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CONNECTIVITY OF CHINESE BRI RAILWAYS IN CENTRAL ASIA AND ITS FUTURE

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Abstract. The article explores the current state and future scenario of the Chinese railway lines routes through Central Asia and Afghanistan taking into account the Taliban regime. Since ancient times, Central Asia has been a crossroad of trade routes, which in modern times largest geopolitical actors are trying to revive. The concept of the Silk Road, which a few decades ago lived only on the pages of history textbooks, firmly settled on the front pages of newspapers, in analytical reports and development strategies of the states of Central Asia. However, times have changed, and the countries of Central Asia are trying to work hard to get access to the seas. And the railways are of paramount importance in this process. Trading via railways is vital for landlocked Central Asian states and in its turn, the competition is high among them to negotiate with Beijing to invest in the project. Furthermore, China and Uzbekistan have a chance to deal with the railway extension to Pakistan and Iran through Afghanistan by negotiating with the Taliban administration.

Keywords: *China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Railways, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Transafghan corridor*

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ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ ҚЫТАЙ ТЕМІР ЖОЛДАРЫНЫҢ ТҮЙІСУІ ЖӘНЕ ОНЫҢ БОЛАШАҒЫ

Самат Уралбаев, Адилбек Ермекбаев

Андатпа. Мақалада Талибан режимін ескере отырып, Орталық Азия мен Ауғанстан арқылы Қытай теміржол желілері маршруттарының қазіргі жағдайы мен болашақ сценарийі қарастырылған. Қазіргі таңда әлемдік геосаяси ойыншылар жандандыруға тырысып жатқан Орталық Азия ежелгі ғасырлардан сауда жолдарының түйіскен орталығы болып келеді. Осыдан оншақты жыл бұрын ғана тарих оқулықтарының беттерінде өмір сүрген Жібек жолы тұжырымдамасы газеттердің бірінші жолақтарында, талдамалық зерттеулерде және Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінің даму стратегияларында нық орнықты. Алайда уақыт өзгерді және Орталық Азия елдері теңіздерге шығу үшін бар күшін салуда. Бұл процесте темір жолдар өте маңызды. Темір жол саудасы теңізге шыға алмайтын Орталық Азия мемлекеттері үшін өте маңызды және өз кезегінде олардың арасында жобаға инвестиция салу туралы Бейжіңмен келіссөздер үшін жоғары бәсекелестік бар. Сонымен қатар, Қытай мен Өзбекстанның Талибан әкімшілігімен келіссөздер жүргізу арқылы Ауғанстан арқылы Пәкістан мен Иранға теміржолды ұзарту мәселесін шешуге мүмкіндігі бар.

Түйін сөздер: *Қытай Қырғызстан Өзбекстан темір жолдар Ауғанстан Орталық Азия Трансафган дәлізі.*

СОПРЯЖЕНИЕ КИТАЙСКИХ ЖЕЛЕЗНЫХ ДОРОГ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ И ИХ БУДУЩЕЕ

Самат Уралбаев, Адилбек Ермекбаев

Аннотация. В статье исследуется текущее состояние и будущий сценарий маршрутов китайских железнодорожных линий через Центральную Азию и Афганистан с учетом режима Талибов. С древних времен Центральная Азия была перекрестком торговых путей, которые в наше время пытаются возродить крупнейшие геополитические субъекты. Концепция Шелкового пути, которая еще несколько десятилетий назад жила только на страницах учебников истории, прочно обосновалась на первых полосах газет, в аналитических отчетах и стратегиях развития государств Центральной Азии. Однако времена изменились, и страны Центральной Азии прилагают все усилия, чтобы получить доступ к морям. И железные дороги имеют первостепенное значение в этом процессе. Торговля по железным дорогам жизненно важна для государств Центральной Азии, не имеющих выхода к морю, и, в свою очередь, среди них высока конкуренция за переговоры с Пекином об инвестициях в проект. Кроме того, у Китая и Узбекистана есть шанс решить вопрос о продлении железной дороги в Пакистан и Иран через Афганистан путем переговоров с администрацией талибов.

Ключевые слова: *Китай, Кыргызстан, Узбекистан, железные дороги, Афганистан, Центральная Азия, Трансафганский коридор.*

Introduction

The Central Asian region, once a part of the transport infrastructure of the Russian Empire and the USSR, has a fairly developed network of railways, which, nevertheless, is unevenly located. If Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have long communication routes, then Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are almost not covered by this thick network. The railway of Kyrgyzstan is only 424 km of scattered, unconnected lines in the north and south of the country. The Tajik railroad, also split in two parts, is only 680 km long. Once a single transport organism was divided into "sovereign" railways, which could not but affect their condition, modernization of rolling stock, since all this directly depended on the economic situation in the owner countries, political stability and the degree of remoteness from large markets. For example, not a kilometer of new railways have been built in Kyrgyzstan since independence. In Tajikistan, only two sections have been launched: Kurgan-Tyube - Kulyab and Vahdat - Yavan. At the same time, over the past 30 years, Kazakhstan has increased the length of its railway network by 2500 km, becoming one of the most important transit land corridors on the Eurasian continent. In 2014, Astana and Ashgabat launched the eastern branch of the North-South corridor, connecting their rail network with Iran. Uzbekistan also laid two and a half thousand kilometers of new tracks [1].

