

Unraveling China's Infiltration into Central Asia



Center for Uyghur Studies

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Who We Are?

The Center for Uyghur Studies (CUS) is a non-profit organization founded in Virginia, United States in December 2020. CUS combines academic research and human rights advocacy and is focused on Uyghur related studies and activities. It conducts various studies on the history, culture and political life of the Uyghurs, excavating historical heritage and developing it on the basis of scientific inheritance. CUS also works to educate the public about the situation of the Uyghurs and other peoples of East Turkistan through research and advocacy. It carries out research and publishes studies and reports to advise on strategic policy recommendations for governments, international organizations and interfaith entities, all through the lens of Uyghur perspective.

Our Mission:

To study Uyghur history, culture, politics and promote Uyghur literary works and historic figures to the world; To raise awareness of the Uyghur genocide and other political, cultural, economic, social, and environmental crises happening in East Turkistan using comprehensive researches and studies; To engage in academic activities and provide governments, international organizations, interfaith entities, and other related entities with research reports and policy recommendations

on East Turkistan; To study new ways and strategies to promote a healthy development of the East Turkistan cause and conditions of the Uyghur people.

Our Goal:

The Center for Uyghur Studies aims to advance the national existence of the Uyghur people through academic as well as advocacy activities and raise awareness of China's genocide and crimes in East Turkistan among the Muslim as well as the global community. In addition to promoting unity and education among the Uyghur people and strengthening the East Turkistan cause, CUS also aims to examine the way the Chinese Communist Party exerts economic and political pressure on the Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims living in East Turkistan. Furthermore, the center will shed light on the CCP's activities in both Central Asian and other Muslim-majority countries, and the economic, social, and environmental consequences of their policies in those regions.

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Introduction

Central Asia is a region of strategic importance to Chinese expansionism. Because of this, China has been trying to control the region for decades. China's strategy to control Central Asia is based on multi-pronged political, economic, military, and cultural penetration. China reinforced the "Shanghai Five" cooperation mechanism with regional countries in 2001 by establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This mechanism provided China with an opportunity to penetrate further into Central Asia. Under this mechanism, China even sent heavy weapons and troops to the region to join military maneuvers under the pretext of counting terrorism. This was the first time Chinese troops entered the region since the 7th century.

Due to the war in Ukraine, Russia's influence in Central Asia has been greatly weakened. This brought a new opportunity for China to gain control over the region. As a result, in May 2023, China invited the heads of five countries in the region to its ancient capital, Xi'an, and held the "China-Central Asia Summit." In his keynote speech at the summit, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping put forward four principles for the future development of China-Central Asia cooperation: "mutual assistance, common



development, universal security and everlasting friendship.” At the end of the summit, the parties signed the Xi’an Declaration. It is of historical significance that the meeting was held in Xi’an, the ancient capital of China.

In 2013, Beijing declared its trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan and has since spent billions of dollars on transportation and infrastructure in the region. China became Central Asia’s largest trading partner. Last year, trade between China and Central Asian countries reached a record high of \$70 billion, including \$31 billion with Kazakhstan alone. The fact that China started its huge expansion strategy of “Belt and Road” (BRI) from Kazakhstan shows the depth of its eagerness to infiltrate into the region.

East Turkistan, the homeland of the Uyghurs, is of existential importance for the BRI, one of the biggest initiatives of the Chinese Communist Party, due to its location that connects China to Central Asia and the Middle East. Four out of six major trade corridors under the BRI pass through East Turkistan to reach other regions. Hence, special economic zones have been established there to serve as corridors. It is noteworthy that a year after the BRI’s launch in 2013, concentration camps started to be established in East Turkistan. With the acceleration of BRI projects in 2017, millions of Uyghurs have been sent to the concentration camps. While pursuing its desire to dominate the world commercially, China is eradicating the

Uyghur people for the sake of its colonialist ambitions.

As a result of the decades-long systematic infiltration, today, the Chinese presence in Central Asia is prominent in all areas. When we look at its influence in the economic sphere, the weight of Chinese companies is very evident, especially in infrastructure projects. The total amount of both investments and projects undertaken by the Chinese state and companies in the region is around 68 billion dollars. Central Asian countries have already become dependent on China in bilateral trade. In addition to the Chinese military presence under the frame of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the presence of Chinese companies in private security draws attention. Culturally, China is carrying out public opinion-forming activities among Central Asian peoples through institutions such as the Confucius Institute. These institutes play an important role in spreading the Chinese language and culture in the region.

China's deepening infiltration into Central Asia and its growing presence in the region have caused a series of acute adverse effects. Central Asian countries are increasingly falling into China's debt trap and losing their sovereignty. Corruption among government officials is rampant as Chinese capital flows in. The region's democratization process has been set back by the CCP's support for authoritarian regimes. The human rights situation is also deteriorating. Transnational repression of Uyghurs and Kazakhs fleeing East Turkistan is



happening across the region. These are some of the negative consequences of China's infiltration into Central Asia.

This report embarks on an in-depth exploration of China's strategic infiltration into Central Asia, a region of increasing global significance. We begin by examining the pivotal role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which serves as the cornerstones of China's engagement in the region. The China-Central Asia Summit and the utilization of East Turkistan as a corridor are also scrutinized for their geopolitical implications. Our analysis extends to China's burgeoning presence in Central Asian countries through large-scale infrastructure projects, enhanced bilateral trade, and collaborative security measures. An important aspect of our study is the investigation of China's soft power strategies in shaping regional dynamics.

The report further delves into the multifaceted consequences of these deepening bilateral relations. We analyze how economic engagements, particularly in infrastructure and trade, have led some Central Asian countries into a potential debt trap, fostering a perilous dependence on China. Furthermore, the report sheds light on the alarming human rights abuses linked to these relationships, raising critical questions about the ethical implications of such partnerships and CCP's exporting corruption through BRI. Additionally, China's support and bolstering of authoritarian regimes in the region are critically



examined, probing the impact on regional governance and political stability.

