

China as a Regional Power: the case of Central Asia

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the behavior of China as a regional power by considering the specific case of Central Asia. The central argument is that Beijing is trying to boost economic, political and military ties with the Central Asian Republics, although its soft power is still very ineffective in the region. Moreover, the Chinese regional ambitions are often viewed with suspicion by neighboring Central Asian countries, which, given their long Soviet past, still see Russia as a great economic, military and cultural reference.

Keywords: Central Asia, China, regional power.

China como poder regional: El caso de Asia Central

Resumen

Este artículo se propone analizar el comportamiento de China como poder regional, considerando el caso específico de Asia Central. El argumento central es que Beijing está intentando establecer lazos económicos, políticos y militares con las Repúblicas de Asia Central, aunque su poder en este campo resulta todavía muy ineficaz en la región. Además, las ambiciones regionales chinas son comúnmente vistas con suspicacia por los países vecinos de Asia Central, los cuales, debido a su largo pasado soviético, todavía ven a Rusia como una gran referencia económica, militar y cultural.

Palabras clave: Asia Central, China, poder regional.

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1. Introduction

This article aims to analyze China's behavior as a regional power, by applying it to the specific case of Central Asia. The central argument is that Beijing tries to shape economic, political and military ties with the Central Asian Republics, although its soft power is still very ineffective in the region. Moreover, the Chinese regional ambitions are often viewed with suspicion by the neighboring Central Asian countries, which still see Russia as a great economic, military and cultural reference, given its long Soviet past.

Central Asia and China are currently two interdependent regions at various levels, as noted by Roman Mogilevski (2012): "China is too large to Central Asia; Central Asia is huge to China." In recent years, we have been witnessing the emergence of China as a regional power, as well as a substantial transformation of the power structure in Asia (Qianqian Liu, 2010; Kang, 2007; Harris, 2005).

Alternatively to the participant and non-participant observation, which are difficult techniques to apply to this object of study, we resorted to the semistructured interview. Regarding it, Ghiglione states that "the interviewer knows all the topics on which he needs to get reactions from the respondent, but the order and how he will introduce them are left to his discretion" (2001: 64). However, some interviewees in Central Asia requested anonymity or, in some cases, they asked to be referred to as local experts. They will be named throughout this article as follows: Expert I, Expert II, and so forth.

2. China's behavior at the regional level

Analyzing the contours of the interaction between the Middle Kingdom and the Central Asian Republics over the past 20 years, it is clear that the region has become an export market and a source of raw materials to China (Kofman, 2012). The interdependence of Central Asian and Chinese economies explains, according to Ablat Khodzhaev, that "many Central Asians have found jobs and new sources of income via the infrastructure supporting Chinese exports" (2009: 22). However, Khodzhaev stresses that "the development of production in the republics of Central Asia has found itself under pressure from Chinese imports, as they do not allow local manufacturers to compete" (Khodzhaev 2009: 22). Roman Mogilevskii (2012) highlights the existence, in Central Asia, of "three categories of consumer goods: the Western type, which are expensive but have a good reputation; the Russians, which are not as expensive as the Western ones and have a decent reputation; and the Chinese, which are cheap but of poor reputation, although the situation has been changing, but slowly".

The Middle Kingdom has been improving communications (road, air and rail) to Central Asia, has simplified the visa regime for foreigners, reduced or completely eliminated customs duties on raw materials, invested significantly in the organization of transportation and delivery of goods and, since 1985, has been focusing on a policy of material incentives for the export of Chinese goods (Ernst & Young, 2012; Winterbottom, 2012; Bao Chang, 2012).

Urumqi, which was transformed into an air, rail and road bridge between East and West, is “the economic center of China in Central Asia” (EurasiaNet, 2007: paragraph 1). The increase in Chinese exports to the region is a consequence of the extraordinary expansion of the Middle Kingdom economy (World Trade Organization, 2012). Indeed, as Khodzhaev explains, “due to the saturation of the Chinese domestic market for consumer goods, small and medium-sized enterprises - which produce textiles, electronic components and household appliances – faced, since the mid-1990s, the difficulty of selling their products” (2009: 22- 23).

Nearly two decades after the independence of Central Asian Republics “it is difficult to find in the region large enterprises based on Chinese capital and engaged in the production of export-oriented goods” (Khodzhaev 2009: 25). The import of Chinese goods, by the Central Asian Republics, led to the formation of an economic niche for a part of the population of the region. The case of the Dordoi Market is certainly one of the best (maybe the best) examples in this regard due to its economic importance in Central Asia, more specifically, in Kyrgyzstan, where it generates an extraordinary flow of goods and capital. As noted by Igor Rotar, “the Dordoi Market is not only a major center of commerce and employment to Kyrgyzstan”, but it is also “one of the main entry points through which consumer goods from China are exported to shops and markets in Kazakhstan, Russia and Uzbekistan” (2012: para. 3). Let us consider the antecedents that explain the existence of such a market in Kyrgyzstan. Questioned as to whether Kyrgyzstan imports goods from China with the purpose of its subsequent re-exportation, the local expert Roman Mogilevskii (2012) answered without evasion that, in fact it happens, and that this practice has “a long history associated to it”. According to this author, “the period immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union was marked by an institutional weakness”, under which the “Customs Services” were “significantly affected” and so “it has become quite easy [especially in the case of Kyrgyzstan] to import various goods from other countries” (Mogilevski, 2012). In this context, Mogilevski (2012) explains that “the Chinese ‘flooded’ all these countries [Central Asian]”, and that it was clearly “cheapest to send goods from China to Kyrgyzstan, and

then take them from there, to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Russia". This dynamic has led to a "huge deal" taking more and more people to get engaged in it, as can be testified by the Dordoi Market, on the outskirts of Bishkek, which "is, strictly speaking, the regional center of this trade" and simultaneously, "the largest market of raw materials and Chinese commodities throughout Central Asia and Russia" (Mogilevskii, 2012). The Dordoi Market, which is indeed the most prominent of a broad economic web, based on a massive dynamic of imports from neighboring China, is likely to contribute, however, to hinder the development of local production. In this regard, it is noted that "although the underground economy is relatively common in the post-Soviet space", the proportions that it assumes and its 'persistence' in the poorest States of Central Asia raises serious questions about "the path of development of the region in the long term" (Oxford Analytica, 2011 para. 1).

