

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR? CENTRAL ASIA IN CHINA'S NEW- ERA FOREIGN POLICY (2012–2024)

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ABSTRACT. *Central Asia is critical to China's security and development. Although China repeatedly underlines the necessity and urgency of establishing a good neighborhood with Central Asian countries, it has not released any strategies and specific policies, at least not explicitly. This article examines Central Asia's sui generis in China's new-era neighborhood diplomacy from 2012 to 2024. It contends that China's foreign policies have evolved so subtly that Central Asia has been prioritized comparatively. With the aim of building a good neighborly relationship in mind, China has stepped up its engagement in Central Asia under the aegis of the Belt and Road Initiative, culminating in the China-Central Asia Summit in 2023.*

KEYWORDS: *China, Central Asia, foreign policy, BRI, neighborhood.*

INTRODUCTION

China has further enhanced its relations with Central Asian countries after the 2013 China-Central Asia Summit, aiming to “foster a new cooperation paradigm featuring high-level complementarity and mutual benefit” (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Taking the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a new starting point, China committed to “elevating regional collaboration to the next level” (Gautam, 2023). If the decade-long China-Central Asia relationship during Xi's presidency culminated in the China-Central Asia Summit in 2023, it behooves us to investigate the paradigms of past interactions (or the lack of them) before building a new one. This article attempts to do so, arguing Central Asia has a *sui generis* position in China's neighborhood diplomacy.

Since China shares land borders with 14 countries of different sizes and development levels, it would be oversimplified to reduce its neighborhood policies to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. In this regard, Yan Xuetong (2015), in interpreting China's foreign policy priorities, contends that China should put a holistic neighborhood before the US. Although the tyranny of geography helps explain why China prioritizes neighborhood policies (Zhang, 2016), from nowhere can we inquire about its nuanced neighborhood policies. A more complex relationship is the reality should we closely scrutinize China's foreign policies.

As an analytical concept, the *neighborhood* can be defined geographically and *ad hoc*. Geographical neighborhood connotes spatial proximity, including countries and regions adjacent to one another; those that can be reached via land and/or maritime

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corridors fall into the category of great neighborhood (Dazhoubian 大周边) (Qiu, 2015). Ad hoc neighbors are contingently constructed since a neighborhood constitutes “a category of social relation crucial to the maintenance of the sphere of the political” (Reinhard, 2005, p. 26).

Owing to Central Asia’s geographical proximity to China, scholarly works on the China-Central Asia relationships mainly focus on their geopolitical and geo-economic implications. While Central Asia’s in-betweenness has kept the great game in the region alive (Blank, 2012; Fingar, 2016), its abundant reserves of fossil fuels have rendered the international scramble for resources more competitive (Freeman, 2018; Liao, 2021). Moreover, Central Asian countries are increasing their weight since the demand for critical raw materials is growing drastically. For instance, the EU planned to export critical raw materials from the region by signing a Memorandum of Understanding with Kazakhstan at the end of 2022. Be that as it may, Central Asian countries, as China’s neighbors, have also gained a normative dimension under the aegis of the BRI since China has integrated them into a culturally defined space by reinvigorating the legendary concept of the *Silk Road*.

Although it is tempting to trace China’s neighborhood policies to the 1950s, when the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence were advocated, the article takes the early 1990s as an analytical departure point. That said, China’s neighborhood policies can be roughly divided into two periods by the reference point of Xi’s presidency in 2012, namely 1990–2011 and 2012–2024. Although the two periods share similar aims of underlining stability, China’s neighborhood policies in the new era have leaped to a new and more nuanced level. This article explores China’s new-era neighborhood policies toward Central Asia from 2012 to 2024.

Instead of using the singular form, the article employs the plural *neighborhood policies* owing to neighboring countries’ diversity and their policy implications for China. In this aspect, although Central Asian countries are diverse individually, this article examines them collectively since they share similar geopolitical and geo-economic significance in China’s neighborhood policies; reducing Central Asia to individual countries in discussing energy security, economic development, and terrorist threats leads to analytical confusion. Central Asia enjoys a special status, perhaps unparalleled by others, in China’s neighborhood policies. To explore its sui generis, this article analyses top Chinese officials’ speeches and memoirs, complemented by information released by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and state-owned media, such as People’s Daily and China Daily.