This comprehensive inquiry offers a nuanced understanding of China's expanding influence in Central Asia. It seeks to unravel the complex web of economic, diplomatic, and security ties, and their profound implications for the region's future and its place in global geopolitics.



1. How China is Infiltrating into Central Asia

The Political, economic and security relations between China and regional countries play an important role in China's infiltration into Central Asia. China is increasing its regional influence by relying on its absolute superiority in relations with Central Asian countries. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has provided China with a legal status and a stable mechanism for active military activity in the region, and the newly established China-Central Asia Summit has further enhanced China's political position in the region. The role of Central Asia is vital in the «Belt and Road Initiative» (BRI), which China has been implementing with all its might since 2013. Under Chinese occupation, East Turkistan (Xinjiang) plays both a key and a bridge role in China's massive expansion into Central Asia. Therefore, these four major factors, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Central Asia Summit, and East Turkistan, play an essential role in China's infiltration into the Central Asian region. These can be said to be China's four major instruments for realizing its Central Asian strategy.

1.1 Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an

intergovernmental international organization that was established on June 15, 2001, in Shanghai, China. The organization's founding members consist of five countries: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These five countries came together under the «Shanghai Five» mechanism in 1996, and this cooperation mechanism laid the foundation for establishing the organization. The SCO is developing and continuing the «Shanghai Five» mechanism. The decision-making mechanism of the SCO consists of two supreme bodies, the Council of Heads of State (CHS) and the Council of Heads of Government (Prime Ministers) (CHG). The two councils meet separately once a year to discuss important issues of the organization. The organization has two permanent bodies: the Secretariat in Beijing, the capital of China, and the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. The Secretary-General of the SCO and the Director of the Executive Committee of the RATS are appointed by the CHS for a three-year term. Currently, Zhang Ming (China) is the organization's general secretary, and R. E. Mirzaev (Uzbekistan) is the director of the RATS executive committee. The SCO currently has nine members, three observers and 14 dialogue partners. Its working languages are Chinese and Russian.(1)

Figure 1: Member states of the SCO



Source: The SCO

The SCO was originally formed for the peaceful settlement of border disputes between the five founding countries and the reduction of border troops, but it later expanded to military and “counter-terrorism” cooperation. As the number of member states of the SCO continually increased, the focus of the organization also gradually moved towards political and economic cooperation.

Economic cooperation has recently become one of the organization’s most pressing goals. Beijing has pushed the organization to focus on economic cooperation with proposals like launching various development funds and free-trade zones.(2)

The SCO is a regional organization established mainly by China's initiative, and China has always played a fundamental role in its development. This can be said to be an indication of China's effort to infiltrate into and control the region. China is currently using the SCO as a tool for its strategy of penetration into Central Asia. The organization is increasingly becoming an important mechanism of China's foreign policy towards Central Asia. Beijing has already achieved some of its goals through this mechanism. They include solving border problems with member countries in Central Asia, getting support from Russia and Central Asian countries in suppressing the Uyghurs' struggle for freedom, consolidating economic power in the region, establishing its presence in the oil and gas sector of the Central Asian countries, creating logistic network among the member states, maintaining geo-political balance in the region, the establishment of a new legal framework for regional security, and forming a «third center» after the US and the EU in the multipolar world.(3)

China continues to accelerate its economic infiltration into Central Asia under the SCO cooperation framework. On November 20th, 2020, 20 construction projects worth 8,6 billion dollars were launched in the Demonstration Zones established by China and other organization members. Currently, there are more than 40 cooperation projects in



the region. There are more than 1500 joint Chinese-Kazakh companies in Kazakhstan alone. China shares 25% of Kazakhstan's oil and gas production. There are more than 20 railway freight routes, including six international lines covering Central Asia, Europe, South Korea, Mongolia, Russia, Southeast Asia and Belarus. In 2019, 670,000 containers were transported between China and other member countries through these routes, an increase of 5% compared to previous years.(4)

The SCO also provides a legal basis for Chinese military infiltration into Central Asia. With the establishment of the organization, China gained the privilege of sending police and soldiers to the region under the pretext of fighting terrorism, maintaining regional stability, and fighting cross-border crimes. This is a rare opportunity for China, which has historically been eyeing the region. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has sent heavy weapons and troops to the region to participate in several military maneuvers carried out under the name of «Peace Mission» in Central Asian countries. This is China's first military entry into the region since the defeat in the Battle of Talas between forces of the Chinese Tang Dynasty and the Arab Abbasid Caliphate in the 7th century. (5)

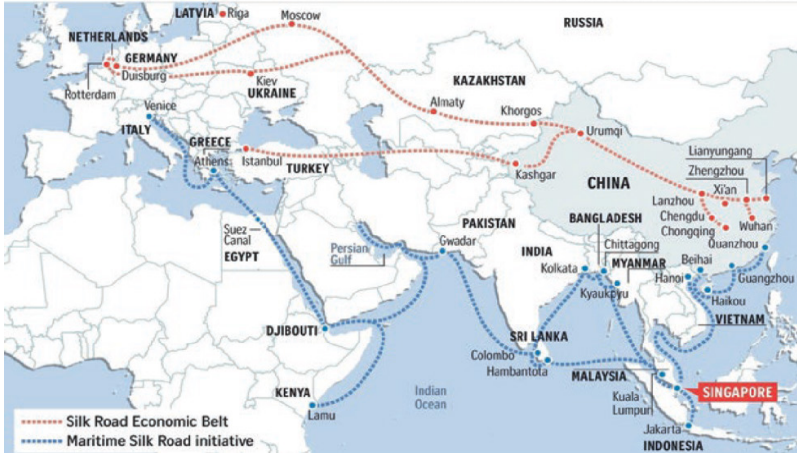
1.2 Belt and Road Initiative

While visiting Kazakhstan in September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping gave a speech at Nazarbayev University. Emphasizing the importance of China and Central Asia relations in his speech, Xi suggested joint collaboration to create a new «Silk Road Economic Belt» (丝绸之路经济带). This statement marked the first time Chinese leaders shared a strategic vision publicly. Xi Jinping also made a visit to Indonesia in October of the same year. During the visit, Xi, who aims to establish close relations with the ASEAN community, also called for a «21st Century Maritime Silk Road» to strengthen maritime cooperation. The two initiatives announced by Xi Jinping during these two visits by Beijing in 2015 to the whole world as an official project, combined under the name of “Belt and Road” (BRI).