As a densely populated country, the priorities of China's policy have focused, in particular, "the problems of land shortage and unemployment" (Khodzhaev, 2009: 25). By the end of 2011, rural China was home to about "656.56 million people", having the Chinese urban population (about "690.79 million people"), exceeded for the first time in the country's history, the rural population, "for the past three decades of economic development" (Bloomberg News, 2012: para. 1). Consequently, considering the continuous growth of the Chinese population, the problem of unemployment tends to worsen seriously (as the former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao warned in July 2012), creating a natural necessity for the continuous expansion of production (Want China Times, 2012). Ablat Khodzhaev believes that "these circumstances will compel the Chinese government to increase investment in local production of other countries, including the Central Asian" (2009: 26). For this expert, "one can confidently predict that in Central Asia, Chinese capital will be mainly invested in infrastructures supporting exploration, production, processing and delivery of energy resources to China" (Khodzhaev, 2009: 26). Nevertheless, Khadzhieva Guljahan (2011) considers that "the Central Asian Republics fear Chinese 'invasion'", or, in other words, they fear that China makes use of the economies and markets of the region to develop its own economy, unprofitable, therefore, to these countries".

According to James Bosbotinis, "the standard of Chinese trade with the States of Central Asia is that of a power that imports raw materials, energy resources and unfinished products, while it exports finished products" (2010: 70). According to *China Daily*, "the volume of trade between Kazakhstan and China exceeds the one that occurs between Kazakhstan and Russia for the first time in centuries, considering that, since 2009, China has been the second largest trading partner of Kazakhstan" (2011: para. 5). On the

other hand, as indicated by Richard Weitz, “bilateral trade between the two countries increased from 1.29 billion dollars, in 2001, to 33 billion dollars in 2012 - or nearly a third of the foreign trade of Kazakhstan”, while “by now, China is only surpassed by the European Union, which has a collective market share of almost 40 % in the total foreign trade of Kazakhstan, due to its massive purchases of Kazakh oil” (Asia Times, 2013: para. 19).

In turn, as far as the Sino-Uzbek trade is concerned, Richard Weitz states that “China is the second largest [foreign] trade partner of Uzbekistan, after the Russia”, having its bilateral trade reached the value of 2.5 billion dollars in 2011 (2012: para. 8). The Middle Kingdom has made substantial investments in Uzbekistan, aiming the development of the country’s natural resources, in particular, the gold and the energy sector (China Daily, 2013). According to Zabikhulla S. Saipov, “the trade between China and Uzbekistan has been developing from the interpersonal level to the interstate level” (Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume, 2012: 172). During the visit of President Karimov to China, on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in June 2012, the two countries signed “more than 30 agreements on trade, economy and investment, worth 5.3 billion dollars” (Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume, 2012: 172). This range of agreements suggests that the Middle Kingdom may have as its aim “to counterbalance its trade and economic relations with Uzbekistan, with respect to those it keeps with Kazakhstan” as well as “to seek to compete with Russia for power and regional influence” (Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume, 2012: 172).

With regard to Sino-Turkmen trade, the *The Journal of Turkish Weekly* (2012) reports that China ranks first in the total volume of foreign trade with Turkmenistan. In fact, according to the *The Observatory of Economic Complexity* (2012), it is for China that the majority of exports from Turkmenistan (39%) is aimed to, followed by Turkey (16%), Italy (8%), Russia (6%), Afghanistan (4%). However, with respect to the main trading partners (imports) is Russia that takes the best (22%), followed by China (18%), Iran (14%), Germany (10%), Turkey (7%) (*The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, 2012). Returning again to the *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, “Chinese enterprises operate in sectors related to oil and Turkmen gas, telecommunications, transport, agriculture, textiles, chemicals, food industry, health protection industries and construction sector” (2012: para. 4). The structure of imports from China faced with Turkmenistan is dominated, mainly, by “industrial-purpose products, equipment and vehicles” (*The Journal of Turkish Weekly*: 2012: para. 6). In turn, “Turkmenistan’s exports to China are, with the exception of natural gas, marked by agricultural products” (*The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, 2012: para. 6).

In an interview to the *Daily Times*, the director of the *Kontent think tank*, Zafar Abudullayev, states that “China is currently the preferred economic partner of Tajikistan” (2012: para. 11). Data from the *The Observatory of Economic Complexity* (2012) indicates that the main countries of destination of Tajik exports are Turkey (27%), Russia (20%), South Korea (10%), Norway (6%), China (5%); and the major trading partners in imports, are China (54%), Russia (27%), Iran (7%), Germany (2%) and Belarus (2%). Chinese customs statistics show that “trade between China and Tajikistan, in the first quarter of 2012 was of 320 million euros”, having registered “an increase of 66% compared to the same period in 2011” (*China Daily*, 2012: para. 17).