The article proceeds in four sections. The first section examines the concept of neighborhood in International Relations. Although widely discussed by anthropologists, it has been less debated in International Relations since the discipline, long dominated by realists, has not taken this relationality seriously. The second section investigates the continuities and changes in China’s neighborhood policies. Although China prioritizes neighborhood engagement in outlining foreign policy principles, the principles are ambiguous. It necessitates us to review the evolution of China’s neighborhood policies. The third section elaborates on Central Asia in China’s new-era neighborhood policies. Although China has not released tailor-made strategies to engage in Central Asia,

analyzing official documents and speeches reveals thematized paradigms. The last section briefly concludes this article.

NEIGHBORHOOD AS AN IR CONCEPT

A neighborhood, delineated by fixed border lines, creates a unique crossing space for contacts and/or conflicts. As an oft-used anthropological concept, neighborhood emphasizes the relationality of communities organized by races, ethnicities, and nations. According to Qin Yaqing (2018), social actors, instead of behaving individualistically, practice relational rationality. If so, a relationally perceived neighborhood problematizes three mainstream International Relations theories whose limitations are worthy of a brief examination.

Realists deliberately neglect the neighborhood, promoting atomized states, absolute gains, and coercive power in the anarchical international system. Although not all neighboring countries would degenerate into the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” security dilemma (Adler, 2010), unilaterally increasing defense budgets triggers military races, particularly between border-sharing countries. In other cases, big powers triumph over small ones in asymmetric neighborhood relationships. Given this, even if power positions between neighboring countries are in constant motion (Zhang & Saxer, 2017), inherent power gaps can hardly be filled quickly.

Unlike realists’ blindness, neoliberalists, hymning to market forces, value neighbors should the latter follow. They can contribute to market capitalism since a neighboring country can either be a new market or source of raw materials. Nevertheless, a neoliberal neighbor can hardly be so if they are not economically complementary. In other words, states with homogenous economic structures and export paradigms will likely result in conflicts. This can somewhat explain the current reciprocal ties between China and Russia. As Xi (2013, p. 301) pointed out, “each as the other’s largest neighbor, China and Russia enjoy a high complementarity in development strategy.”

Constructivists believe that a neighborhood is engineerable since the norms that define it are fluid. Therefore, neighborhoods can be formulated ad hoc out of political needs by employing cultural factors engrained in social fabrics. According to Zhang and Saxer (2017), although the concept of neighborhood is often anchored on spatial fixities, the relationship per se is subject to contingent interpretations. By saying so, the statist act of defining a neighborhood is politically selective. Whereas a conventional neighborhood is premised on geographical proximity, the constructivist one can be rhetorically relevant. For instance, the EU has delineated Central Asia as a “distant neighbor” even though they are geographically far away.

Although geographical proximity between Central Asia and China dictates a realist and neoliberal analysis, this article applies a constructivist lens. With no intention to disregard the conventional geopolitical and geo-economic tenets, a constructive view allows us to investigate the concept of neighborhood by integrating cultural elements. Otherwise, cooperation and conflicts in international politics cannot be fully understood unless we explain them in specific cultural settings.

Constructivists acknowledge that identities and interests are mutually enhanced. Relevantly, relational theories, epitomized by Qin's (2018) works, "argue that agents develop their properties not in isolation but as the result of the ties they maintain with others" (Cooper & Schulz, 2023, p. 2). Neighborhood relationships can be more conveniently constructed and kept with the assistance of ritualized artifacts, including those accidentally found at archaeological sites or purposefully built for connectivity. Therefore, cultural heritage aside, infrastructures are increasingly crucial in defining neighborhood relationships. For instance, whereas border walls and barbed wires separate countries, a denser network woven by roads and bridges often implies a closer relationship.

A neighborhood can be constructed and consolidated by invoking fictive kinship based on ethnicity, nationality, and humanity. To a degree, the European Union (EU) has managed the otherwise ferocious conflicts in the region by promising economic prosperity. Nevertheless, when the resources of Europeanism spread thin, nationalism was revived and even radicalized. The neighborhood is vulnerable in a time of crisis. In other cases, neighboring countries obsessed with historical hatred and mired in forged rivalry can hardly maintain cordial ties. Among others, three Northeast Asian countries, namely, China, Japan, and South Korea, are cases in point.

