1908). Emperor Guangxu (1871-1908) attempted another similar initiative of reformation and strengthening. Unfortunately, the reforms only lasted for hundred days. In addition, the external factors that caused the decline of the Chinese power were the attacks by foreign powers such as the British, French, Germans, Japanese and Russians. The Qing Dynasty suffered a series of military defeats such as the Opium War I (1839- 1842), and Opium War II (1856-1860), Sino-French War (1884-1885), and Sino-Japanese War

(1894-1895). Subsequently, China was forced to sign unequal treaties and give away territories to foreign powers.

The combination of both internal and external factors contributed to the withdrawal of Chinese influence in Central Asia as it had to re-direct its resources to fight foreign invasions and counter internal rebellions. Moreover, the Russian Empire had advanced into Central Asia in the early 19th century. At that time, the Qing Dynasty was too weak to pose any powerful opposition to the Russians that it had to relinquish its strategic presence in the region. There were confrontations and tension between Russian and British in India over the control of Central Asia. It was known as the “Great Game” due to their worry of each other’s incursion in respective territories (Ewans (ed.), 2004). The British were concerned by the Russian expansion into Central Asia which could threaten its colony in India. By 1895, the Great Game came to a close when the Russians took control of almost the entire Central Asia (Ewans, 2012).

#### **4. Contemporary Rise of China in Central Asia and Challenges**

Despite the temporary withdrawal of China’s influence from Central Asia, the region continued to be of concern to the Chinese government. During the Sino-Soviet Union rivalry in the 1960s and 1970s, Central Asia was one of the most militarized region the world. Both the Chinese and the Soviets were ready for war and had fortified their respective borders in Central Asia. However, the tension eased in 1991 after the disintegration of the Soviet Union.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union had created a political and economic vacuum in Central Asia which contributed to the return of Chinese presence in Central Asia. Despite the passing of time, Central Asia remains relevant to China. In the modern era, the importance of

Central Asia to China can be divided into three main points. First, China is aware that Central Asia is a region rich in natural resources such as natural gas, petrol, gold, bronze, and uranium which are indispensable to meet the industrial and economic development needs of China, especially for cities like Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou which are located on the East coast. According to Kubanychbek Toktorbayev, a senior analyst at the National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS) of the Kyrgyz Republic, “The Chinese leadership quickly realized that the Central Asian region would play a role of a ‘strategic home front’ for China, and Beijing has recognized the importance of Central Asia as a resource provider for the Chinese economy” (Sukhankin, 2020).

Second, China also recognizes the importance of the Central Asian geo-strategic position in connecting China with other regions such as South Asia, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. Hence, Central Asia plays the role of a land corridor. This is not something new because Central Asia has long played this role in the Silk Road. However, now it is becoming increasingly important for China because Central Asia has the capacity to reduce China's level of dependence on maritime routes, especially in the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca. Currently, China is involved in overlapping claims in the South China Sea. At the same time the United States has expressed interest in the South China Sea and always calls on China to abide by International Law as well as freedom of navigation. Thus, the tense situation in the South China Sea is likely to lead to an armed conflict between China and the United States. China is concerned about the possibility of the United States launching a sea blockade to block China's trade network and trade routes abroad. Therefore, Central Asia is the ideal alternative route for China to go abroad.

China, through the efforts of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has launched the construction of a complex network of highways and

railways for the purpose of connecting China with manufacturers and markets in Central Asia and other regions. Among the network projects are the New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB), the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC), the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Belt and Road News, 2020); (Xinhua, 2017); (Sukhankin, 2020). For example, the China-Central Asia-Western Asia Economic Corridor connects China to the Arabian Gulf via Iran and the Aegean Sea / Piraeus Port via Turkey. At the same time, the BRI railway line to Turkey's Middle Corridor via Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea reduces the travel time to the Middle East and European countries (Li & Aminjonov, 2020).