The idea of BRI comes from the ancient «Silk Road», which started in China, passed through Central Asia and the Middle East, and ended in the heart of Europe. The ancient Silk Road connected Eurasia over land. In the new era, China planned to realize its vision of establishing a new two-way «Silk Road» on land and at sea by creating its sea version. China’s new Silk Road project consists of two lines: land and sea. The landline of the project covers the neighboring countries around China, mainly Central Asia.

Figure 2: Land and sea lines of the BRI

China's One Belt, One Road

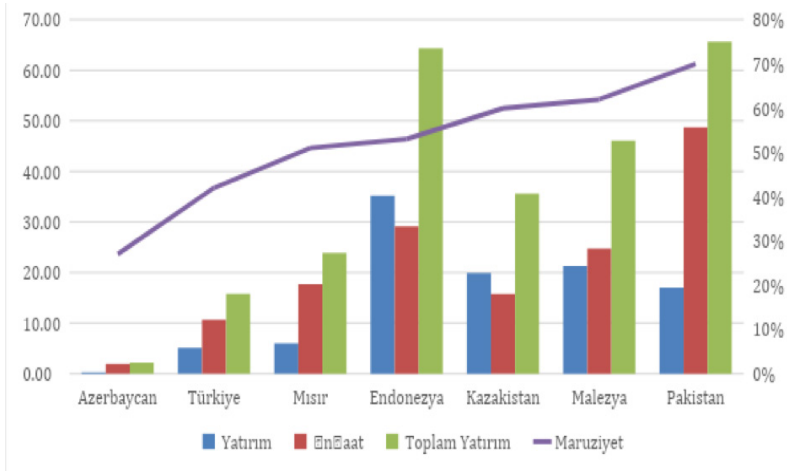


Source: Xinhua News

BRI is the largest infrastructure initiative of all time. The project covers approximately 65% of the world's population and one-third of the world's GDP. This project's scope includes roads, railways, communication networks, energy pipes, seaports, etc. The World Bank estimates that BRI's transportation projects, if completed, could reduce travel times between economic corridors by 12%, increase trade by 2.7% to 9.7%, raise incomes by up to 3.4% and lift 7.6 million people out of severe poverty. According to preliminary estimates, a total investment of around 6 trillion US dollars will be made for the construction of the infrastructure of the project. The Development Research Center of the State Council of China

announced that at least 10.6 trillion US Dollars are needed for the infrastructure construction of the countries involved in the BRI initiative. (8)

Figure 3: China's investment and its influence in Islamic World



Source: CUS, 2023

China's influence in Central Asia greatly increased since implementing the BRI. China accelerated its Infiltration into the region using the initiative as an effective economic tool. The participation of all the Central Asian countries in the Initiative provided China with a historical opportunity. With its huge regional investments and loans, China has already established its hegemony among the Central Asian countries. These countries have increasingly become more dependent on China's investments or debts. With the BRI, China has



consolidated its presence in Central Asia. Now, the region is playing a key role as a trade hub and security base for China's further expansion.

Central Asia is in a key position in the BRI, which the Chinese Communist Party markets to the world with propaganda about the key to social development. When the reasons for this are analyzed, the following picture emerges.

Central Asian countries are attractive to China due to their rich natural resources. As China is one of the world's largest consumers of oil and gas, it wants unhindered access to these resources. China is expanding its markets and maintaining domestic employment by moving overcapacity, labor-intensive, low value-added and polluting production facilities and technologies abroad. The government particularly favors such plants and technologies. The region is characterized by low labor costs, limited competition, and governments willing to offer tax breaks and other incentives to foreign investors. These factors make Central Asia attractive to Chinese investors.

Despite China's official rhetoric as a generous donor and investor, M. Laruelle of George Washington University has argued that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is, in fact, a response to China's domestic economic problems and aims to postpone the decisive moment of the transition from «Made in China» to «Created by China.» China's activities in the energy sector are focused on constructing and refurbishing old-style coal-fired power plants while exporting its know-

how, experience, and technology in hydropower. As a world-leading producer of solar panels, China is also striving to play an important role in Central Asia's rapidly growing renewable energy markets.⁽⁹⁾ The rationale for BRI's interest in Central Asia is that countries in the region need money to develop and extract value from their vast mineral resources. Their economies, with the exception of Kazakhstan, are unable to secure sufficient domestic financing for development and are in critical need of significant investments to create viable market-oriented economies and participate in international trade networks.