In discussing neighborhood policy in international politics, Chinese scholars advocate Tianxia-ism, advocating that unneighborly love can exist regardless of long distance (Tianya ruo bilin 天涯若比邻). Although the all-inclusive Tianxia, directing to a world society (Zhao 2006), sounds too ideal to be true, any vision that can jump out of the otherwise ossified statist paradigm is better than no vision. Tianxi-ism, according to Li Shenzhi (quoted in Zheng, 2019, p. 149), is anchored on cultures, not nation-states. Given this, it is no surprise that under Xi's presidency, China proposes to build "a community with a shared future for mankind."

CHINA'S NEIGHBORHOOD POLICIES: CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

Western scholars are inclined to explain China's neighborhood policies by wearing realist or neoliberal glasses. Although providing insightful interpretation, parsimonious theories can be equally distorted without examining the policies' continuities and changes and the rationales behind them. As Wu Lin (2016) reminds us, analyzing the driving force behind China's neighborhood policies should overcome the Western either-or approach. Although the US factor is a critical variable affecting China's neighborhood policies (Lampton, 2005, p. 307), we cannot overly exaggerate it since neighboring countries' autonomy has been taken seriously in China's policymaking. More importantly, domestic interests reign, and foreign policies are made first and foremost by taking neighboring countries into consideration.

China paid particular attention to neighborhood diplomacy in the early 1990s. In the CCP's 15th Congress, erstwhile President Jiang Zemin underlined that China needed a long-lasting, peaceful environment for development and envisioned new security perspectives with neighboring countries. Although China strived to create such an environment, territorial conflicts with neighboring countries were too thorny to resolve.

Good borders are pivotal to good neighborhoods (Walzer, 2011). Be that as it may, territorial disputes, should they be rooted in the process of post-colonial state-building, can hardly be resolved when both sides hold irreconcilable opinions (Zhang, 2006). As a result, despite the border conflict with India still fermenting, China has successfully managed the thorny territorial disputes with Russia, signing the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. Border issues with Central Asian countries were addressed under the aegis of Shanghai Five (and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation from 2001) in the 1990s.

Anything leading to an unstable neighborhood incurs a high cost to China's security and economy (Tsygankov, 2005). With this in mind, China strives to achieve national rejuvenation by carrying out neighborhood diplomacy strategically (Xi, 2019a). If the 1990s Asian financial crisis had directed China's attention to Southeast Asia and led to regionalism, exemplified by the ASEAN+3 (Choi, 2009), China has been applying constant vigilance on Central Asia since a stable neighborhood contributes to "a modern socialist country in all respects" (Xi, 2022). In other words, unlike periodic financial crises, perennial ones resulting from terrorist attacks and secessionist activities require policy consistency and a cordial neighborhood. According to Fu Ying (2018), erstwhile Chairperson of the National People's Congress Foreign Affairs Committee (2013–2018), China, different from the 1970s–80s practices, turned to regional platforms, such as ASEAN, for security.

In 2003, erstwhile Prime Minister Wen Jiabao proposed "pursuing the policy of bringing harmony, security and prosperity to neighbors" (Mulin Anlin Fulin 睦邻安邻富邻). Regardless of the vicissitudes of regional and international politics, China still clings to the above tenet in adjusting neighborhood policies. In the furtherance of the above principles, Dai Bingguo (2016), Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group (2005–2013), in discussing China's policy in the Asian Pacific in his memoir, claimed that China has no intention in pursuing hegemony in Asia.

Since a peaceful neighborhood is pivotal to modernization (Sun, 2005), Xi (2014c, p. 395), at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, underlined that "China's peaceful development begins here in Asia, finds its support in Asia and delivers tangible benefits to Asia." Therefore, it is no surprise that he (Xi, 2015, p. 287) considers building a peaceful and prosperous neighborhood China's "unshrinkable responsibility," stating that "China has always placed its neighborhood at the top of the diplomatic agenda." To do so, China aims to prevent neighboring conflicts from being spilled over and integrate neighboring countries into the BRI. Only stability premised on domestic solidarity and economic prosperity for Beijing can lead to long-term stability. Otherwise, externally sustained peace and prosperity proved ephemeral. Given this, Xi, in laying out the goals of China's neighborhood policies in 2013, committed to "mak[ing] our neighbors more friendly in politics, economically more closely tied to us, and we must have deeper security cooperation and closer people-to-people ties" (quoted by China Daily, 2013).