Finally, regarding the Sino-Kyrgyz trade relations, in the first half of 2012 the volume of trade between Kyrgyzstan and China was 479.4 million dollars, a growth of 23% compared to the same period in 2011 (Kabar, 2012). In an interview to the *The Times of Central Asia*, the Chinese Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Wang Kaiwen, states that “China is investing heavily in joint Sino-Kyrgyz projects” and that “the volume of trade between the two countries is around 5 billion dollars per year” (2012: 2). Wang Kaiwen also notes that “China does not see any inconvenience regarding the possibility of Kyrgyzstan to join the Customs Union”; on the contrary, Beijing assigns more importance “to the fact that both countries are members of the World Trade Organization”, and to be “necessary to improve the balance of exports and imports” (*The Times of Central Asia*, 2012: 2). Kyrgyzstan became one of the main centers for the re-export of Chinese products in Central Asia. As indicated by Roman Mogilevski, “re-exports are a source of revenue and employment for a good part of Kyrgyz people, and an important sector of the national economy” (2012: 5). This activity increased from the importation of cheap goods from China, Turkey and other countries, which were intended for domestic sale in Kyrgyzstan (Ide, 2011). Kyrgyz traders would quickly realize that “the resale [of such products] to neighboring countries was highly profitable, and made possible by the existence of bazaars in Kyrgyzstan”, being expanded afterwards to “large regional trade centers” (Mogilevski, 2012: 5). In this context, “the Kyrgyz entrepreneurs realized that the combination of cheap Chinese materials, a skilled and low-cost workforce, and the existence of channels to re-export, would make it possible to develop an efficient textile industry” (Mogilevski, 2012: 5). It was thus that emerged “several commercial and manufacturing poles in terms of light industry” composed of “large bazaars in Bishkek and Osh, and small shops and services related to the textile sector” (Mogilevski, 2012: 5).

According to Vladimir Paramonov, the terms of trade between China and Central Asia are more beneficial to Beijing, though likely to reduce the region to a sort of appendix of raw materials of the Chinese economy (2005). In Stephen Blank's opinion, it is established "a mutually profitable relationship" [in which the economic leverage becomes a political instrument], although "inducing long-term dependence", i.e, the Middle Kingdom wins an almost monopolistic position facing the regional states, resulting from their dependence in what concerns the Chinese market, in terms of exports, imports and financing (2009: 440). As an example, Blank notes that "the Tajik Government accepted a loan of several million dollars, interest-free, from China in 2007", followed by a "political cooperation agreement, under which Tajikistan pledged not to recognize Taiwan as an independent state" (2009: 440).

Among the Central Asian Republics with more relevance to the Chinese interests in the region, one can highlight Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, which are both endowed with substantial energy resources (China Brief, 2013; Apoteker, 2012; Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012). According to Richard Weitz, "Kazakhstan is currently China's most important economic and strategic partner in Central Asia" (2008: 103). On the one hand, it is the largest State in the region; on the other hand, it has considerable reserves of natural gas, oil and other strategic raw materials, including uranium (Naumenko, 2012). The main Chinese interests in Kazakhstan reside in the access to reserves of uranium, oil and natural gas; in integrating transportation and transit infrastructures (national and regional) with Xinjiang; and in consolidating political influence in Astana (Muzalevsky, 2011; Shichor, 2008; Meier, 2013).

In 2009, China granted loans worth 10 billion dollars to Kazakhstan in return for the access to Central Asian oil and gas (Daly, 2009). As Wenran Jiang mentions, "China's investment [strategy] in Kazakhstan is based mainly on the model "loans in exchange for oil supplies", which gives the Chinese companies "direct control over resources" (China Brief, 2009: 8).

According to Bracken *et al*, "one unique factor [of Kazakhstan] that differentiates the Sino-Kazakh relations from those that China maintains with other Central Asian Republics is the overlap of ethnic groups" (2013: 9). Approximately "180 000 Uyghurs live in Eastern Kazakhstan", being that "one million of ethnic Kazakhs live in China" (Bracken *et al*, 2013: 9). It is, therefore, understandable that Beijing expresses "concern over ethnic Muslim separatism in the Xinjiang autonomous region," which encompasses about "one-sixth of China's land area" (Bracken *et al*, 2013: 9).

Turkmenistan is yet another Central Asian State with a high relevance to China (China Daily, 2013). In June 2009, for example, the Middle

Kingdom lent four billion dollars to Ashgabat, in order to exploit the largest natural gas field in Turkmenistan (one of the largest in the world), the South Yolotan, near the Afghan border (Roberts, 2009). This loan is part of a long-term agreement (30 years), under which China will receive about 40 billion cubic meters of gas per year (The Economist, 2010). As Erika Downs notes, “China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) is currently the dominant external actor in the onshore fields of Turkmenistan” (2011: 76). In 2007, the country approved CNPC, through a “production sharing contract”, to explore the field Bagtiyarlyk on the right bank of the Amu Darya river, which makes the Chinese company “the first - and until now, the only - foreign company operating onshore in Turkmenistan” (Downs, 2011: 76).

Turkmenistan exports natural gas to China through the pipeline “Central Asia Natural Gas Pipeline”, also called the pipeline “Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China”, inaugurated on 14th December 2009 (*The New York Times*, 2009). According to James Bosbotinis, “this pipeline helps giving Turkmenistan an important mission, by connecting the Chinese energy infrastructure, in Central Asia, to the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East” (2010: 72). In other words, Beijing estimates that Turkmenistan will articulate the role of Gwadar, in the context of maritime energy imports in China, with the energy infrastructure of Central Asia, connecting it to Kazakhstan and to Xinjiang (Malik, 2012). Indeed, the huge deep-water port of Gwadar reveals “China’s determination in developing its western provinces and in connecting them to Eurasia” (Kemp, 2006: 74).