Some of the information on China's investments in Central Asian countries will be provided in the following sections. However, the BRI's repercussions in Central Asia can be summarized as follows. Three of the BRI's largest transportation and projects pass through the territory of Central Asian countries. These are:

- Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline
- China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railways
- China-Europe Railway Express

According to a study analyzing BRI projects, Central Asia's total number of BRI projects is 261, amounting to 136 billion dollars. The largest share among these projects belongs to Kazakhstan, with a value of more than 90 billion dollars. Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan



follow it. Uzbekistan's share is much less than 5 percent, amounting to \$4.6 billion. The main areas of projects are road and rail infrastructure, energy connections, industry, agri-food, minerals and finance.(10)

Despite billions of dollars in projects, BRI projects are at the center of controversy. Some of these debates will be discussed in the following sections. However, some points should be emphasized here. BRI is also one of China's instruments for establishing dominance over Central Asia. According to one study, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reflects the country's desire to gain more reliable access to energy and mining resources. The BRI aims to achieve China's military, political and cultural goals by increasing its regional and global influence. This far-reaching project seeks to have a global impact by starting in China and spreading worldwide. Thus, it aims to revitalize East-West trade corridors and implement a comprehensive security strategy in politics, economy, military, and soft power. (11) Central Asia is undoubtedly this project's most important transit point, starting in Beijing and spreading worldwide.

Although the countries' governments want to get a larger share of the BRI projects, concerns and reactions are growing in Central Asian societies. The results of a survey of young people make this clear. The vast majority of respondents, nearly 80%, see the massive influx of Chinese migrants as a significant

risk. This concern is followed by environmental damage and pollution, cited by 70%. China's governance practices are also a concern for 65% in Kazakhstan and 52% in Kyrgyzstan. 59% in Kazakhstan and 44% in Kyrgyzstan believe that Chinese investments threaten their countries' sovereignty.⁽¹²⁾ Such societal reactions are sought to be eliminated by repressive systems modeled after China by the leaders of Central Asian countries.

1.3.China-Central Asia Summit

On 19 May 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping chaired the inaugural China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an City, Shaanxi Province of China. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan, President Sadyr Zhaparov of Kyrgyzstan, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, President Serdar Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan and President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan attended the Summit. At the summit, the presidents reviewed the history of exchanges between China and the five Central Asian countries and envisioned future directions for cooperation. With the future in mind, they agreed to work together for an even closer China-Central Asia community. In his keynote speech at the summit, Xi Jinping put forward four principles for the future development of China-Central Asia cooperation: "mutual assistance, common development, universal security and everlasting friendship." At the end of the summit, the parties signed the Xi'an



Declaration(13). They announced that Kazakhstan will hold the second China - Central Asia Summit in 2025 and that the permanent secretariat of the mechanism be set up in China(14)

Xi'an, the central-northwest Chinese city formerly called Changan, is a highly symbolic location for the meeting, as it once served as the eastern starting point of the Silk Road. This ancient trade route connected China with Central Asia and the Mediterranean. This is the second time Beijing has tried establishing such a mechanism after launching the «Shanghai Five» in 1996. Last time, China chose its developed coastal city of Shanghai as a symbol for the «Shanghai Five»; this time, it decided to use the ancient capital Chang'an as a symbol for the «Xi'an Six.»

In 2013, Beijing launched its trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan and has since spent billions of dollars on transportation and infrastructure in the region. China is Central Asia's largest trading partner. Last year, trade reached a record high of \$70 billion, including \$31 billion with Kazakhstan alone. This year is proving to be no different; already, China and Central Asian nations have conducted more than \$24.8 billion in trade. Just as Central Asia relies on Chinese trade and investment, Beijing depends on Central Asia for critical resources. Many Chinese cities rely on natural gas pipelines from Turkmenistan and oil from Kazakhstan. (15)

Figure 4: Central Asia and its surroundings



Source: Silk Road Briefing

1.4. East Turkistan as a Corridor

East Turkistan is of existential importance for BRI, one of the most significant initiatives of the Chinese Communist Party. The fact that the homeland of the Uyghurs is located in a geography that connects China to Central Asia and the Middle East is one of the most important justifications for Beijing's Sinicization of East Turkistan. Four of six major trade corridors under the BRI pass through East Turkistan to reach other regions. Kashgar, one of the ancient cities of East Turkistan, is neighbouring Pakistan, where the most considerable



investments under the BRI are concentrated. Special Economic zones have been established there.(16) It is noteworthy that a year after the BRI's launch in 2013, concentration camps were established in East Turkistan. Yet, with the acceleration of BRI projects in 2017, millions of Uyghurs have been sent to concentration camps. While pursuing its desire to dominate the world commercially, the communist regime is eradicating the Uyghur people for the sake of its colonialist ambitions.

The most significant economic corridor of the BRI is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). With this economic corridor, China sees Pakistan as the gateway to the Asia-Pacific region after East Turkistan. Billions of dollars have been invested in Pakistan in many areas, from ports to highways. The Pakistani government, afraid of losing these investments, ignores the Uyghur Genocide happening next to it.

The majority of Muslim nations that have backed Beijing in their UN votes concerning China or OIC pronouncements are part of the BRI and are economically dependent on China.(17) Along with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have signed Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships, the broadest framework of the BRI. In return for these signatures, these countries have consistently supported China's Uyghur Genocide policies. They have also extradited a number of Uyghurs to China at Beijing's request.(18)

As can be seen from these examples, there is ignorance towards the Uyghur Genocide both in Middle Eastern countries and in world politics. Countries support China on international platforms because they benefit from China's BRI projects. Many states, primarily Muslim states, support the Uyghur Genocide. As mentioned earlier, a UN resolution calling for independent observers to inspect East Turkistan was collectively blocked. The 'Muslim solidarity' in support of the communist regime's oppression of Muslims shows how assertive China economically and diplomatically is and even capable of suppressing all criticism.(19)

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects continue at full speed, especially in Central Asia. Countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are key players in China's strategy to create new markets in these maritime regions. China aims to create a new power dynamic in Central Asia by strengthening economic ties and increasing dependence on the region through BRI. The most important projects that will realize this goal pass through East Turkistan. For the Chinese Communist Party, East Turkistan is the gateway to the West. Therefore, it serves as a bridge. The existence of a community other than Han Chinese should not be allowed on this bridge. The following features of the occupied East Turkistan make it strategically the highest point:



Border: East Turkistan is China's westernmost border, bordering eight countries.

