

TRANSFORMATION OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Central Asia is an important target of Chinese foreign policy. This region was included in the so-called sphere of external strategic borders of the PRC, which directly affects its national and state interests.

As one Chinese researcher Zhou Jun notes, the heightened interest of leading and regional states in Central Asia is determined by the objective and beneficial economic, geographical and military-strategic position of this region, moreover, by the richest reserves of mineral and energy raw materials, transport and communication capabilities and high potential [1].

Central Asia, being ethnoculturally and historically connected with the western regions of China, mainly the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, occupies an important place in the Chinese foreign policy strategy. Intensive industrial development of Xinjiang, growing trade and economic ties with Central Asian countries, as well as the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization allowed Beijing to expand its influence in the field of economy and security in the region. The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) project, proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, is an important initiative for Chinese investment in the region and aims to more closely connect Central and South Asia with each other and with China to create a strategically important land transport corridor between China and Europe. At the moment, the key projects connecting Xinjiang with Central and South Asia are the Khorgos free economic zone on the Sino-Kazakh border, where the largest transport hub will be located for organizing the delivery of Chinese goods to the markets of the Middle East, Europe and even African countries. Moreover, the Sino-Pakistani Economic Corridor, which begins in the city of Kashgar in Xinjiang and goes further south across Pakistan along the border with India to a port in the city of Gwadar, where China is building a commercial port and related infrastructure to gain access to the Arabian Sea and the Indian the ocean [2].

Despite the fact that the Silk Road Economic Belt as well as the Maritime Silk Road are purely economic and infrastructural projects, their implementation in one way or another depends on the solution of a whole range of security problems, which are concentrated mainly around Afghanistan and Pakistan. An equally important region from the point of view of ensuring security for Chinese initiatives is Central Asia, where the threat of terrorism and radicalism continues to persist, albeit in a latent form.

Some researchers, analyzing the modern approaches of China to Central Asia, come to the conclusion that China is less than other world powers interested in global control over the region. China is more interested in issues related to regional security and internal separatism.

The further trajectory of the development of terrorist threats in the region will be determined by two main factors: firstly, the outcome of the ongoing armed conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan and secondly, the future of the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda in the region. Indeed, given the heightened security measures in the Central Asian states and the determination of many militants from the region to continue to fight in hot spots in the Middle East and Afghanistan, most of these terrorist militants will not be able to return to their homelands. [3]

In addition, China's policy in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, as well as an increase in economic presence in the Central Asian countries, may become a new factor in the radicalization of the local population of Central Asian countries and the ethnic Uyghurs living in them, which will also have a negative impact on security in the region. China has established the most active interaction in countering terrorism on a bilateral basis with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, with which it often regularly conducts joint exercises, including for the protection of critical infrastructure. Besides, China's large investments in Tajikistan, as well as its interest in containing instability from Afghanistan, forced China to invest in ensuring the security of the weakly guarded border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, through which various goods are smuggled, drug trafficking, and which is a refuge for Islamic radicals and criminal gangs.

The security situation in Afghanistan in recent years remains extremely difficult, in particular, each time offensive operations and large-scale terrorist attacks by the Taliban continue to undermine the position of the official government in Kabul. Although none of the belligerent parties has so far been able to turn the tide of the conflict by force, the overall strategic situation is rather in favor of the Taliban, as evidenced by its tough stance in the peace negotiations and its commitment to the continuation of hostilities. Much will depend on the dynamics of the US-Taliban talks and the stability of the official government in Kabul. At the same time, the US decision to withdraw or retain troops in Afghanistan may be decisive. If the United States decides to withdraw from Afghanistan in stages, ensuring a political solution to the conflict and stabilization of the military-political situation, then the level of violence in the country may decline, but this scenario seems extremely unlikely given all of the above factors. At the same time, working out the details of a political settlement can be extremely difficult, given the diversity of interests and demands of the opposing sides, as well as their internal heterogeneity. If the United States decided to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan and leave the official government in Kabul alone with its problems, the situation in Afghanistan could seriously worsen. The issue of Afghan settlement and security in the region directly affects the interests of China. Despite the fact that China is not the driving force behind the peace process in Afghanistan, its military-political steps in the border areas have an impact on the stability of the region and is a factor that must also be taken into account when analyzing the Afghan problem. [4]

China seeks to implement its foreign policy strategy in the region, taking into account the following of its main national interests.

1. Ensuring stability on its turbulent northwestern borders and border areas. The common border of the PRC with the countries of Central Asia is 3,700 km, which is the subject of special attention of the Chinese leadership. In addition to "separatist" Taiwan, it is from the western direction, according to Beijing, that the main threats to the stability, sovereignty and integrity of the PRC are currently emanating. China, while admitting the possibility of developing relations of Uyghur organizations with Turkey, is closely monitoring the subversive aspects of this regional strategy of Ankara. Beijing is concerned about the influx of Turkic nationalism from the countries of Central Asia, so according to A.A.Mkrtychyan, today, apart from the United States and Europe, Turkey cannot consider China and Russia as its strategic allies, not to mention theocratic Iran. In these conditions, Turkey will gradually try to implement its own doctrine of the revival of the global Turkish pole with a stake on the Turkic and post-Ottoman world. It is no coincidence that China maintains a powerful military grouping in the XUAR, which is determined not only and not so much by the border position of the province itself, as by the need to suppress any ethnopolitical resistance of the Uyghur nationalist groups. As E.F.Parubochaya emphasizes, at the present stage one can definitely speak about Turkey's attempts not only to integrate the post-Soviet Turkic republics, but to form the Turkic world, which could be considered as a single actor on the world stage. Back in 1992, Turkish President Halil Turgut Ozal put forward the thesis that the Turkic world will become the dominant factor in the Eurasian space from the Balkans to the Chinese Wall, proclaiming the 21st century as the century of the Turks. Consequently, the threat of pan-Turkic separatism is an acute problem for Chinese politics. [5]