The states of the region understand the importance of the development of railway transport, which is extremely cost-effective. Each of the Central Asian states has adopted transport development

strategies that are linked to international projects of trans-Eurasian transport corridors, including those within the EAEU, the SCO, the Chinese Belt and Road project and the North-South corridor. Nevertheless, the problems of connectedness of communications, coverage of territories, the degree of coverage by the railway network, access to the largest international markets remain significant.

Inherited from the USSR, the main railway network of the region had limited capabilities, and practically did not meet the requirements of the modern world. The process of disintegration in the post-Soviet space has aggravated the deplorable state of the railway tracks, which had previously been a dead-end branch of the All-Union railway. Instability in Afghanistan and the isolationism of the Turkmen authorities have minimized the logistics potential of the railway.

According to the World Bank briefing "Transport Connectivity in Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities", Central Asia is one of the least "connected" regions in the world. The connectivity indicator in the region averages less than 60% in terms of transport access ratio in relation to global GDP, which is the lowest on this scale [2].

This is confirmed by the study of the Uzbek Center for Development Strategy, according to which "the states of the region, not having direct access to seaports, bear significant transport and transit costs, which reach 70-80% of the value of exported products" [3].

Due to lack of transport infrastructure in the region, the states of CA region are trying to bite its portion of investment,

Map 1. Major international rail routes in Central Asia, electronic resource from the Briefing



Source: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637891/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)637891_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/637891/EPRS_BRI(2019)637891_EN.pdf)

which were or will be provided by China, Russia and the US. All of the global actors have their own interests in the CA region to implement the projects with their own investment. Withdrawing the troops of the US, to some extent, means that the US is not going to pour his money to the railway connection in the CA region. Russia is eager to engage in transport connection development with the region but without China and other regional actors' activation.

However, Russia, invited to the project by ex-President Sooronbay Jeenbekov, once showed his agreement on the new lines from China to Uzbekistan via Kyrgyzstan while experts state that Russia's willingness is just to discourage the project, as it will

decrease the importance of the railways of Russia and Kazakhstan.

Overall, there is left only China with its power, investment and the most important, aspiration to connect East Asia with the Middle East, Africa and Europe through Central Asia. One of the closest and fastest routes would be China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan lines which would be converted into the shortest BRI route and have probability to extend to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

Research methods

As for the research methodology, the authors are based on the principles developed by the school of political

neorealism, the fundamental postulate of which is the principle of inviolability of national interests, as well as the theory of economic interdependence.

Accordingly, the methods of scientific analysis, synthesis, political forecasting and modeling were applied in the study. The problems considered in this paper are analyzed in a temporal and dialectical connection in which we use a systematic approach that will allow us to approach the above problems exclusively on the basis of a balanced scientific analysis. Based on these principles, in the article we tried to use comparative-historical, analytical and interdisciplinary research methods that will allow us to consider the political, economic and other aspects of the policy of the Central Asian countries in a complex.

Discussion

The People's Republic of China is the most dynamic, influential and most important state for all players in the political area of international relations of the 21st century. The "fifth generation" of Chinese leaders, led by Xi Jinping, is taking bold steps in implementing global projects. The project "One belt and one road", originating from the "Great Silk Road", connecting more than 60 countries, attracts the attention of the whole world [4]. The problems of the countries of the region, as well as the issues of the geopolitical and geo-economic influence of external players on the processes taking place in Central Asia are quite widely sanctified in political science. In this paper, we will try to consider the issues in the context of recent processes in the region. The issue of regionalization and integration

in the region is the subject of study by Central Asian researchers. "However, the basis of the discussion is the assumption that a region is understood as a group of countries connected by closer economic ties than other countries of the world" [5].

The problem of the Central Asian countries is that, possessing sufficient resources, they remain in the rank of backward states, and to a greater extent this is due to the lack of direct access to the sea. In order to enter the world markets, the countries of the region need to act through neighboring countries with access to the sea. The construction of transport corridors and the development of land trade infrastructure would compensate for isolation from the sea. The advantageous geopolitical location between the "world factory" China and the huge consumer market represented by Europe, the countries of the region have not yet fully exploited this potential, primarily due to the lack of necessary financial capabilities.