China's holistic foreign policy starts from those nearby. Likewise, different issues areas have priority degrees in China's policy repertoire. Therefore, after viewing itself as a significant regional player (Wu, 2016), China began to address unconventional security

concerns, such as water, energy, and ecology. Alongside the mindset change, China, to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, has shifted from a reactive to an active foreign policy stance, rhetorically replacing the strategy of hiding strength and biding time (Taoguang Yanghui 韬光养晦) with that of forging ahead relentlessly (Fenfa Youwei 奋发有为).

Beijing is more confident in implementing its policies than ever, committing to bringing a new type of international relations to the world stage, which features mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation (People's Daily, 2024). Xi (2017a) explicitly claimed at the 19th CPC National Congress that the new era “will be an era that sees China moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind.” Similarly, Xi (2019b, p. 547) stated, “China today is more than the country itself; it is very much a part of Asia and the world.”

Interestingly, while a low-profile China was criticized for its unwillingness to undertake international responsibility, the ambitious one provoked suspicion and fear and raised the awareness of those worried about the turbulence of regional and global order (Gardner, 2017; Shin & Lee, 2022). Besides repeatedly refuting the above claims, Beijing has learned to disregard the perceptively biased concerns. In the calling for sitting tight on the fishing boat despite the rising wind and surging waves (Renpinfenglangqi Wenzoudiaooyuchuan 任凭风浪起 稳坐钓鱼船), China is in transit from an agenda-taker to an agenda-maker. Among others, the BRI is an ambitious undertaking aiming to draw neighboring countries and those beyond into China's global economic projects. Culturally interpreting the infrastructure-led BRI, Tim Summers (2016) views it as an international political practice based on cultural heritages.

Although the pace of Chinese investment has been variously slowed by potential recipient countries in the name of national security or environmental disruption (Zheng, 2021), Chinese companies have steadily increased their engagements in neighboring countries. Chinese state-owned companies initially spearheaded China's Go Out policy before being elevated to the strategic and comprehensive level by the BRI. By saying so, we should not interpret it as a policy U-turn since China had already accomplished the strategic shift piecemeal after the 2008 financial crisis. If anything, the financial crunch helped display the comparative advantages of the Chinese model, exacerbating the debate between the Beijing consensus and the Washington consensus. Although the Chinese authority is wary of utilizing the concept of Beijing consensus, the Chinese way of development at least offered neighboring countries alternatives to escaping neoliberal predicaments, wherein global capital would “fatally destabilise the entire national economy” (Chang, 2012, p. 71). Speeding up infrastructural connectivity under the aegis of the BRI squarely serves to this end (Xi, 2019a). In the furtherance of this enterprise, China launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2015, which was deemed “the first overt challenge to the Bretton Woods system” (Howorth, 2016, p. 391).

Scholars regularly take 2010 as a turning point for China's international status after Chinese GDP rose to 2nd in the world. In this context, after the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, China under Xi's presidency formulated new guidelines for China's neighborhood policies, which characterize “friendship,

sincerity, reciprocity and inclusiveness” (Qin Cheng Hui Rong 亲诚惠容) by treating all neighboring countries as equals (Xi, 2014b, p. 326). Rhetorically, China employed the concept of partnership rather than alliances to construct a new form of international relations. Xi, at the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, called for pursuing partnerships with neighboring countries and proposed building Asian security (Xi, 2014c). Given this, Shi et al. (2019) write that one feature of China’s new-era neighborhood diplomacy is constructing a new strategic framework in the 21st century by calling it partnership diplomacy. Unsurprisingly, Beijing repeatedly underlines win-win cooperation. Xi (2014a, p. 301), in a 2013 speech given in Moscow, stated that “[b]y growing stronger through development, China will bring more opportunities, rather than threats, to the rest of the world.”