Third, Central Asia is crucial for China's national security. Beijing is deeply concerned about the development of terrorist groups such as the Uzbekistan Islamic Movement (IMU), Jamaat Ansarullah and Jihad Union which operate in Central Asia. China fears Central Asia, will likely be the centre of terrorist activities especially for the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) that will threaten its national security and stability. Tajikistan serves as a buffer for China with terrorist groups in Central Asia and the Talibans in Afghanistan. As such, China has conducted military exercises with Tajikistan known as "Cooperation 2019" and anti-terrorism exercises in August 2019 (Sukhankin, 2020).

Based on these arguments, it is clear that China is a "reactionary state" in Central Asia. As in the past, Central Asia today is still important for China's survival. Although China had to reduce its influence in Central Asia during the occupation of Russia and the Soviet Union, it has actively returned to the region.

In 1996, China initiated a regional grouping known as the Shanghai Five (SF) consisting of China, Russia and three Central Asian States

which were once part of the Soviet empire, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The group specifically focused on border demarcation, confidence-building measures (CBM) and resolution of common problems such as terrorism and transnational crime (SCO, 2004). In addition, it also focused on battling the terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan by ensuring regional stability. In June 2001, Uzbekistan was invited to join the group, and subsequently the official name was changed to Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (Saha, 2014).

As a regional organisation, the SCO has been able to create a collective identity for its members. Although it is premature to evaluate the success of the SCO, it is undeniable that their relations have definitely improved since its establishment in 1996. Five years later in 2001, the regional grouping was transformed into a regional organisation. Member states can share opportunities and deal with new challenges and threats more effectively.

Although the Shanghai grouping has only been established for 23 years (1996-2019), it has managed to bring former enemy states like Russia and China to reconstruct their identities. It is also a way for the Central Asian republics as well as Russia and China to positively build relationships. It is hoped that through this affiliation process, individual states can reconstruct their own identities. As a first move towards a collective identity, all the members of the SCO have agreed to abide by the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. Currently, the SCO has eight states members including India and Pakistan that joined in 2017. In addition, there are also four Observer states: Iran, Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia, and six Dialogue partners: Turkey, Nepal, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

It should be highlighted that SCO is very crucial for China's foreign policy towards Central Asia. Member states of SCO have agreed to cooperate with the Chinese security to fight against the “Three Evils”,

i.e. terrorism, separatism and extremism. SCO member states have shown commitment in combating violence and transnational crime in Central Asia. Among the commitments include Agreement on Regional Anti-Terrorist (RATS) Structure between the Member States of the Shanghai of Cooperation organisation, Agreement on RATS Databanks, Separatism and Extremism, Agreement on Cooperation in Combating Illicit Traffic of Narcotic Drugs Psychotropic Substances and Precursors, Joint Anti-Terrorist Exercises within Territories of Members States of the SCO. These activities aim to preserve security and stability in Central Asia in line with China's security interests in the region as China does not wish violence and extremism to spread to its Western region, especially Xinjiang.

Several joint military exercises such as “East-2014,” “Norak Anti-terror,” “Solidarity,” and “Tianshan” have been held for the purpose of anti-terrorism between China and Kyrgyzstan. All these were part of China's multilateral efforts with SCO member countries to curb terrorism and transnational crime in Central Asia. China is aware that it needs cooperation from Central Asian countries to overcome the problem of terrorism, especially in terms of preventing them from supporting the Uyghur separatist movement in Xinjiang (Zhao, 2018).

Besides, the SCO has been collaborating with the United Nations in combating terrorism and transnational crime in Central Asia. Some examples of this effort are “The United Nations and Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Jointly Countering Challenges and Threats” in New York in 2016 and “The United Nations and Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Fight Against Drugs: Common Threats and Joint Actions”, in Vienna in 2017 (Alimov, 2018).