In a context in which investment and trade between Beijing and the Central Asian Republics are becoming very auspicious, one would also, possibly, expect a larger bet on Chinese soft power in Central Asia (Foust, 2011). In this respect, Sébastien Peyrouse uses as an example a Kazakh study, which reveals that 44% of the experts consulted believe that China will not be able to impose itself as a regional power in Central Asia (2008: 13). On the other hand, only 20% of the experts surveyed believe that the Middle Kingdom will be an important actor in the region (Peyrouse, 2008). Moreover, language and Chinese culture do not arouse (much) interest in Central Asia, at least for now (Foust, 2011). In fact, in terms of soft power, experts like Raquel Freire (2012) believe that China “has not made particular effort to try to be well received [in the region]”, while “Russia expresses that concern because it considers Central Asia as an area that belongs to it, in quotation marks”. However, the fact that the Chinese are pragmatic and (relatively) ‘unconcerned’, in terms of soft power, towards the region, does not mean that China has “a very clear agenda for this area”, consisting essentially of “achieving economic benefits and energy resources” (Freire, 2012).

Nearly two decades after independence, the Central Asian Republics still live in a system very imbued with Russian reference points (Soviets, not long ago) (Rumer, Trenin, Huasheng Zhao, 2007; Indian Council on Global Relations, 2012). Indeed, “the language that allows access to the world is Russian; Russia remains the country whose development model is evoked more often; social and economic relations are still concentrated in Moscow; and trends/ cultural fashions come from the Russian Federation” (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2009: 10). On the other hand, as underlined by Daniel Vajdic, “the Kremlin wants them [the Central Asian Republics] to remain dependent on Russia in terms of security”, which will ensure that Russia will continue to be “the dominant power in Central Asia” (2012: para. 11).

On the other hand, according to Edward Chow (2011), “ Russian elites have a longstanding relationship with the Central Asian political elites: they both know each other very well and speak the same language”. Besides, Russia (and then the Soviet Union) was the “former colonial power”, which contributes to providing shared “similar tastes and perceptions” (Chow, 2011). However, there is, curiously, at the same time, a propensity to negotiate with the Chinese, “because they have money” (Chow, 2011). In spite of the fact that the Russian cultural influence is predominant in the region, one must, however, take into account the influence of Turkey (Vlasov, 2013). Although he recognizes that the Chinese have the ability to put “hospitals and businesses almost ‘turn-key” Heitor Romana (2012) considers that they “have no chance from a cultural standpoint [in Central Asia]”, since, as noted by the expert, “all the traits that form Central Asia are culturally turkish”. As emphasized by Michael Moreland (2012), the Turkish expansion in Central Asia, is stimulated by the Turkish identity, by the strategic interests and economic goals of Ankara. Since “Turkey connects, from a geographical point of view, Asia to Europe, the country could serve as a bridge between the strategic blocks of NATO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Central Asia” (Atlantic Sentinel, 2012: para. 6). Moreover, “as the standard-bearer of Turkish identity, Ankara is exceptionally positioned to play a key role in Central Asia” (Atlantic Sentinel, 2012: para. 7).

The development of trade between Beijing and the Central Asian Republics are not (yet) reflected in an increase of Chinese influence in the region (Foust, 2011). On the other hand, China’s economic growth (accompanied by the emergence of China as a regional and global power), even seems, paradoxically, to raise “a greater concern” in the Central Asian Republics than to contribute to the increase of the influence of the Middle

Kingdom in the region (Indeo, 2012: para. 1). An enlightening case of the discomfort that China seems to be causing in the region: the migratory movements (Swanström, 2011; Rickleton, 2010). With regard to immigration, Igor Torbakov notes that “Beijing is accused of sponsoring, silently, the Chinese migration in Central Asia” (2007: 158). The fear of the ‘yellow peril’ is inherent to the question of Chinese immigration in the small Central Asian Republics, whose inhabitants are around “92 million people” (Central Asia Competitiveness Outlook, 2013: 3). There’s nothing we can compare to a China that has about one billion, three hundred and forty nine million inhabitants (The World Factbook, 2013). The phenomenon of crime appears as being connected to the question of immigration. According to M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, “the Central Asian Republics impute to Chinese immigrants the responsibility for the rise in crime in urban areas, showing themselves equally apprehensive regarding the emergence of ghettos in big cities, especially the Chinatowns that arise in the capital cities” (2009: 159). R. Mogilevski (2012) notes that “nowadays, there are more Chinese living there [in Central Asia]”, although this expert does not believe that “they are as numerous as those who reside in the United States, for example”, because, as he clarifies, in Central Asia “we do not see Chinese on every street corner”. Questioned about the reason why this happens, R. Mogilevskii (2012) points out the restrictions on immigration imposed by the several governments in the region, which are “very strict” (in the case of Kyrgyzstan, for example, the maximum limit of immigrants allowed is “10 thousand for the whole country”), though he admits to be “possible to manipulate these numbers in many different ways”.

Likewise, let us mention the poor reputation that products from China, as well as several Chinese businessmen - involved in dubious and/or suspicious contracts - have in the region (Steiner, 2013). One should not overlook, on the other hand, the issue of competition between Chinese products vs regional products, which raises serious concerns at a local level (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2009; Sun Zhuangzhi, 2007; Crisis Group Asia Report, 2013). In this respect, returning to Khadzhiyeva Guljahan (2011), the expert informs that “the Central Asian products are unable to compete with Chinese products”, which, in practice, has contributed to the “destruction of light and heavy industry” in Central Asia, where “several industrial units find themselves forced to close doors, or, in other cases, to substantially reduce their production”.

The balance of powers in Central Asia is complex and fragile (Cooley, 2012). While, on the one hand, the regional powers are concerned with the safeguard of their interests, with the assistance of the Central Asian

Republics, these, in turn, also seek to maximize their own goals “benefiting both from the competition between regional powers” (Feigenbaum, 2011: 4). Acting tactically, the Central Asian Republics can increase their trading margin relatively to other regional States, establishing a balance of power capable of guaranteeing their independence (Feigenbaum, 2011). On the other hand, the Central Asian Republics seem to be “clever enough” by using “an ambivalent diplomacy regarding the interests, mainly of Russians, North Americans and Chinese in the region” (Torbakov, 2007: 158-159).