Connectivity: East Turkistan connects China to Central Asia and the Middle East.

BRI routes: Four of the six main BRI land routes pass through East Turkistan.

Economic corridors: East Turkistan is home to three of the six BRI economic corridors.

Investment: China has generated billions of dollars from investment and trade in East Turkistan.

Trade: In 2019, East Turkistan accounted for more than 80% of trade with BRI countries.

As such, East Turkistan stands out as a region known for its desert geography and strategically important for China. This region, which plays a critical role in the success of the BRI, is at the center of trade with Central Asian countries. Chinese dominance in East Turkistan is directly related to the success of this project. Moreover, East Turkistan is important in the Eurasian Corridor, where six of the eight railway lines between China and Europe pass. Rich in energy resources, Xinjiang functions as a strategic buffer zone in northwest China and protects the geopolitical center of the country. As a critical transit point on the land routes of the new Silk Roads to Europe, Xinjiang is in a position where instability in the region could have significant implications for China's economic goals. In addition to Xinjiang's regional importance, it also plays a

central role in China's global ambitions, especially regarding the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. This highlights the geostrategic value of the region.

1.5. New Free-Trade Zones in East Turkistan

The Chinese Communist Party continues to turn East Turkistan into an economic center to protect its interests in Central Asia. New free trade zones to be established in East Turkistan are a further step taken to maintain economic dominance in Central Asia and to make the economies of the countries in the region more dependent on the Beijing government. The free trade zones to be established in the border regions of Central Asian countries, in the cities of Kashgar, Urumqi and Horgos, also aim to oppose the sanctions imposed by the USA and Western countries. These free trade zones, which defy US sanctions, claim to be one of the steps taken by the Chinese government to gain geopolitical superiority in Central Asia.

Figure 5: Kashgar Area of China (Xinjiang) Pilot Free Trade Zone in Kashgar



This photo taken on Nov. 11, 2023 shows the unveiling ceremony of Kashgar Area of China (Xinjiang) Pilot Free Trade Zone in Kashgar, northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. [Photo/Xinhua].

The Chinese Government announced newly established free trade zones (FTZ) at the end of October. According to the plan the State Council of China announced, Pilot Free Trade Zones will be established in East Turkistan. These trade zones are also considered one of the main hubs of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese Communist Party's new economic expansion program. Pilot Free Trade Zones, which claim to accelerate China's opening to the West, also aim to strengthen China's relations with Central Asia. These so-called free trade zones aim to improve the business environment, facilitate trade



and expand the advantages of traditional industries.(20) On the other hand, it was decided that FTZs would be established by the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), known as Bingtuan. The United States has also sanctioned XPCC for its crimes in human rights violations in East Turkistan. XPCC was later also sanctioned by Canada and the European Union. The USA also enacted the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act a year later.(21)



2. China's Presence in the Region

As closely followed by the international community, the Chinese Communist Party's influence in Central Asia is increasing in many areas such as military and security cooperation, exploitation of natural resources, direct investments, loans and infrastructure projects. The Belt and Road Initiative BRI, announced in 2013, has been one of the most important elements of the Beijing government's increasing presence in Central Asia. When we look at its influence in the economic sphere, the weight of Chinese companies is very evident, especially in infrastructure projects. The total amount of investments and projects undertaken by the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese companies in the region is around 68 billion dollars. China accounts for 22 percent of exports in Central Asia. Likewise, 37 percent of imports are from China. Central Asian countries are dependent on China in bilateral trade.(22) Tajikistan is undoubtedly where China's military presence in Central Asia is felt the most. Tajikistan has a military settlement on the border with Afghanistan. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which the Central Asian countries are also members, is also the umbrella organization where joint work is carried out in security. China conducts joint exercises with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. On the other hand, Chinese companies' presence in the private

security field draws attention. Another point is that the Beijing Government carries out public opinion-forming activities among Central Asian peoples through institutions such as the Confucius Institute. This section will contain details of the matters summarized.

2.1 Infrastructure investments and energy resources heading to China

Central Asia, which is China's geography extending to Europe, is also one of the regions where the Communist Regime has made its economic impact felt the most. These investments are especially in the fields of both energy and infrastructure investments. With the Belt and Road Initiative announced in 2013, China's investments are also increasing. It is stated that the number of projects funded by China after announcing the Belt and Road Initiative is approximately 112. (23) The Beijing government has accelerated its steps to increase its presence in Central Asia both economically and diplomatically in recent years. In particular, President Xi Jinping's recent summit with heads of state has attracted the international community's attention. One of the topics of the summit held in May 2023 was undoubtedly increasing infrastructure investments. At the summit attended by the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, important infrastructure investments such as the acceleration of the construction of the China - Central Asia Natural Gas line, the

construction of the international transport corridor between China and the Caspian Sea, and the strengthening of China - Europe freight train services were on the agenda.(24)

Figure 6: China-Central Asia infrastructure development



Source: Rane-Worldview

Leaders of Central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan, frequently meet with Chinese leaders. After such meetings and summits, new agreements are constantly signed between China and the counterpart country and new economic targets are set. For example, the Kazakhstan Presidential Press Service announced last month that President Tokayev travelled to China, where he signed 30 trade documents worth \$16.5 billion. Similarly, Uzbek leader Mirziyoyev, after a one-on-one meeting with Xi, said that China's investments in Uzbekistan

had increased fivefold compared to previous years. Mirziyoyev also stated that he wants the mutual trade between the two countries to increase to 20 billion dollars. Turkmenistan's top leader, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov led a delegation from his country to the Belt and Road Initiative forum. At the event in Beijing, the delegation signed agreements on «technical and economic cooperation», which are vague in their wording and seem ostentatious but lacking in substance.(25)

The situation of the countries can be summarized as follows.