Russia, which traditionally considers the region to be its sphere of influence, due to its weak financial capacity, cannot fully gain a foothold in the market of the countries of the region. According to experts, Russia has been losing its position in the region in almost all directions over the past 5-7 years. To a greater extent, this is due to the imposition of sanctions against Moscow in the light of its aggressive policy towards Ukraine. The sanctions imposed against Russia have severely undermined not only its economic opportunities, but also caused serious damage to Moscow's image in the region. Practically, the countries of the region, after the annexation of Crimea, are gradually trying to get out from under the influence of the Kremlin. This is not only

connected with the political sphere, first it is due to economic motivation. Since a strong dependence on a country under sanctions affects economic well-being. During the period of independence, the countries of the region have tried several times to create a semblance of a regional union, in political, economic, trade and other spheres. Practically all of this has not been implemented.

Although the ideas of the Central Asian Union have existed for more than 20 years, many experts were skeptical about the idea, justifying their opinion by saying that integration in the region is not possible without the participation of players from outside. China and Russia were considered external forces that could integrate the region into a single economic space. Since none of the countries in the region is able to realize on its own, not only because of the lack of economic opportunities, but it is not necessary to discount internal contradictions. Kazakhstan is traditionally considered the flagship of the region, as compared to other countries, Nur-Sultan has a number of advantages, primarily economic and image. The country, unlike its main competitor Uzbekistan, is more open to foreign investors, has established relations with China and Russia, has no territorial problems with its neighbors, and the important fact is that it does not border with countries where there is instability, meaning Afghanistan.

The situation has begun to change in recent years, the coming to power of the pragmatic politician Mirziyoyev contributed to this. The reforms carried out were able to change the situation in the region in favor of Uzbekistan. First, the new authorities were able to establish

relations with neighboring countries, primarily with Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, recall that the former leader Islam Karimov once said that future wars in the region could occur because of water resources [4]. Karimov's statement at that time was addressed not only to Bishkek but also to Dushanbe.

Tashkent's strained relations with its neighbors created additional obstacles to Uzbekistan's transformation into a regional leader. Mirziyoyev's rise to power marked the beginning of a new era in Uzbekistan's foreign policy. The establishment of relations with neighboring states was supposed to promote closer integration of the Uzbek economy into the world. The program of internal modernization of Uzbekistan adopted by the new authorities of the country, understands the minimization of state control over business, the creation of a favorable environment for foreign investment, and the elimination of bureaucratic barriers, which, according to the authorities, should stimulate the economic development of the country. In addition to the above points, there is also a program of modernization of the village and remote settlements, and the start of this improvement program was started from the village of Manas on the border with Kyrgyzstan. The choice did not fall by chance, it was a kind of signal for Bishkek, demonstrating a change in Tashkent's foreign policy priorities. The problems that existed under the previous president, this rolling power outage has not been repeated recently.

After Mirziyoyev came to power, it should be noted that the number of negative incidents on the border

between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has sharply decreased, and contacts between government commissions on the demarcation of the state border of Uzbekistan with neighboring states have intensified in the Ferghana Valley region.

With the arrival of Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan began to play an important role in infrastructure projects in Central Asia. Official Tashkent aims to overtake its main competitor in the region by expanding the network of highways that will bypass Kazakhstan. If earlier the prospects of Uzbekistan looked vague in the context of instability in Afghanistan, then recent changes in this country open up new prospects.

Uzbekistan, unlike Tajikistan, expressed readiness to cooperate with the new Afghan authorities, and did not even raise the issue of the Taliban's commitments to an inclusive government. Although one of the first high-profile decisions of the Taliban government was the abolition of the status of the Uzbek language as the state language.

Taking into account the current situation in the region and the Taliban administration in Kabul, China and Uzbekistan are possessing some positive chances to negotiate with Taliban. Official Beijing has national interests of great importance in Afghanistan [5]. China's close-tie cooperation with Pakistan would be an advantageous step to establish exclusively economic relations with Kabul under the Taliban.

Uzbekistan, as one of the main players in the region, replaces Tajikistan's position along the railway routes through Afghanistan as Dushanbe and the Talibs' relations are tense.

Competitive psychology gives rise to such unrealistic projects as, for example, the connection of the territories of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, bypassing Uzbekistan through Afghanistan. The idea was about to be realized during the hard relations of Uzbekistan with Tajikistan. Most revealingly, at first glance, unifying projects have generated a number of conflicts between the countries of the region. So, having begun as the product of a series of blockades of Tajikistan by Uzbekistan, a detour through Turkmenistan after the establishment of relations between Dushanbe and Tashkent with Shavkat Mirziyoyev's administration and, accordingly, the suspension of the project by the Tajik side, eventually led to the blocking of transport links with Tajikistan by Turkmenistan.