As Sébastien Peyrouse notices, “the pragmatism of Chinese business men is often praised by Central Asians, and contrasted with indecision and broken promises, of their European and Russian counterparts” (2009: 10). Nevertheless, this expert explains that “the idea that Central Asians have of China is far from entirely positive, in a way that the ‘sinophobia’ has been growing rapidly” (Peyrouse 2009: 10). In fact, as emphasized by Umarov and Pashkun, “despite the cordial nature of relations with the Middle Kingdom, the Central Asian States feed a permanent distrust on Beijing”, and even “a deep pessimism regarding the growing power of China” (2006: 2). On the other hand, Roman Mogilevski (2012) believes that “Russia expresses concern about the dynamism and involvement of China in the region”. R. Mogilevski (2012) also considers that the fact that the Middle Kingdom does not adopt an aggressive posture, and does not rush, “means that there is a “widespread sense of fear towards China”, as in Kazakhstan, that reveals itself “overly concerned regarding the Chinese influence [in the region] (...)”.

In turn, as M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse observe, “despite the positive effects it generates, for now, it is suspected, however, that in the long term, China’s presence can cause considerable problems to the Central Asian nations” (2009: 8). According to these authors, “there is a strong suspicion that China, as in the past, (still) owns imperial designs regarding the region, and that it only tries to hide them or stall them” (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2009: 8). One must recall that the Central Asian Republics endured, for a long time, Russian domination (Pipes, 1983). In this respect, as Edward Chow (2011) explains, “there is a feeling of compatibility that is very difficult to experiment by the Chinese, “since these are, after all, “the people that the Soviet system had taught to fear since primary school until university”; so, much of that sensitivity still prevails in the region”. Therefore, it seems to be rather strange that those Central Asian responsables demonstrate, publicly, a positive attitude towards the Chinese presence in the region. M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse have no doubts: “the manifestation of a positive attitude towards China is not necessarily based on an ideological conviction (for example, sympathy for the country or for its political regime...)” (2009:

67). Instead, it “seems to be guided by a certain ‘sinophobia’: the desire to maintain strong ties with China because it is better to keep healthy relationships with a large and fearsome neighbor” (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2009: 67). In the case of Kazakhstan, for example, according to a local expert (Expert I, 2012), “Nazarbayev has been very careful and pragmatic; the relations with China are of a purely commercial nature, linked to the extraction of resources”.

Krawchenko Bohdan (2012) understands that “the economic impact of the Middle Kingdom is absolutely harmful”, and therefore that “the Central Asian Republics reveal themselves extremely apprehensive towards China, not knowing how to really handle with it”. Similarly, António Costa Silva (2012) explains that “the Central Asian Republics collaborate with the Chinese, though they fear them”. The expert reminds us of a symbolic aspect related to it - the change of the capital of Kazakhstan, Almaty, practically on the border with China, to Astana (northwest, closer to Russia) – due to a constant “fear [Kazakh] that a possible invasion would completely dominate, the [old] capital” (Silva, 2012). Despite the change of the capital, the ‘Chinese factor’, in other words, the weight of China, remains “overwhelming”, and the Central Asian Republics have sought to counteract – and, here, the case of Kazakhstan is exemplary - Western interests (in particular, that of the major Western oil companies) and the Russian and Chinese interests - “by joining ones more than others” (Silva, 2012). The Republics of the region are seeking, according to this expert, “to play on the various trays to defend their independence”, so that it is not “overly mortgaged to China” [or any other major power] (Silva, 2012). Exemplary in this regard is, again, the case of Kazakhstan, which maintains “excellent relations with the European Union and with Russia, among others” (Silva, 2012).

In the opinion of Oleg Egorov (2011), “the China’s rapid expansion can prove to be quite dangerous and harmful to the Central Asian Republics”. As an example, this expert informs that “they have been building Chinatowns in the vicinity of pipelines, existing or projected, in Central Asia” (Egorov, 2011). On this matter, Bohdan Krawchenko (2012) states that the Chinese “use their own workers”, not only for the specific case of the maintenance of pipelines, but also for the various activities in which they are involved in Central Asia, not manifesting, on the other hand, “any particular concern about environmental issues”.

According to Peyrouse *et al*, “Chinese aid, to the countries of the region, does not contribute for them to become autonomous in the construction of their own development” (2012: 14). Rather, “[it] exacerbates the economic dependence of these States in what concerns Chinese products

and support”, and it is not, therefore, “devoid of financial and strategic interests” (Peyrouse *et al*, 2012: 14). China has sought to “create new export markets for its products; close contracts for its companies, as well as ensure new energy sources; and turn its Central Asian governments into ‘debtors’, or even ‘vassals’” (Peyrouse *et al*, 2012: 14).

Returning to Oleg Egorov (2011), a Kazakh expert, “there is a difference between the wages of the Chinese workers and the wages paid to the locals”, which leads, sometimes, Kazakh workers to strike against what they consider to be a “Chinese invasion”. Moreover, Egorov (2011) also points out the case of illegal immigration of Chinese to Kazakhstan, which also generates “a reason for dissatisfaction and concern”. For Bohdan Krawchenko (2012), these fears “are not an utopia”, and in practice, “they have been materializing”, existing, in fact, “many thousands of Chinese who are traders, especially in the Russian Far East” where the population density is too low.