2.1.1 Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the country with which China has the strongest trade and diplomatic relations, as well as the country with which China invests the most. In the period between 2005 and 2023, the amount of Chinese investment in Kazakhstan in the field of construction was 17.32 billion dollars. The total amount of China's investments in Kazakhstan and fields other than construction is 37.4 billion dollars. The largest of these investments is transport investments worth 940 million dollars. Likewise, Beijing-affiliated companies invest billions of dollars, especially in oil.(26) Only 23 agreements have been signed to transport Kazakh oil to China. A smelter agreement for using copper mines and constructing an automobile factory are some of the projects China is considering.(27) Another important agreement signed between Kazakhstan and China is



on the quintupling of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Line (TITR) capacity and the increase of its annual container capacity to 500,000. According to the Kazakh government, the TITR «accounts for about 85 percent of the land transit traffic between China and Europe via Kazakhstan», and it is also stated that 35 billion dollars will be invested in road improvements over 15 years.(28)

2.1.2 Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is the second largest investment area of the Beijing Government in Central Asia. Chinese investments in Turkmenistan exceeded USD 15 billion as of the first half of 2023. Undoubtedly, the largest investment is again in the field of construction. Total construction investments amount to 13.2 billion dollars. Almost all the investments are related to the energy field(29). Moreover, Turkmenistan's official news agency announced an agreement between the State Customs Service of Turkmenistan and the Chinese Customs Administration to expand the Authorized Economic Operators Program. China's official publications, such as China Daily, have published an analysis of the ongoing work on Line D, the fourth phase of the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline, which will integrate Turkmenistan with China via other Central Asian countries and will increase the annual natural gas export capacity to 30 billion cubic meters.(30)

Figure 7: China - Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan Railway Routes



Source: Silk Road Briefing

2.1.3 Uzbekistan

The total amount of investments made by the Chinese Communist Party in Uzbekistan is more than 10 billion dollars. Of this figure, 8.5 billion dollars is related to construction. Most of the investments in this country are related to energy. The second place is taken by infrastructure investments in the field of chemicals and the third by transport.(31) It is also one of the partners of the 325-mile (525 KM) railway project starting from Kashgar City of East Turkistan, which China occupies, and reaching the Andijan region of Uzbekistan. China is carrying out numerous projects worth \$289 million



funded by Beijing's Export-Import Bank. A \$440 million chemical plant project is also underway in Navoi.(32) One of China's technology investments in the region is also in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's Ministry of Digital Technologies and China's Ministry of Industry and Informatics have announced cooperation in «infrastructure integration, communication networks, 5G, cyber security and information technologies». On the other hand, China Southern Power Grid International and Uzbekwaterenergo JSC signed a \$1 billion deal to build the 600 MW Yukori Pskem hydroelectric power plant.(33)

2.1.4 Kyrgyzstan

The total amount of investments made by the Chinese Government in Kyrgyzstan, one of the Central Asian countries, is relatively small compared to other countries. The total investment amount is 4.73 billion dollars. 3.78 billion dollars of investment is related to construction. Most investments here are also directed towards energy and transport infrastructure investments.(34) China's total investment in Kyrgyzstan in the long term is 43 billion dollars. A total of 26 agreements have been signed for this commitment.(35)

2.1.5 Tajikistan

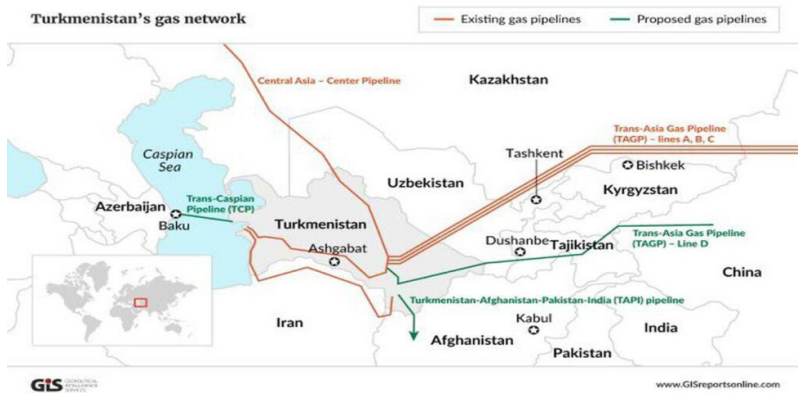
The total amount of investments in Tajikistan, the smallest country of Central Asia in terms of geography, is 3.33 billion

dollars. 2.32 billion of these investments are in the field of construction. The largest investment is the 540-million-dollar investment made by the Chinese National Machinery Industry (Sinomash) company.(36) 25 agreements between Tajikistan and China have been signed, especially for strengthening infrastructure investments.(37)

A significant part of the energy needs of the Chinese Communist Party, which carries out a ruthless competition in production in many fields in the world, is also provided by Central Asian countries. Natural gas resources in Central Asia have been flowing from the region's countries to China through pipelines constructed since 2009. The first pipeline built was Line A in 2009. Line B became operational in 2010, and Line C became operational in 2014. Fifty-five billion cubic meters of natural gas is transported annually through the lines, which reach China in zigzags by wrapping around Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan like an octopus.(38) Line D, which is still in the project phase, was on the agenda at the summit between Xi and the leaders of five countries in May and the demand for its completion as soon as possible was raised. One of the turning points in the energy trade between Central Asian countries and China occurred in 2016. At that time, the price dispute with Russia's energy company Gazprom emerged in 2016. Following this incident, 80 percent of Turkmen gas started to go to China. By the end of 2019 alone, more than 250 billion cubic meters of gas worth \$8 billion had reached the region and

was used to service Chinese loans. In 2021, China signed an agreement to drill new gas wells in Turkmenistan. According to the agreement covering three years, 17 billion cubic meters of natural gas is expected to be extracted yearly. Uzbekistan is also one of China's energy suppliers. The power plant in the city of Dushanbe in Tajikistan was built with a \$331.5 million Chinese loan agreement. This agreement also gave China the right to obtain licenses for two gold mines in that region.(39)

