

CONTEMPORARY PROCESSES IN CENTRAL ASIA AND CHINA'S DIPLOMACY IN THE REGION IN THE ERA OF UPGRADED COOPERATION

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Abstract. In this academic article, an attempt is made to present the perception of Chinese scholars on the development of contemporary processes in Central Asia and the policies of foreign states and unions in the region in the context of changing international and regional dynamics.

The research results shed light on the existing perceptions within Chinese academic circles regarding the current state and trajectory of Central Asian countries' relations

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with foreign actors, ongoing geopolitical changes, the process of strengthening intra-regional cooperation, and a significant shift in China's foreign policy in Central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, China, geopolitical competition, constructive cooperation, SCO, BRI, community of common destiny, summit.

ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ ЗАМАНАУИ ПРОЦЕССТЕР ЖӘНЕ ЫНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҚ ЖАҢҒЫРУ КЕЗЕҢІНДЕГІ АЙМАҚТАҒЫ ҚЫТАЙ ДИПЛОМАТИЯСЫ

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Аңдатпа. Бұл ғылыми мақала Қытай ғалымдарының Орталық Азиядағы заманауи процестердің дамуы және халықаралық және аймақтық конъюнктураның өзгеруі жағдайында шет мемлекеттер мен ұйымдар тарапынан аймақта жүргізіліп отырған саясатына қатысты түсініктерін ұсынады.

Зерттеу нәтижелері Қытайдың ғылыми топтарында Орталық Азия елдерінің шетелдік акторлармен қарым-қатынасының өзекті мәселелері мен бағыттары, болып жатқан геосаяси өзгерістер, аймақшілік өзара іс-қимылды нығайту процесі және ҚХР-дың Орталық Азияға қатысты сыртқы саясатындағы елеулі өзгерістер туралы қалыптасқан пікірлерді анықтауға мүмкіндіктер береді.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, Қытай, геосаяси бәсекелестік, конструктивті өзара іс-қимыл, ШЫҰ, БЖББ, бір тағдыр қоғамдастығы, саммит.

СОВРЕМЕННЫЕ ПРОЦЕССЫ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ И ДИПЛОМАТИЯ КИТАЯ В РЕГИОНЕ В ЭПОХУ ОБНОВЛЕНИЯ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА

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Аннотация. В этой научной статье делается попытка представить восприятие китайских ученых развития современных процессов в Центральной Азии и проводимой в регионе политики иностранных государств и объединений в условиях изменения международной и региональной конъюнктуры.

Исследование призвано пролить свет на имеющиеся в научных кругах Китая представления об актуальном состоянии и треке отношений стран Центральной Азии с зарубежными акторами, происходящих геополитических

изменениях, процессе укрепления внутрирегионального взаимодействия и существенном сдвиге во внешней политике КНР в ЦА.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Китай, геополитическое соперничество, конструктивное взаимодействие, ШОС, ОПОП, сообщество единой судьбы, саммит.

Introduction

The rapid changes in the international environment surrounding Central Asia and China, observed over the past few years, are creating conditions for strengthening relations among the six states. A significant achievement in this process is the elevation of interaction levels to the format of a summit of heads of states of China and Central Asia. At the first meeting of the region's leaders in May 2023 in the ancient Chinese capital city of Xi'an, guidelines for future cooperation were formulated. The choice of location was not accidental, as it is from this city that the Great Silk Road was started more than 5,000 years ago.

Fidelity to history and traditions regarding the revival of this important route for the region and the continent as a whole aims to emphasize the scale and completeness of intentions, both for the population of China and for the peoples familiar with the history of the Great Silk Road.

Among the key changes in recent years, the Chinese academic circles give particular attention to the definitive official withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict in February 2022, the escalation of tension in the Taiwan Strait, the intensification of competition between the USA and

China, as well as internal upheavals in Central Asia. Under the influence of these factors, the region is witnessing the development of the following important trends

Firstly, there is a strengthening of geopolitical competition among major actors in Central Asia due to the exacerbation of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis. In the unfolding conditions in the region, countries such as Turkey, the European Union, the United States, and other players have noticeably intensified their efforts to advance their own interests. Meanwhile, the Central Asian republics maintain a course towards a balanced foreign policy.