We must note that Oleg Egorov (2011) does not deny that China should support the social development of Kazakhstan (taking this country as an example); however, this expert estimates that the construction of hospitals and other public infrastructures, by the Chinese, in return for the permit of the exploitation of the energy potential in the country, turns out to be “little substantial”. Concerning this matter, Egorov (2011) reports that “more than 78% of the oil and natural gas is being withdrawn [from the Kazakhs]” and that “the Kazakh refineries only operate at half of its capacity”. This explains that there is “little oil to be effectively refined” (although the country is an oil producer) in Kazakhstan, and, “at the same time, there is a large financial dependence comparatively to China” (Egorov, 2011). In this regard, another local expert, Meruert Makhmatova (2011), explains that in the case of Kazakhstan, for example, there is “a great dissatisfaction with the way China has granted credit to the country”. The author states that during the economic crisis of 2008, President Nazarbayev requested a loan of 13 billion dollars to Beijing. However, such a high amount presupposes, according to Makhmatova (2011), various negative effects for Kazakhstan, where “local jobs are being taken by the Chinese”, being “the majority of the population not pleased with the idea that the Chinese are part of the Kazakh economy, investors and good friends of the President [Nazarbayev]”.

Martin C. Spechler stresses that “although China, actively, tries to securitize its access to energy resources and other raw materials in Central Asia, there is not, however, a [Chinese] significant private business dynamics in any of the post-Soviet States” (2009: 3). There are, certainly, structural factors that explain “the relative disinterest in the Chinese Central Asian

market”, namely, “its small size”, as well as “a climate of investment undermined by corruption and ‘unexpected’ taxes, currently common in Central Asia”, capable of “discourage even the ‘tolerant’ Chinese” (Spechler, 2009: 15). While, on the one hand, “China’s economic presence in Central Asia” is “very significant”, and although in many ways, Chinese investments are “welcomed” by the Central Asian Republics, there is, however, a “lack of transparency” inherent to such investments, as well as “to the relations of the Middle Kingdom with those countries” (Edward Wong, 2011: para. 12). On the other hand, “the local populations are cautious, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, where they have, for a long time, feared that the Chinese migration can reverse the scales of the economic power in these countries”, which have a “weak population density” (Edward Wong, 2011: para. 13).

In an article published in the Vancouver Sun, Jonathan Manthorpe reports that “the prejudice against the Chinese is general” (2013: para. 7). This is especially strong in Kyrgyzstan, where “Chinese mining companies are accused of generating pollution, taking jobs from locals, offering little in return” (Manthorpe, 2013: para. 7). On the other hand, “in several Central Asian countries, there has been a crescendo of violence between Chinese workers and local inhabitants” (Manthorpe, 2013: para. 9). These facts suggest a kind of *déjà vu*, since the Chinese show similar behavior in other parts of the world, such as in Africa. In this respect, Tanguy Struye stresses that “many contracts concluded with Chinese companies are accompanied by the requirement that 70% of their tasks are performed by their own employees (usually prisoners or recruits)” (2011: 23). Then again, either Central Asia or Africa “have been the scene of a repetition of very similar problems to those that frequently occur in China: deforestation, land and water contamination, disrespect for the environment, due to an unrestrained pursuit of productivity” (Duarte, 2012: 27). Given the above, it is questionable whether the Chinese presence in Central Asia generates development in the region. Sébastien Peyrouse doubts, indeed, that it contributes “to the spread of knowledge and techniques for the interaction with the host country” (2009: para. 9). For now, Saule Mukhametrakhimova remarks that Chinese policy has proved to be “very pragmatic, emphasizing the economic gains, rather than a quest for political domination” (2012: para. 9).

According to Roman Mogilevski (2012), although Central Asia is the foreigner near Russia, “the presence and participation of China in the region have increased significantly”, though, for this author, “the arguments for Russia to ‘return’” are strong: in fact, “the Russians have many ambitions from a strategic point of view [regarding the region]”, and one can not neglect, on the other hand, “the weight of nostalgia...”. Another local expert, who,

nevertheless, requested anonymity (Expert II, 2012), adds to this nostalgia – mentioned here by Mogilevski (2012) - a “traditional suspicion” from the Central Asian Republics towards China. This expert describes the Soviet era as “the time when the roads were paved and the infrastructures were built”, so that “being part of the Soviet Union was like living in the Golden Age”, where there was an operating system, while “nowadays the public facilities are degraded” and, therefore, little or not functional (Expert II, 2012). To Almaz Saifutdinov (2012), with the exception, perhaps, of “ancient philosophers or nationalists, traditional writers and Islamic characters”, it does not seem, therefore, unreasonable to assert that “the older generation feels nostalgia for the Soviet period, unlike the vast majority of the people that is part of the younger generation”, who, not having experienced the Soviet era, “do not truly know what to think...”.

Liubov Jdanova (2012), Director of the Department of European Studies at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, understands that Russia is “a kind of brother of the Kyrgyz people”, considering that “approximately one million of Kyrgyz people go to Russia regularly, to visit their relatives who live there”. But we should also emphasize the “trading relations, Russia’s investments in the country, in various sectors...” (Jdanova, 2012). All of these factors lead, therefore, Liubov (2012) to recognize that “Russia is ‘clearer’ [for the Kyrgyz people]” because “they share the same past”. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, “there were many ambitions and hopes that were lost” (Jdanova, 2012). It is no coincidence, in fact, that Jean-Christophe Lermusiaux (2011) underlines that “the Central Asian people grew up together for about three centuries; they lived communism, as well as many other experiences together”. However, if Russia can arouse that nostalgia referred to by Liubov Jdanova, among others, China, on the contrary, often triggers an opposite feeling, in a way that, as Lermusiaux (2011) refers, “everybody fears the Chinese”, including the Mongols and Russians (these, by the way, in particular, the low population density of Siberia), and so there is “a rejection of the foreigner as ‘a settler’, but not of his investments”. Naturally, one can not speak of China as if it was a ‘homogenous block’, because, as we explained above, there are different ‘Chinas’, although the Xinjiang share common traits (culture, religion, language, etc.) with central Asian peoples, and in that sense, we can say that “there is a very similar worldview and a good understanding among them” (Jdanova, 2012).