Figure 8: Turkmenistan's gas network



Source: Stefan Hedlund

On the other hand, the Chinese Communist Party is also investing in renewable energy resources in Central Asia. In this context, Antaisolar, one of the leading Chinese companies in the field of photovoltaic mounting systems, signed a 470 MWp Solar Tracking System agreement with Uzbekistan-based EPC contractor Enter Engineering for one of the largest

solar energy projects in Central Asia. A similar initiative in Kyrgyzstan is the \$3 billion joint project between China and Kyrgyzstan involving four hydroelectric power plants with a total capacity of 1160 MW, one of the largest hydroelectric power plant initiatives in Kyrgyzstan.(40)

The reflection of the Chinese Communist Party's system of doing business behind closed doors around the world is naturally seen in Central Asian countries as well. In this context, it is noteworthy that only the names of the projects in Central Asian countries are known, and important details about the projects are not shared with the public. The underdeveloped democracy in the countries in the region and the lack of government accountability naturally lead to the lack of supervision of projects in Central Asian countries. The limited number of civil organizations and other groups in countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan cannot criticize such projects. It should also be emphasized that all regional investors are increasingly disregarding social needs, and new projects are causing permanent damage to the socio-economic environment and natural life.

2.2 Mutual Trade

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s led Central Asian states to declare their independence. This period was also a turning point in the trade relations of the newly independent



republics with the Chinese Communist Party. From 1992 onwards, trade volumes between China and the Central Asian countries, especially the border neighbours Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, increased. Mutual trade, less than half a billion dollars in 1992, exceeded 70 billion dollars in 2022.(41)

According to data from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, in 2013, when the BRI was announced, this figure was around 50.2 billion dollars. The period when mutual trade increased much more than expected was between 2021 and 2022. In 2022, trade volume increased by 40 percent compared to the previous year and exceeded \$70 billion. In the first quarter of this year, the rate of increase was 22 percent compared to the same period of the previous year.(42) China's power in production enables it to hold the upper hand in trade with many countries in the world. However, the natural minerals, agricultural products and energy resources of the Central Asian countries give this region an advantage in the mutual trade balance. While China's share in imports is 50 percent, its share in exports is 42 percent. China exports mostly machinery and electronic products to Central Asian countries.(43)

The volume of trade of Central Asian countries with China has increased significantly. According to statistics published by the Customs Administration of the People's Republic of China, in the first half of 2023, the volume of trade of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan with China increased by 26.8% compared to

the same period of the previous year. Uzbekistan's trade with China rose by 27.6 percent, Turkmenistan's by 12.3 percent, with Tajikistan showing the highest increase with a jump of 84.7 percent. Kazakhstan remained China's largest trading partner, with a trade volume of \$18.25 billion, followed by Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.(44)

The relations with Russia also shape the course of trade relations between Central Asia and China. In recent years, bilateral trade between Russia and China has increased and Central Asian countries have become critical transit corridors. Russia's squeeze in the face of embargoes emanating from Western countries has become even more evident after the Ukraine war. This is because export products from China to Central Asian countries are quickly exported to Russia via the same countries. Russia's influence is undoubtedly important in the sharp increase in foreign trade with China while the economic growth of Central Asian countries is developing at an average rate. The increase in Chinese exports of vehicles and vehicle spare parts also reflects Ukraine's occupation. For example, in the first quarter of 2023, 4,700 heavy-duty trucks were exported from China to Central Asian countries. This figure is three times higher than the previous year. One of the surprising results is that the increase in vehicle spare parts and accessories increased by 520 percent compared to 2021. China has overtaken Japan in car exports due to the



withdrawal of Western car companies from this region after Russia's belligerent policy.(45)

Both China and the countries in the region are increasing the capacity of freight transport to increase mutual trade. For example, according to the memorandum signed between Kyrgyzstan and China, it is aimed to increase the road transport capacity from 20 thousand in 2023 to 60 thousand next year. The Horgos Free Trade and Transit Zone established on the East Turkistan and Kazakhstan border has also been used more intensively since this year. While 8000 thousand tones of cargo covering only 200 products were transported by train from Horgos is the key point of railway freight transport. In 2020, this figure has recently increased to 50 thousand tonnes.(46)

According to the Ministry of National Economy of Kazakhstan, from January to August 2023, the trade volume between Kazakhstan and China increased by 23% to \$19 billion compared to the same period last year (\$15.5 billion). However, this growth was mainly one-sided: Kazakhstan's exports to China reached \$9 billion, an increase of only 2.1% compared to last year. According to the ministry, imports from China to Kazakhstan increased by 49.5% year-on-year to \$10 billion.(47) Uzbekistan's statistical agency released figures for the first three quarters of the year, stating that the

value of bilateral trade during this period increased by 36.2% compared to the same period in 2022, reaching \$9.45 billion. During this period, Uzbekistan's exports to China amounted to \$ 1.85 billion, while imports from China amounted to \$ 7.59 billion(48).

2.3 Popularization of Chinese methods in the field of security

During and after the Soviet Union, the security activities of the Central Asian countries were mostly centered on Russia. In the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it was observed that Russia's influence continued in Central Asian countries. On the other hand, it is obvious that the Chinese Communist Party has made its presence felt more in other countries, especially in Tajikistan, both in military and security terms. The Beijing government is developing its own initiative independently from Moscow. It has established more sophisticated relations, especially in countries such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which are in contact with East Turkistan and where Uyghurs live. Looking at the past periods, after the Central Asian countries gained their independence, the Beijing government focused on whether an independence movement would emerge in East Turkistan, which was occupied by the Chinese Communist Party in 1949.