Regarding the route from China to Uzbekistan through the territory of Kyrgyzstan, not only disagreements arose over the gauge, but also disputes about the places of the route. It is critically important for Kyrgyzstan to connect the northern and southern regions of the country by rail, while Beijing and Tashkent are looking for the shortest route to the Middle East. Thus, each of the states in the region is striving to seize from its rivals the status of the main transport hub in Central Asia, which so far belongs to Kazakhstan.

For Kyrgyzstan, the implementation of the project to connect the railway with the Uzbek railway branch is also a priority, as this will avoid dependence on Kazakhstan and diversify its export opportunities.

Thus, the expansion of transport highways in Central Asia within the framework of the BRI project contributes to the transformation of Uzbekistan

into a major player in Central Asia, and the prospects of Nur-Sultan are not so convincing in light of the high dependence of Kazakhstan's economy on Russia suffering from sanctions.

Results

Given that Uzbekistan is the region's most populous country, strategically located between the remaining four states, efforts to build intra-regional links made little sense without its participation is something that Tashkent's isolationist policy made difficult [6].

During a visit to the Surkhandarya region, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev said that the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway would become one of the largest projects in the history of Uzbekistan [7]. According to him, the World Bank has already agreed to allocate \$35 million for design work. "I call this the project of the century," the president said and added that Russia would soon join in its implementation. The head of state noted that for Uzbekistan one of the most important tasks has always been access to seaports, despite the borders being closed for many years.

If the project is realized, transportation of one Uzbek container through Iran or Pakistan will become 3-4 times cheaper, the time will be reduced 4-5 times. When the road becomes short and cheap, stable economic development will be ensured, this will benefit entrepreneurs. They will not go to Tashkent, on the contrary, Tashkent residents will come here so that the Afghan people would buy Uzbek products not through intermediaries, but first-hand.

In early February 2021, Uzbekistan,

Afghanistan and Pakistan signed in Tashkent a roadmap for the construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway. The project was planned to be prepared in May, and to begin construction of the road in September this year, however the situation in Afghanistan is a barrier to realize it.

The railway project is estimated at \$5 billion. It involves the construction of a highway with a length of 573 km and a transit potential of up to 20 million tons of cargo per year. The new transport corridor should connect the European Union, Russia, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and further the states of Southeast Asia.

The frequent visits of the head of Uzbekistan to the countries of Central Asia have demonstrated Uzbekistan's readiness to conduct a more open policy towards the countries of the region, the way out of the self-isolation of the potential leader of the region is fundamentally beginning to change the situation in the region. Uzbekistan is a country with huge human and economic potential and, unlike its main competitor, has a common border with all countries in the region.

Positive shifts in foreign policy are also planned in Kazakhstan. In light of the successful transit of power in the country, qualitative changes have taken place, although foreign policy priorities have not changed much since Tokayev came to power, qualitative shifts are noticeable in foreign policy, in particular, ties with the countries of the region have intensified, and within the framework of the Turkic Council. The pragmatic policy pursued by the two states contributes to the improvement of the political and

economic situation between not only Tashkent and Nur-Sultan, but it also has a positive impact on the situation in the region.

The Belt and Road Initiative gives a new impetus to the structural modernization of the transport infrastructure of the countries of the region and contributes to its closer integration within the region. The countries of the region also intend to eliminate existing internal barriers. However, despite the efforts of the countries of the region, such problems as poor quality of infrastructure, limited digital communication and bureaucratic obstacles remain unresolved. The development of the railway network will allow the countries of the region to get out of the state of "isolation" and develop new markets in South Asia and the Middle East.

Conclusion

Summing up this work, I would like to note the following that the Central Asian region, despite its isolation from the world ocean, is integrating into the system of world trade and communication. The complex processes associated with the unstable geopolitical situation in Afghanistan, with the arrival of the new Taliban administration, inspires hope for positive changes. The strengthening of Beijing's official positions in the region causes some concerns among

the population of the countries of the region, where anti-Chinese sentiments are traditionally strong. The situation is also aggravated by the active propaganda about the facts of the "genocide" of the Muslim population in Xinjiang. Today we clearly understand that apart from the PRC, almost no country has sufficient investment potential. The countries of the region are actively using the BRI initiative to develop internal communications, as well as a way to enter foreign markets. Practically, the strengthening of the PRC's position in the region has re-actualized the issue of leadership in the region. Kazakhstan, traditionally considered the cornerstone of Central Asia, received Uzbekistan as a competitor. The intensification of Uzbek foreign policy in the region and the ongoing reforms of the new leadership of the country contribute to the formation of a new geopolitical situation in the region.

Through the Central Asian region, China has the opportunity to enter the oil and gas market of the countries of the South Caucasus, and at the same time gets the opportunity to directly access the hydrocarbon-rich countries of the Middle East, excluding Russia from the struggle, and given the fact that the Americans have left Afghanistan, the region practically remains under the influence of the PRC.

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