Let us also consider an issue that, although sometimes overlooked, is of great relevance in that, directly or indirectly, it can dictate the behavior, or influence the perception of certain actors concerning China: the soft

power (Duarte, 2012). For now, the Middle Kingdom reveals some difficulty in designing the so-called soft power in Central Asia (Nye, 2012). This is an important limitation because it says a lot about a power that, while economically and commercially strong, is faced, however, with “a great difficulty in designing its civilizational component to other parts of the world”, such as Africa, Latin America, and in this particular case, Central Asia (Roman, 2012).

Heitor Romana (2012), who lived several years in the East, believes that “the seduction for what China is, is quite considerable”, even then “little consequent, if we consider an anthropological level”, that is, if we look deep down in the “idiosyncrasies of being a Chinese”. In the author’s opinion, “the Chinese make a great effort in giving themselves to the world”... because “they do not have a universalist feature...” (...); “they don’t have something that is in the cultural DNA, if one may say so”, though “they try to copy the British, the English, the French, and even the Portuguese, model” (Roman, 2012). That is, according to H. Romana (2012) “China can not penetrate the mental plan of the decision, because it is for that, after all, the soft power is for”. In turn, António de Sousa Lara (2010) argues that China is faced with the serious problem of “miscegenation not being in its culture”. In other words, the author explains that “when the Chinese emigrated to the European Union, or the United States (as evidenced by the large historical communities living in London, New York, among other cities) they did not mix with the population; they were not designed for a ghetto, they created it themselves”, i.e. “the Chinese were the ones who built the Chinatowns” (Lara, 2010). Now, for António de Sousa Lara (2010), “it demonstrates a certain kind of attitude towards the outside: [the Chinese] do not want to mix with the local population, or, then, they don’t know how to mix because they have a very different culture, of which they do not want to abdicate”.

In conclusion, in the opinion of experts as Hak Li and Zhengxu Wang, you can anticipate that, “unless China presents a clearer and more proactive plan aiming to deepen its relations with the Central Asian Republics, its influence, in the region, will remain limited” (2009: 14). Laruelle and Peyrouse also consider that although “many Central Asian experts confess his admiration for the speed with which China has been able to affirm itself in Central Asia”, we must not, however, draw hasty conclusions since, in many areas, Beijing’s influence is (or at least perceived) “still limited in the region” (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2009: 115; see also Volkov, 2013; Hak Yin Li and Zhengxu Wang, 2009).

The energy issue is a driving force in economic relations between Beijing and the Central Asian Republics (Xiaoqin Chen, 2012). In the

origin of this observation lies another one: China needs energy. According to Virginia Trigo (2010), “it is fundamental to the Middle Kingdom, to have access to the resources... since this is the ‘factory’ of the world”. For its geographical proximity, but also for its vast reserves of oil and natural gas, Central Asia is, not surprisingly, seen by Beijing as an attractive opportunity with regard to the import of energy resources (Journal of Energy Security, 2012; Fazilov and Xiangming Chen, 2013).

Enlightening, the numbers prove the extraordinary energy potential in the region. According to Global Business Reports, “the Central Asian Republics have proved to have natural gas reserves of over 6.7 trillion cubic meters”, and “their confirmed oil reserves are estimated at over 60 billion barrels of oil”, with some estimates reaching even “200 billion barrels” (Special Report: Caspian Region, 2012: 1). However, “most of its energy wealth remains, largely, unexplored” (Special Report: Caspian Region, 2012: 1).

When talking about the importance of Central Asia for the energy supply in China, we must consider it in a broader context, which concerns, in essence, the issue of energy security. In its turn, this can be considered, according to Nayoan Lee, “a question of, at the same time, international and national security” (2013: 1). As Waco Worley suggests, “a country should have, permanently, access to energy resources, taking a minimal risk that these are exhausted” (2006: 2). So, that leads many States to try to better exploit their domestic energy reserves. However, these are not always enough to provide the energy needs of a country, which represents, of course, a source of insecurity for itself. According to W. Worley, “energy insecurity decreases the power and the influence of a State in the international system”, and so, “without the appropriate energy resources (domestic or not), States can not become regional, and certainly not, world powers” (2006: 2). In the case of China, an emerging country that shelters a fifth of the world population, the issue of energy security is even more urgent “as the Government moves towards achieving its goals of modernization and collective prosperity” (China Daily, 2012: para. 1).

Returning to W. Worley, “since countries need energy to survive”, they tend, in an “aggressive” way, to “look for the energy resources that are held by other States”, seeking for that purpose, “as many partners as possible” in order to “diversify their sources of energy” (2006: 2). As they do so, they create bonds (which include agreements on borders, trade and culture). According to Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (2001), the establishment of such links is likely to generate a lasting cooperation between States. In the case of China and the Central Asian Republics, that is increasingly evident. If, on the one hand, Beijing needs these countries to diversify its energy

sources, they, in turn, see in China “a dynamic and accessible market for their exports, as well as a vital (non-Russian) channel, through which they can make their goods circulate to a wider international market” (Burles, 1999: 3; Shustov, *International Affairs*, 2012).

There are other factors that argue in favor of the way the Central Asian Republics perceive China's interest in the region. The Chinese Government, unlike other governments, has the capacity to provide a broad financial assistance to these countries, which is absolutely vital to the development of their economies (Garibov, 2013; Weitz, 2013). According to Nargis Kassenova, “the Chinese support to development is provided either through subsidies - usually paid in merchandises, through the delivery of goods and materials, with the aim of reducing the risks of corruption - or through concessional or on preferential terms loans” (2009: 10). Moreover, it is interesting to note that this aid is not subject to any ‘democratic demand’, or subject to the respect for human rights, contrary to the requirements often imposed by “Western creditors and/ or donors”, in return for the aid given (Kassenova, 2009: 5). This is supported, for example, by Sébastien Peyrouse, Jos Boonstra and Marlène Laruelle, according to whom “the economic support provided by China has been successful”, among other aspects, because of the “loans offered at very advantageous prices” and “the ‘turnkey’ services proposed by Chinese companies”, which are “very accessible” (2012: 14).