To sum up, a closer inspection reveals that China’s new-era neighborhood policies have shifted from a holistic to a differentiation view, exemplified by regularly held subregional dialogues, including the China-Central Asia Summit. Wu Lin (2016) debates that one feature of China’s neighborhood policy maturity is how Beijing can envision different strategies to manage its otherwise diverse neighbors.

CENTRAL ASIA: BEDFELLOW WITH DIFFERENT DREAMS?

Western scholars are inclined to divide neighborly love into the identitarian and non-identitarian kinds by following the self-other nexus. According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009, p. 182), identitarian love is the “love of the same” based on a common history or a shared future. Therefore, theoretically, non-identitarian love would be less intense and less likely to result in policy consensus since it is, at first glance, an oxymoron.

Nevertheless, consensus can be rebuilt should we establish a new common ground, such as China’s revival of the Silk Road. Seeking common ground by leaving aside differences (Qitong Cunyi 求同存异) has been highly praised and repeatedly practiced in Chinese political culture. As far as Central Asia is concerned, China’s engagement has made nuanced changes. From a refrained attitude in the early 1990s to a relatively conservative attitude in the early 2000s (Wu, 2016), China has increased its engagement with Central Asian countries.

Quoting the Chinese proverb that neighbors are dearer than distant relatives, Xi (2014d, p. 316), in his 2013 speech given at Nazarbayev University, Xi stated that China “takes improving these relations [with Central Asian countries] as a foreign policy priority.” Despite the above, China’s engagement with Central Asian countries is not without caution. As Xing Guangcheng and his colleagues (2016) observed, color revolutions and the like, periodically occurring in Central Asia, would inspire secessionists to the feasibility of a “peaceful revolution.”

Democratization without stable political orders can hardly be sustained (Zheng, 2021). Nevertheless, democracy has many forms. Whereas the logic of the Western Pareto’s improvement cannot guarantee all entities’ interests, China keeps in mind all stakeholders’ co-development, to which Zhao Tingyang (2022, p. 85) speaks of Confucian improvement. Relevantly, China’s new-era foreign policy emphasizes building a community with a shared future for mankind. Since it is the “love of the

other, and not self-love, grounds the self” (Oppenheim, 2007, p. 47), neighboring regions have been prioritized since China’s foreign policies are made by following a holistic and harmonious approach. Thus far, China has proposed to build communities of shared destiny with ASEAN in 2013, Mongolia in 2022, and Central Asia in 2023, among others.

Central Asia is pivotal to China’s security and development. Despite this, security is premised on development (Fu, 2018). Otherwise, security without development can hardly be sustained (Xinhua News Agency, 2022). For one thing, security concerns emanating from secessionists and terrorists cannot be well managed without Central Asian countries’ commitment and participation. In a time of uncertainty, neighborhood implies threats that do not necessarily come from state actors since non-state actors, such as terrorist groups, are more than active in the international arena by developing transnational branches. When a powerful secessionist movement grows, neighboring countries can hardly be left undisturbed since conflict spills over (Horowitz, 1985, p. 281). Not less concerned are implicitly referred foreign forces, including the US and the EU, by China (Hou, 2023). Should we read between the lines, Central Asia is where the above disruptive forces are spawned.

For another, Central Asia, lying between the EU and China, is gaining increasing importance alongside the waning influence of the northern corridor (via Russia). Since the alternative routes from China to the EU are limited, the burgeoning trade volume has elevated Central Asia to a more significant role. Besides, Central Asia has abundant resources. For instance, Kazakhstan is rich in oil and uranium, and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are known for their abundant natural gas reserves.

Either way, it is reasonable and rational for China to release the infrastructure-theme BRI, promising “to provide more public goods to its Asian neighbors through connectivity, and welcomes them to board China’s train of development” (Xi, 2017b, p. 543) and commit to building an economically prosperous Central Asia. Regardless of Central Asia’s particular weight, China has not released any strategies for Central Asia, at least not explicitly, as has been done by the EU in 2007 and 2019. Meanwhile, no paradigmatic route has been tailor-made despite the repeated emphasis on good neighborhood. Thus said, although it is convenient to assert that Beijing’s neighborhood policies speak louder than deeds, a pragmatic view helps to understand the unparadigmaticness since China’s neighboring policies aim to achieve a win-win outcome, complying with the Confucian doctrine that the benevolent always care for others (Renzhe Airen 仁者爱人).