Apart from the security issue, SCO is important to China in terms of economic cooperation with the Central Asian countries. For example, as early as 2004 the Economic and Trade Ministers Meeting of the SCO

Members States implemented an Action Plan for the Implementation of the Program of Multilateral Trade and Economic Cooperation among the SCO member states which included 127 projects in 11 areas (Zhao, 2018).

Since then, various agreements such as the Agreement on Interbank Cooperation, Resolution of the Conference for the Establishment of the SCO Business Council have been signed. In 2016, the SCO Heads of Government Council approved the 2017-2021 List of Measures to continue developing SCO Project Activities as a guide for SCO economic cooperation for a period of five years. Among the areas that have been identified for cooperation include trade and investment, finance, science and technology, agriculture, transportation infrastructure, and nature conservation.

In addition, the SCO members cooperate in the social areas. These include the Agreement on Cooperation in Education between the Governments of the SCO Member States, the Agreement between the Government of the SCO Member States on Cooperation in Health, the Tourism Cooperation Program of the SCO Member States and the SCO Network University. However, compared to the security and economic areas, social cooperation among SCO members is still comparatively low. It is important to note that SCO is not just a regional organisation that focuses on security aspect alone, it also covers the economic and social areas where China considers it can play a major role in contributing to their success.

However, SCO is not free from the various challenges. Among them are the existence of other regional organisations that have the similar objectives such as Central Asia Japan Dialogue of Foreign Ministers, Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum, the Eurasian Economic Community, the Eurasian Economic Union, the Greater Eurasian Partnership and the Turkic Council. These not only pose as alternatives



to the SCO, more importantly, they threaten China's credibility and its importance in the Central Asian region. With the existence of more forms of cooperation with other major powers such as Japan, the United States as well as middle powers such as Korea and India, Central Asian countries have more options to cooperate with since they are not limited to China and Russia.

The main challenge of the SCO is to ensure the unity and integrity of its member states. despite efforts to attract SCO member states towards other organisations. In 2009, the United States together with several members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) sponsored the establishment of the Central Asian Regional Information Coordination Center in Kazakhstan. This was followed by the establishment of the Central Asia Counter-Narcotic Initiative in 2012 which was also supported by the United States.

Similarly, the existence of the Turkic Council which aims to foster cooperation among Turkish-speaking countries in Central Asia. These efforts have posed a challenge to the unity of SCO members. In fact, President Putin was aware of this challenge faced by the SCO. In 2006, during the SCO Summit, he stated that Russia opposed the formation of other organisations in Central Asia that shared the same ambitions as the SCO.

Another challenge for the SCO especially among the Central Asian countries is the increasing level of dependence on China and Russia. In addition, India's and Pakistan's participation in the SCO since 2017 could disrupt the harmony among these SCO members as both these countries have been in conflict with each other since 1947. Their membership in the SCO could drag other members into the India-Pakistan conflict and divide the SCO (Desai, 2017). Moreover, the presence of India in the SCO could be considered as a counterbalance to the Chinese leadership in the SCO. The United States as well as other

European countries plan to make India a defence partner for China's counterbalance. The United States sold weapons worth 15 billion USD to India, and in 2016, the Ministry of Defence of India and the United States signed a Memorandum of Agreement on Logistic Support which allowed the sharing of military bases for logistic purposes.

According to former Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson in his speech “Defining Our Relationship with India for the Next Century” at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, stressed that India is a “Pivotal State” for the United States and has a greater function in security and the stability of the Indo-Pacific region (Zhao, 2018). Clearly, China's interest in the SCO is definitely challenged by India. It is noteworthy to mention the SCO has often been criticised for being an anti-Western bloc by Western countries. The SCO has also received criticism for supporting China and Russia's efforts in balancing the United States and NATO. This is especially so when the Declaration of the SCO Heads of State supports Iran on the issue of nuclear power and opposes US efforts to intervene in Syria.