Thirdly, the Chinese presence in Central Asia offers “a useful counterweight” to the Russian presence (Kucera, 2011). Effectively, for the Central Asian Republics, “the fact that there are two major regional powers in competition for the access to oil and natural gas” is, of course, “more ‘interesting’” than having to be subjected “to a situation of Russian monopoly”, as it has happened (Jackson, 2009: 18). In this regard, one must note that Russia seems to understand that China is not only a ‘useful’ partner to counterbalance Western influence in the region (Leksyutina, 2010; Weitz, 2012; Zhao Huasheng, 2013). It is also a competitor (Pravda News, 2002; Mankoff and Miller, 2010; Cutler, 2013; Rabinovitch, 2013; Volkov, 2013). In fact, to Dmitri Trenin, Director of Carnegie Moscow Centre, “although they share common interests, China and Russia are not allies” (2012: 43). If, on the one hand, Moscow does not tend to accept an eventual Chinese supremacy, China, in turn, conceives Russia “as a faded power” (Trenin, 2012: 43). Another author, Axel Berkofsky, refers that “from the Russian point of view, Beijing is a kind of unwanted guest”, which “challenges the Russian influence in its *near abroad*” (2012: 1). Therefore, “the receptivity of Moscow regarding a regional integration promoted by China”, in the fields of “politics” and “security” remains “limited, unless it is used to hold

the Western influence (especially that of the United States)” (Berkofsky, 2012: 1). Russia appears to be “cautious” about “China’s rapid military modernization”, and “categorically against the establishment of Chinese military bases in Central Asia” (Berkofsky, 2012: 1).

Fourthly, “the Chinese partnership with the Central Asian Republics is well accepted by themselves, since these are – except for, possibly, Kazakhstan - fragile from a military point of view”, while, at the same time, they face “multiple threats” at the security level (Duarte, 2012: para. 11). Now, China has a lot of interest in preventing the insecurity in the region, in particular with regard to separatist movements (Berkofsky, 2012). The Russian military support to Central Asia is not, of course, recent, although Beijing has shown, in this subject, an active interest in training the Central Asian armies and in contributing to the modernization of its military equipment (China Brief, 2010; Swanstrom, 2011).

According to Edward Chow (2011), “China is a relative latecomer in Central Asia”. In fact, as Suvankulov and Guc underline, “until the early 2000, China occupied a secondary position in the pursuit of influence in the region” (2012: 23). Actually, “although it had concluded several bilateral treaties with Central Asian Republics, Beijing’s priorities were not concentrated in the region” (Suvankulov and Guc, 2012: 23). In the 90s, the Chinese asked themselves about “what to do in relation to Central Asia” (Chow, 2011). In truth, the collapse of the Soviet Union took them by surprise: “nobody knew, for sure, what would happen to the region” (Chow, 2011). However, the North Americans were significantly faster in trying to gain influence in Central Asia, in contrast to the Chinese, in part because “it is very difficult to achieve the political consensus in China”, and then set out for action (Chow, 2011).

In less than two decades, Beijing has managed to operate an extraordinary entrance in Central Asia. The Central Asian Republics discovered the Chinese neighbor in 1991, at the time of their declarations of independence (Zhang Chi, 2013). The newly independent Republics would be, then, faced with the need to negotiate relations of good neighborhood with a country about which they knew little, and which had been, in many aspects, demonised by the Soviet propaganda (Kellner, 2008).

Peter Fonseca (2011) understands that China won “a clear prominence in the region”, which is also due to its “growing importance worldwide”. Having solved the border disputes with its Central Asian neighbors, Beijing proved to be a reliable partner in dealing with these Republics, not only in terms of bilateral diplomacy, but also from the commercial point of view. Effectively, as the *The New York Times* underlines, “since the beginning of

the financial crisis, China has surpassed Russia, until then the main trading partner of Central Asia” (2012: para. 7).

3. Final Notes

The consolidation of the Chinese strategy towards Central Asia is a complex game, mainly the result of good political relations and economic agreements. However, if the trade is, usually, a source of peace and stability, on the contrary, the dispute for the access to energy sources implies, however, the existence of tensions, mistrust and rivalries. As a rising power, China shows itself, naturally, apprehensive with regard to its energy security, more specifically, with regard to the diversification of its energy sources. Here is a ‘necessary’, but not ‘sufficient’ reason to justify the importance of Central Asia to China. In fact, the Middle Kingdom seeks not only to diversify its energy partnerships, but also to break the isolation of some of its provinces. In this context, the stability of Xinjiang and the Chinese periphery are at the heart of Beijing’s security concerns, which tries to neutralize the independentist aspirations and terrorism.

It is premature to say that the Middle Kingdom profits from a decisive influence in the Central Asian region. Indeed, despite the speed with which China has been able to assert itself in Central Asia, Beijing’s influence is still tenuous in the region. On the other hand, one has to recognize that the Russian influence in the region stands out. In fact, despite having already achieved independence two decades ago, the Central Asian Republics share more similarities with Russia than with China: not only at an economic, cultural level, but also with regard to the confidence they won. In fact, China is still perceived as a ‘weird’ and quite ‘new element’ in these countries that were, until quite recently, under the Soviet domination. There is a strong suspicion that the Middle Kingdom, as in the past, still has imperial designs towards the region, trying, however, to hide or postpone them. From what was said, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that, unless China presents a clearer and more proactive plan to deepen its relations with the Central Asian Republics, its influence in the region will continue to be reduced.

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