Shared interests and concerns bring neighbors close to each other. For China, connecting the European market via Central Asia is strategically important; likewise, Central Asian countries aim to diversify their trade by all means. Paul Collier (2007, pp. 56-57) says, “If you are coastal, you serve the world; if you are landlocked, you serve your neighbors.” Albeit oversimplified, it can explain why land-locked Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan tried and are still trying to reach a broad market through the Lianyungang port in Eastern China.

Besides shared interests, Central Asian countries and China have similar concerns about ethnic secessionism, religious extremism, and international terrorism (Pan, 2002). Given this, it is no surprise that China prioritizes engagement with Central Asian countries, sticking to the good-neighborliness policy. In particular, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are prioritized neighbors since their shared borders with China are porous and, hence, potential access for East Turkistan's permeation (Wu, 2016).

Besides bilateral engagement, China underlines regional approaches. As Pan Guang (2013, pp. 27-28) writes:

With China's rapid economic growth, particularly with the further development of China's western region and its accelerating demand for energy, Central Asia is becoming more and more significant strategically for China. The SCO has enabled China to build security, political, economic, and cultural ties with the region as never seen before, which creates conditions for China to play an active and constructive role in the region. Cooperation within the multilateral framework makes it possible for China to avoid frictions with its neighbours while preserving and pursuing its own national interests.

Regardless of their differences, China has established economic connections with Central Asian countries under the aegis of the BRI. More importantly, the BRI has no plan to replace the existing international system. At least, the financing models that it employs "are redolent of existing practices rather than novel ones" (Summers, 2020, p. 149), which, in a way, can explain why China released it by reviving the ancient Silk Road concept. Irrespective of the precise nature of their relationships in the past, all actors are deemed equal groups in the cultural imaginaries. Besides that, China has added new content to its neighborhood policy, such as ecological issues. Chinese and Central Asian cities, alongside BRI corridors, released the Urumqi Declaration in 2014, committing to sustainable development to enhance inter-city cooperation.

CONCLUSION

The article investigates Central Asia in China's new-era neighborhood policies. Although no explicit neighborhood policies have been tailor-made for Central Asia, China, with anti-secession and economic development in mind, has pragmatically integrated Central Asian countries into BRI and the community with a shared future for mankind. This has particularly underlined the region's stability under Xi's presidency.

The article examines the region's twofold complexity by focusing on Central Asia's uniqueness in China's neighborhood politics. One refers to Central Asian countries' complexity emanating from religious and ethnic diversity; the other relates to external powers' engagements, which are often periodical and unpredictable. Compounding the complexity is Central Asian countries' divergent interests in responding to external powers. Central Asia is an arena where great powers compete for influence. Taking the US for instance, Washington "pledges to help the Central Asian states defend their sovereignty against their more powerful neighbour" in the 2017 National Security Strategy. Qiu Huafei (2015) observes that the neighboring Central Asian countries are highly adroit in utilizing the US factor to balance regional power equilibrium. As early as 1994, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan joined the Partnership for Peace, a NATO program deemed an alliance between member states and other states.

Although it is worthy of investigation, the article has only explored the complexity of China's neighborhood policies toward Central Asia in a holistic manner, leaving another three equally crucial actors, including provincial governments, military corps, and state-owned companies in Xinjiang, silent, which, however, is not the case. In one way or another, the three entities have affected and are still influencing China's neighborhood policies. As Tim Summers (2016, p. 1633) observes, "the ideas and practices of linking up China's western border provinces with neighboring economies have been an idea at the provincial level since the 1980s". Correspondingly, border provinces are inclined to interpret the central government's policies to their maximum interests and have agendas in managing neighborhood affairs. On rare occasions, the unique interests of border and coastal regions can even conflict with those of the central government (Wu, 2016).

China and Central Asian countries declared they would work together for a China-Central Asia community with a shared future after the 2023 Xi'an Summit. If such a move has symbolically brought China closer to Central Asian neighbors, it still takes time to tell how it will be put on the ground. In particular, a community will be debilitated without instruments to manage crises, such as the 2022 Kazak unrest. Aboulafia (2010) reminds us that being good neighbors in a community means doing no harm and implies the willingness to assist those in need.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

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