Secondly, there is a strengthening of intra-regional ties among the countries of Central Asia, commonly referred to as regional integration, as a collective response to the changing international and regional landscape. This trend is accompanied by an increase in the region's independence and autonomy in developing relations with non-regional actors.

Thirdly, there is a significant shift in China's external policy focus on Central Asia. There is a transition from the traditional approach of being an "external observer" to engaging in "constructive interaction," along with an elevation in the level of cooperation among the six countries to regular meetings of the

heads of these states.

Amidst these ongoing changes, China and the Central Asian states maintain their course towards strengthening and deepening cooperation, aiming to overcome new challenges and seek opportunities to promote sustainable development.

Research Methods

The research methods employed in the preparation of this paper involved the use of systematic and comparative analysis of materials and data obtained during the search and monitoring of Chinese sources regarding current processes in Central Asia. The systematic method enabled an assessment of the international political processes in Central Asia and China over recent years.

A content analysis was conducted on sources containing information about cooperation results among countries, officially reached agreements, and plans for further development. Evaluating these results allows for conclusions to be drawn regarding the ongoing processes of modernization in this context.

“The New Great Game” in Central Asia

Unprecedented changes in contemporary international and regional processes contribute to the growth of competition among major foreign actors vying for expanded influence in Central Asia. In history, the rivalry for dominance in the Central Asian space was known as the “Great Game,” which took place in the late 19th and

early 20th centuries between the British and Russian Empires. Contemporary processes in the region are referred to as the “New Great Game.” [1] Considering increasing geopolitical turbulence, there is a noticeable escalation in its intensity and complexity. [2]

In The New Great Game, the influence of the Russian Federation in Central Asia remains strong. With the onset of military actions in Ukraine, the significance of the Central Asian region for Moscow has increased. The Central Asian republics are not only important economic and political partners but also hold strategic significance in terms of ensuring the security of Russia’s southern borders. [3]

The United States has increased the importance of its Central Asian foreign policy vector due to the loss of positions in Afghanistan, the onset of the war in Ukraine, and the heightened tension in U.S.-China relations. In the current geopolitical realities, the USA is utilizing various mechanisms of cooperation with Central Asian countries to pull them towards its side and play a leading role in the region for countering China. [2]

The European Union is intensifying steps to strengthen cooperation with the Central Asian republics in political, energy, and transportation spheres. In these new realities, the EU’s escalation of interaction with Central Asian countries aligns with the natural needs of the EU in preserving the stability of transportation corridors and energy supplies. However, there are indications of the European side’s aspirations to expand its presence in the Central Asian region while Russia’s

attention has shifted towards the Western direction. [4]

Among the non-regional actors, the Republic of Turkey holds the fourth position in terms of influence on Central Asia, following Russia, the EU, and China. The escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022 significantly impacted Turkey's strategy, prompting more decisive actions in the region. [5]

The increased role of Turkey as a mediator in the processes surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian crisis has led to the integration of what is conventionally called a "give-and take tactics" into its foreign policy philosophy concerning Moscow. This approach assists Russia in matters unrelated to Central Asia, expecting in return a silent position from Russia regarding Turkey's actions in advancing its own interests in bilateral relations with Central Asian states in military, energy, and political fields.

Following the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, significant efforts by Ankara have also been directed towards promoting a multilateral format of interaction with the countries in the region within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Despite the limited agenda of this regional structure, it will undoubtedly lead its members to a dispersal of attention and distract them from regional economic cooperation issues within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). [6]

Summarizing this section, the research by Chinese scholars concludes that a new stage of geopolitical competition has evolved in the region due to NATO's

withdrawal from Afghanistan, the escalation of the military conflict in Ukraine, and the heightened tensions between the United States and China. In this New Great Game, they highlight the following main tendencies in the foreign policy of foreign states.

First, a decrease in Russia's involvement in Central Asian processes after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. However, Russia's predominant position in the region continues to be preserved. Other countries use these circumstances to expand their ties with the Central Asian republics.

Second, the United States is gradually strengthening its connections with Central Asia in the new conditions. One of Washington's main objectives in the region is to create conditions for containing China's development through neighbouring countries.