Another crucial event which marks the return of China to Central Asia was President Xi Jinping's visit to the region in October 2013. During this historical visit of President Xi to Astana, Kazakhstan, he launched the “Silk Road Economic Belt” of the global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is interesting to note that the “belt” area covers Central Asia, Middle East and Europe. China helps in constructing rail roads and highways which connect China to Europe via Central Asia through the BRI (World Bank, 2018).

The region has once again become a vital area for the Chinese economy. Unlike in the ancient period, China no longer practises the tributary system with the modern Central Asian republics, but rather creates connections through agreements. Contemporary China hopes to create a network of transportation and communication through the BRI

to enhance business and social connectivity. The rail roads and gas pipelines in the “New Silk Road” have replaced the ancient caravans used by traders in the past.

Central Asian countries also welcome the BRI organised by China because they consist of countries that do not have direct access to the sea and are located far from shipping routes. Therefore, they support China's plan to create a network of highways and railways that consists part of BRI's “Belt” for connectivity purposes. According to President Xi Jinping, China and Central Asian countries are working together to build “the Belt” as a compliment to “the Road” which is the maritime route. The “the Belt” area covers China, Central Asia and the southern Caucasus.

Most of the roads and railways in Central Asia were built during the Soviet Union and some even had been in operation since the time of the Russian Czar period. Hence, they were obsolete and old. The construction of highways and railways by the Chinese Belt plan has been well-received by Central Asian countries. For example, the Wahdat-Yovon railway in Tajikistan was built by China in May 2015 and completed in August 2016. Similarly, the construction of the Angren-Pap railway tunnel in Uzbekistan built by China has started operating since June 2016 (Yellinek, 2020).

In addition, BRI is expected to provide employment opportunities as well as increase taxes through the implementation of infrastructure construction projects. For example, Kazakhstan has the potential to receive 5 billion USD as payment for goods being transported through its territory to other countries' markets. In addition, BRI programmes are predicted to help in enhancing greater cooperation and ties among Central Asian countries (*ibid.*).

Central Asia has about four percent of global energy deposits (Chen and Fazilov, 2018). It is estimated that the oil and natural gas in the

region amount to 17 to 33 million barrels per day with more unexploited deposits. This makes the region to be extremely important to China's demand for energy (*ibid.*). China produced an estimated 4.3 million barrels per day of oil in 2011 and it was expected to increase to 4.5 million per day in 2013, but its consumption rose by 16.4 metric tons (379.6 million barrels per day) in 2014 due to the rapid industrialisation in China. Its domestic energy could no longer sustain the ever-growing demand. Hence, China resorted to expand its energy sources from Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

Compared to other regions, Central Asia is geographically closer to China. Therefore, China invests heavily in the oil and gas industry in order to secure the supply of energy besides establishing its "energy diplomacy" with the Central Asian republics. To demonstrate the energy diplomacy, China has adopted two strategies.

First, China built oil and gas pipelines linking China with the major producers in the region. For example, Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline is already operational. Second, through Chinese energy companies' investment in oil and gas industry in Central Asia. In addition, China aims to improve the relations with the peoples of Central Asia through economic and energy diplomacy to deter them from supporting separatist movements in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

China has always considered Central Asia to be an important region for its security against foreign invaders such as the Mongols, Arabs and Russians. Currently, China is also concerned about the security and stability of Central Asia as it fears the rise of religious extremism in Central Asia that will eventually spread to XUAR. Therefore, China is working closely with the Central Asian republics in its fight against religious extremism and terrorism.

Kazakhstan is the largest Central Asian republic and it has estimated 37 billion barrels of oil and 3.3 trillion cubic meters (tcm) of natural gas (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). This makes Kazakhstan one of the world's largest oil producers. Hence, Chinese energy companies have shown interest in investing in Kazakhstan even prior to the establishment of the BRI. For example, in 1997 China National Petroleum Cooperation (CNPC) already acquired 60.3 percent shares of Kazakh oil company Aktobemunaigaz (Blank, 2009). Furthermore, CNPC also acquired 49 percent of Kazakhstan's MangistauMunaigaz Company which enabled China to control over 15 percent of Kazakhstan's total oil production (*ibid.*).