2. Development of the western regions of the PRC and reducing the gap in the economic development of coastal and inland regions by strengthening trade and economic cooperation of the

western provinces with the countries of Central Asia and with Turkey. As a result, China is today the main foreign economic partner of Central Asia and the main investor in the economies of the region's states. According to the Ministry of Trade of the People's Republic of China, in 1992 the total volume of trade with this region amounted to \$460 million, and in 2015 this figure reached \$32.6 billion. To some extent, the Central Asian states are concerned about the Sinification factor in the region. Such a threat can stimulate the development of integration ties between the countries of the region both with Russia (in the field of economy, defense and security) and with Turkey (in the field of strengthening Turkic nationalism, ethnocultural ties and as a bridge to the West - the USA, EU, NATO). [6]

3. Providing guaranteed access to energy sources for its growing industry. As E. Petelin notes, the main component of the PRC's energy policy in Central Asia since the mid-1990s has been the strategy of going beyond, the essence of which is the introduction of Chinese capital and technology into the international market. Kazakhstan can be called one of the main sources of oil and gas supplies to China. The main sphere of China's financial investments in the Kazakhstani market is the oil and gas industry. Turkmenistan is China's second key energy partner in the region, and energy is the top priority area of bilateral economic cooperation. Chinese investments and loans play an important role in stimulating the development of cooperation in the field of energy. In particular, in 2013, the volume of loans provided by China exceeded \$3billion. Here we should agree with the opinion of M. Potić that it can be argued that a certain complementarity of economic interests has developed between China and the countries of the region: the countries of Central Asia need Chinese investments to develop their oil and gas fields, as well as to develop the relevant sectors of the economy; China, on the other hand, needs new sales markets for its products, as well as new sources of energy imports. Thus, the energy resources of the Central Asian region are in the circle of special interests of Beijing, and gaining direct access to them – without Russian control – becomes an important task for the region for China, which contradicts Russian national interests.

4. Formation of reliable transport corridors to enter the markets of the CIS countries and Europe. Direct communication between the central and western regions of China with Central and South Asia will allow Chinese goods to gain direct access to regional markets and reduce transport costs. Regarding the transport and transit policy of the Central Asian states, as M. Turaeva notes, the main task of transport projects in North and Central Asia is to bring the countries of the region into the number of transit states and create alternative multimodal corridors, mainly along the East-West latitudinal direction, as well as along the North-South meridional direction. It should be noted that the PRC already has access to Kazakhstan through the Druzhba railway station and the road through the Khorgos checkpoint.

5. Another area that largely determines the foreign policy of the PRC in the region is the desire, through the spread of its influence in Central Asia, to oppose the unipolar system and the dominant position of the United States at the economic, political and military levels.

Indeed, as experts note, in recent years China has become one of the leading geopolitical players, exerting a growing influence on the development of the situation in the region. At the same time, it should be noted that in the first half of the 1990s, China did not show any noticeable activity in the CAR. Having established diplomatic relations with the Central Asian states in 1992, Beijing was primarily interested in maintaining political stability in the XUAR. However, the subsequent political realities in Central Asia prompted Beijing to move to a more active policy and from the second half of the 1990s to increase its influence in the region.

Thus, China has a particular interest in this region in the context of growing economic interests, resource needs, transit prospects and security issues.

Talking about the relevance of China's strategy in the Central Asian region, the following most important elements should be highlighted. China views Central Asia as:

- A promising market for goods and an alternative access to international transport corridors;
- An important source of energy resources needed to meet the needs of the rapidly growing Chinese economy;

- A territory that plays a strategically important role both in ensuring the national security of modern China and in its development as a great world power.

At the moment, the priority task of China's foreign policy in Central Asia, as well as centuries ago, is to maintain security and stability on its western borders, or what is now called the fight against the "three evils" – international terrorism, national separatism and religious extremism. The strategy of the three world powers, in particular China, Russia and the United States, in Central Asia has both common and special features. We can refer to the general trends, first of all, the economic policy. All three states are interested in building mutually beneficial trade and economic relations with the region.

The United States and China are interested in Central Asia in terms of its energy potential. At the same time, Russia and the United States regard this territory as an important geopolitical outpost, where each side has its own national interests and priorities. Today China refuses to have a direct military presence in the region, relying on leverage of economic influence, primarily within the SCO.

As a result, it can be noted that in the near future, Central Asia will remain in the center of attention of the leading world powers as one key geopolitical region, the influence on which can determine the further development of a particular state. At the same time, of course, one should take into account the fact that in the very near future new actors may appear in the Central Asian region that can seriously affect the situation.

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