Third, the European Union, faced with new fundamental challenges concerning energy resource imports and the redistribution of cargo flow from China to the EU via overland transportation routes, is expanding cooperation with Central Asian countries. In the political field, the parties also show an interest in elevating their interaction to a new level.

Fourth, the Republic of Turkey adeptly utilizes its position as a mediator in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict to implement a "give-and take tactics" with Russia, aiming for progressive advancement of its interests in Central Asia.

On their part, the Central Asian republics, amidst the intensifying geopolitical competition, strive to

maintain a balanced position in their foreign policy [3]. They advocate for upholding the principles of the United Nations and the supremacy of international law. These nations are committed to developing mutually beneficial cooperation with all interested states and are not inclined to take sides or align with any particular party.

Integration Processes in Central Asia

At the current stage, one of the significant trends in Central Asia is the revival of intra-regional integration. Changes in the security architecture around the region have prompted the five states to address mutual support for overcoming common external challenges and threats, as well as preserving independence and territorial integrity.

Regarding the institutional understanding of integration among the Central Asia countries, there is currently no clear definition of this process and its organizational goals. However, judging by the content and substance of this interaction format, it encompasses areas such as politics, economics, security, cultural-humanitarian ties, and other aspects. In a broader sense, this process can be termed as the regional cooperation of Central Asian republics.

The ongoing integration in Central Asia is accompanied by the development of two significant trends. [7] Firstly, there is an increasing awareness of a common regional identity. Each Central Asian republic understands that interacting with foreign states and

international organizations as a unified region enhances their international influence, allows for increased global recognition, strengthens their position on the international stage, and facilitates collaboration with interested parties. This has led to the emergence of the C5+1 format, which has found broad application in developing relations with non-regional actors. In 2023, China and the United States successively elevated the level of this format to meetings of heads of states.

The second trend involves strengthening the independence and autonomy of the region. Considering the historical development of the Central Asian republics, other states regarded them, to a greater or lesser extent, as zones of influence. However, this perception is gradually weakening. The restoration of integration within the Central Asian space is one manifestation of this trend.

Following the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, the Central Asian states maintained close relations with their northern neighbour. However, the countries of the region also demonstrated greater autonomy in enhancing cooperation with other players in politics, economics, and security. They have become more actively involved in creating favourable conditions to increase connectivity with other regions of the world through infrastructure development and transport routes.

Taking into account the increased external risks developed after February 2022, three important trends stand out in the foreign policies of the Central Asian

republics. Firstly, a shift away from perceiving the geopolitical belonging of the region's countries to the post-Soviet space. Secondly, the aspiration to change external political paradigms formed in the earlier years of independence. Thirdly, the movement towards developing a regional foreign policy strategy that pays greater attention to the region's interests and independence.

All of the above indicates that in an attempt to overcome new challenges, the Central Asian countries are becoming more active in shaping the regional order and independently expanding cooperation with all interested parties.

Chinese academic circles adopt a relatively sceptical view regarding the prospects of integration among the Central Asian countries, pointing to significant differences in their internal situations, political cultures, national interests, and weak economic interconnectedness. They emphasize the necessity of involvement of neighbouring major states. The scholars believe that achieving deeper integration seems unlikely without it. [7]

China's Relations with Central Asian Countries at the Present Stage

As a result of internal crises within and between the Central Asian republics, China's diplomacy is shifting from the traditional approach of being an "external observer" to a policy of "constructive interaction" [9], along with elevating the Central Asia-China format to the level of regular meetings between heads of states.

The internal disruptions in Central

Asia in 2022, including the so-called "January events" in Kazakhstan, the border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the "protests in Karakalpakstan" in Uzbekistan, have to some extent influenced China's re-evaluation of its foreign policy in the region. Traditionally, China's support for peace, stability, and development in neighbouring countries aligns with its national interests [10].

The transition to "constructive interaction" implies China's readiness to provide the necessary assistance to neighbouring countries in times of instability and their need for external aid, all while adhering to principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international law.

China sees the application of this approach as particularly necessary in cases where disruptions have extraterritorial implications and pose a threat not only to national but also regional security. This shift also reflects China's growing awareness of its increased responsibilities and capabilities as a major power.