China considers Kazakhstan as an important strategic partner especially as a source and link in its energy security. On top of that, Kazakhstan also provides cooperation to strengthen its north-western borders against terrorism and extremism in Xinjiang. It is clear that China's interest in the oil and gas industry of Central Asia is driven by its domestic economic growth. The close geographical proximity and construction of pipelines enable China to secure its energy for its rapid economic activities in cities such as Shenzhen and Shanghai.

Through the BRI, China aspires to reconstruct the Silk Road Economy in Central Asia by sponsoring the building of modern highways and railroads that connect China with the Central Asian republics. In addition, China has also constructed long-distance railroads linking China to Europe via Central Asia. It is interesting to note that the first long distance China-Europe railroad was launched in March 2011 connecting the city of Chongqing in southwestern China to the German city of Duisburg via the province of XUAR, China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus and Poland.

The building of railroads and highways enables inland cities such as Chengdu and Chongqing to develop and receive foreign investment. For

example, the US computer company Hewlett Packard set up one of the largest laptop factories in Chongqing. The China-Europe long-distance railroad enables millions of China-made laptops and notebooks to be transported to Europe in a faster and cheaper way compared to shipping.

In addition to the Chongqing-Duisburg railroad, on 18 July 2013, the railroad from the city of Zhengzhou in central China to the port city of Hamburg, Germany via Kazakhstan (Central Asia), Russia, Belarus and Poland was historically launched. This achievement enabled more Chinese products to be transported to the European market. It is a clear evidence of the importance of Central Asia to the Chinese economy. Similar to the past, the region is still a gateway for China to the outside world. Kazakhstan, in particular, is the most crucial state among the Central Asian republics for bringing China and Europe closer and increasing the overland trade (Chen and Fazilov, 2018).

With the launch of the BRI in 2013, the border town of Horgos in XUAR was upgraded to a modern city. The city is now part of the China-Kazakhstan International Center for Boundary Cooperation. Horgos is one of the major railroad port cities that connects China with Central Asia via Kazakhstan. China has invested millions to build modern infrastructure such as huge shops and wholesale markets. It has attracted many traders and tourists from Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan to visit Horgos for business and shopping (Wade, 2016).

BRI still has its own challenges. Among the key challenges is the extent to which BRI truly benefits the locals in Central Asia. For example, in the China-sponsored Kyrgystan-Osh-Sarytash-Irkeshtan and Bishkek-Naryn-Torugat road construction projects, 70 percent of its workers were brought in from China while only 30 percent were locals. Similarly, in terms of the use of goods for construction, 60 percent was imported from China (Li & Aminjonov, 2020).

Feelings of “Sinophobia” are on the rise throughout Central Asia as there are Anti-China demonstrations in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. There are concerns that the sovereignty of Central Asian countries has eroded due to the presence of workers from China. What is even more worrying is the presence of China's private security forces located in some strategic locations in Central Asia to protect China's economic interests. According to Bakhtiyor Ergashev, Director of Ma'no Research Initiative Center in Uzbekistan, “We can see that Chinese private military companies are securing deposits of natural gas in Turkmenistan... It is now openly discussed that Chinese special forces are to protect zones of the Kashgar- Gwadar route. This is a blow against national sovereignty... I hope that this will not happen in Uzbekistan, and that Chinese workers will not be allowed to work on our territory” (Sukhankin, 2020).

To further complicate matters is the spread of news on the ill-treatment received by the Turkic Muslim population in Xinjiang under Chinese rule. In addition to the Uyghur population, Xinjiang is also inhabited by other Turkic peoples such as Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz. The news of the existence of detention camps in Xinjiang has created negative implications. Although the Chinese government has been attempting to correct the negative perceptions by insisting that the so-called detention camps are actually re-education and vocational centres. However, it fails to change the perception of the Turkic population in Central Asia as anger still lingers among them. For example, there were large-scale demonstrations in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan protesting China's actions in Xinjiang (Standish, 2019).

The next challenge of the BRI in Central Asia is the allegation of irregularities and lack of transparency in Chinese investment. According to Oliver Stuenkel, a political analyst, Chinese officials have personally

acknowledged that BRI's investment in Central Asia has suffered a 30 percent loss due to corruption. China is also promoting non-tender procurement, such as the exclusive right granted to Chinese company of TBEA to repair Bishkek Power Plant for \$385 million as well as Dushanbe-Chanak highway repair work to a Chinese highway contractor with a \$300 million loan (Li & Aminjonov, 2020).

In addition, there are irregularities in the BRI subsidy given by the Chinese government to encourage the use of railways. According to the *Chinese Business Journal*, there were reports that many Chinese exporters have used train carriages supposedly to transport goods from China to Europe, but the carriages were found to be empty (Standish, 2019). This is done to obtain subsidies. The Chinese government is aware of the increasingly serious problem of malpractice and corruption in BRI projects. Thus, during the Second Annual Belt and Road Forum in April 2019, Chinese leader Xi Jinping signalled that his administration would tighten the oversee of the BRI infrastructure project network as well as ensure transparency within the terms of the agreement. Xi also stressed that his administration would adopt a “zero tolerance” policy for corruption.

In addition, there are criticisms that BRI has created a serious dependence and indebtedness of Central Asian countries to China. The biggest concern about BRI is the problem of debt burden similar to what happened in Sri Lanka where the government of Sri Lanka was unable to repay the debt of 8 billion USD to the Chinese construction firm that developed the port of Hambantota. So, in 2017, the Sri Lankan government had to pass over a 99-year lease for the port facilities to China as a means to repay the debt. Central Asian countries are likely to suffer the same fate if they are unable to pay off debts, and this could result in the countries' income stream or assets to be handed over to China's management and ownership, thus threatening national



sovereignty. Therefore, BRI could be more of a “debt trap” for participating countries, and not a “golden opportunity” as claimed by President Xi.

Unlike loans and grants provided by the EU, the United States and Japan which include conditions to encourage countries to implement political, economic and human rights reforms, those offered by China to Central Asian countries do not impose such conditions. Critics state that loans provided by China through BRI have been used by autocratic governments in Central Asia to strengthen their patrimonial regime without any reform efforts. Hence, BRI loans only benefit the elite as well as their cronies.

As mentioned earlier, China has encountered two major challenges in its quest to return as an active power in the region. The first challenge is facing the threat posed by religious extremists that threaten China’s economic and security interests. The second challenge is the rise of other regional powers such as India, Iran and Turkey which threaten China’s position in the region. At the same time, China cannot ignore the Russian’s bid to strengthen its position in Central Asia. There is a possibility that Russia will re-establish its former hegemonic position in the region. All these challenges leave China with no alternative than to strengthen its economic position through the BRI and the SCO in order to safeguard its interest and strengthen its influence in Central Asia.

## **5. Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that China’s influence in Central Asia has been in existence since the ancient times. Central Asia has remained a core region for the Chinese security and economy. China has adopted various strategies in dealing with the region from tributary system used by the Chinese dynasties in the medieval period to the current economic

and infrastructure diplomacy. It can be said that the Chinese interest and involvement in Central Asia predates the Russian colonialization. The domestic and external challenges it had encountered in the 19th century led to China's temporary withdrawal from the region.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the independence of the Central Asian republics enabled China to return to the region. Ever since then, China has continued to engage with the Central Asian states through bilateral and multilateral. These include the BRI and SCO, but it must be pointed out that China has never shown any intentions to dominate the region. Unlike the previous Great Game between the Russians and British in the 19th century, contemporary China has always emphasised on cooperation while maintaining its economic and security interests. Regardless of the challenges, China's position in Central Asia through the BRI is here to stay.

## Note

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