China's contribution to ensuring stability and development in the region is significant concerning the improvement of the security situation in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China. This is primarily addressed through three main pillars of China's foreign policy in Central Asia: the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the China + 5 Central Asian Countries format. Strengthening ties with neighbouring countries through these tools has substantially enhanced the

socio-economic situation in the western part of China [11].

In this New Great Game in Central Asia, China is pursuing its own policy. China's response to increased competition in the region, along with the adjustments made by Beijing in the Central Asian direction as mentioned above, involves increasing interaction with the five republics to the highest level – through regular meetings between heads of states. Specific directions and future goals of this multilateral format are outlined in the Xi'an Declaration, fundamental agreements, and cooperation initiatives adopted following the first China-Central Asia Summit in May 2023.

Amid the evolving geopolitical situation in the region, understanding China's current and future foreign policy vector and its position in Central Asia is essential. At the summit in May 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping articulated the vision for processes in Central Asia focusing on stability, prosperity, harmony, interconnectedness, as well as the conceptual basis for ensuring sustainable regional development and bilateral relations – the Community of Common Destiny for China and Central Asia. This concept comprises four main directions, including mutual assistance and support, promoting joint development, ensuring comprehensive security, and strengthening centuries-old friendship [12].

The summit's final documents also reflect institutional development and various areas of cooperation within the new China-Central Asia format.

The parties agreed on creating meeting mechanisms at the ministerial level for key and priority cooperation spheres and exploring the possibility of establishing a Secretariat for China-Central Asia. The defined areas of interaction include trade, economics, transportation, energy, innovation, science, technology, and inter-civilizational dialogue.

Considering the aforementioned, it can be stated that China's relations with Central Asian countries, amidst increased geopolitical turbulence and internal upheavals in the region, are entering a fundamentally new level. In addition to establishing a mechanism for regular meetings between the heads of the six states, participants in the multilateral format have reached significant agreements on creating new interaction institutions, further expanding and deepening cooperation in various fields, signifying consensus on the necessity of strengthening cooperation and serving as a collective response to new international and regional challenges.

Overall, influenced by ongoing changes, the six countries in the region maintain their course towards further strengthening and deepening cooperation to overcome new challenges and seek opportunities for sustainable development. The current vision of China's Central Asian foreign policy vector can be described by the words of Chinese President Xi Jinping: "...China's relations with Central Asian countries are based on deep historical roots, driven by genuine demand, and possess a strong social foundation. In the new era, they

are full of vigorous vitality” [12].

Conclusion

An analysis of scientific papers and sources authored by Chinese political scientists and experts allows for an understanding of the prevalent vision and comprehension of the contemporary developments in Central Asia and China’s diplomacy in the region during this era of renewed interaction. Chinese scholars frequently highlight key trends in the Central Asian region: the rise of geopolitical competition, the strengthening of intra-regional ties, and the enhancement of regional cooperation with China.

The final part of the research also underscores the importance of including some conclusions and recommendations by Chinese scholars that consider the aforementioned regional trends:

- Changes in the configuration around Central Asia and the intensification of geopolitical competition among major players pose risks to future stability in the region. [3]
- Effectively countering U.S. and Western efforts to contain China’s development from the territory of Central Asian states requires China to continue promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, offering timely support to neighbouring countries for economic development and ensuring social stability. [2]
- Turkey’s influence on Central Asia is expected to gradually increase in the near future. This may pose a challenge to the established

relationships between major players in the region. China should pay special attention to this issue, considering the potential increase in competition between Beijing and Ankara, and possibly make adjustments to its foreign policy in Central Asia. [5]

- The current state of the political situation and security in the region can be described as stable. Regional countries are taking quite active and effective measures to overcome external shocks, implementing structural reforms aimed at solving social issues and improving people’s lives. [3]
- Improving China’s relations with Central Asia in the coming decade requires strengthening interaction with the Central Asian republics to enhance the sense of a community of shared destiny and increase the level of institutionalisation of bilateral cooperation. [11]

The main limitations of the presented work are the analysis based solely on public scientific works by Chinese scholars, which are open and accessible to the wider public, and the contemporary nature of the considered trends, influenced by rapidly evolving processes and a dynamic international environment.

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