Figure 9: Chinese security officials show visiting Kyrgyz Interior Ministry representatives unmanned aerial vehicles used by security services in Xinjiang.



Source: mvd.gov.kg

For this reason, special relations have been developed, especially with the rulers of the Central Asian countries bordering East Turkistan. China's involvement in Central Asia's security issues also involves protecting the investments of the Beijing government and regime-affiliated companies. Multilateral and regular dialogues on security issues have been developed between all levels of Central Asia's security

personnel, both within and outside the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Since 2010, the Chinese Communist Party has conducted annual security exercises.(49) As will be seen in some of the details to follow, Central Asian countries have adapted the high-tech surveillance systems used by the Chinese Communist Party in committing genocide in East Turkistan. This brings new human rights violations to the agenda in Central Asian countries.

2.3.1 China's Increasing Military Presence in Central Asia

The Chinese Communist Party has borders with Central Asian countries through East Turkistan, which it occupies. During the Soviet Union period, the Beijing government had a dispute with the Moscow government, especially over the borders to the country's west. For a period of time, the Soviet Union even considered the Chinese Communist Party in the category of enemy states and massed troops in the border regions. When the Soviet Union disintegrated soon after the resolution of the border disputes, the Chinese Communist Party was one of the first administrations to recognize the newly established states for its so-called security. The main purpose here was considered to resolve the border disputes left over from the Soviet Union period as soon as possible(50). However, for the Beijing government, the reflection of the independence movements in Central Asia to East Turkistan



and the end of the occupation of the communist regime are also some of the factors in the immediate recognition of the newly established states.

One of the factors that influenced China to increase its military presence in Central Asia was the period of instability in Afghanistan in the 1990s. The instability there also affected other countries in Central Asia. Based on this situation, the Beijing government took the lead and organized the first meeting of the Shanghai Five in August 1999. The leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan's security forces attended the meeting in Bishkek. During the meeting, it was decided to cooperate among the participating countries' security forces and fight against alleged terrorism and extremism. This meeting also formed the basis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. After Putin came to power in Russia in 2001, relations with China were strengthened. In the same year, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was established with the participation of Uzbekistan. At the SCO meeting on 15 June 2001, a decision was taken to fight against alleged terrorism, separatism and extremism. In the same period, China started to conduct and support military exercises with the Central Asian countries.⁽⁵¹⁾ After the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York in the USA on 11 September 2001, China led the joint action between military and security units both within the framework of the Shanghai Five and independently of it to fight against alleged terrorism. This

is the period when the Chinese People's Liberation Army (CPLA), the army of the Chinese Communist Party, whose name is widely heard in the international arena today, started to show its presence in Central Asia. The CPLA conducts joint exercises with the Central Asian countries and provides various support.(52) This indicates that China is increasing its presence in the region economically, diplomatically, and militarily.

Figure 10: China's and Central Asian Military Cooperation



Source: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Military and security activities between China and Central Asia also occur in different dimensions. In this context, the first issue to be evaluated is multilateral security activities. The decision-making ground for these activities is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The Organization holds regular



summits where the Heads of State and Governments of the member states make decisions. The agreements reached at these summits guide the departments' daily functioning and implementation policies. To support implementation, various governmental security bodies hold regular meetings. In this context, Ministers of Defense and Attorneys General have met annually since 2001; Secretaries of the Security Council have met annually since 2004; Ministers of Interior and Public Security have met annually since 2009; and Commanders of the Armed Forces have met twice yearly since 2011.⁽⁵³⁾ Conversely, the Chinese Communist Party has established a second cooperation ground independent of Russia. This initiative is the China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers Mechanism (C+C5) announced in 2020. Speaking at the launch program of the Mechanism, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi argued that political consensus, the Belt and Road Initiative and the so-called «three evils» are China's core interests across the region.⁽⁵⁴⁾

The reflections of China's perception of East Turkistan as a threat to its hegemony from the past to the present are also seen in the military exercises it has pioneered under the SCO umbrella. The first military exercise between China and the Central Asian states within the scope of the so-called fight against terrorism was held in 2003. The scenario in

this exercise included an attempt by a so-called international terrorist group to hijack a plane and cross into Kazakhstan after carrying out a terrorist attack on a city in East Turkistan. In the following period, military exercises were held every two to three years, and each exercise was conducted with a new scenario. In addition to the participation of all countries, military exercises have also been organized individually by China and the Central Asian states. In these exercises, which have been going on since 2002, all possible scenarios were planned in such a way that the Uyghurs were again terrorized.(55)

In 2013, in addition to large-scale military drills, smaller drills were also launched. In these organizations, under the name of Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), drills were carried out against the so-called terrorist acts that were planned to occur in the border areas of East Turkistan and the countries in the region. On the other hand, joint training of the military units of their countries started in 2014, and drills against cyber security attacks began in 2015. (56) The point that should be emphasized here is that the organization named RATS was also given the authority to carry out missions. The target of these missions is indirectly the Uyghurs. This is because RATS was initially established to create a legal framework for the Shanghai Cooperation



Organization (SCO) member states to ensure cooperation and coordination in combating terrorism, separatism and radicalism. This structure determines whether a person is a suspected member of a recognized international terrorist organization in a SCO member state. If the person is a member of a terrorist organization and the organization is officially recognized in one of the SCO member states, the person can still be detained even by another SCO member state that does not recognize the terrorist organization. Such an arrangement could provide an additional legal basis for the deportation of members of the Uyghur community from Central Asia to the People's Republic of China. Moreover, in October 2004, RATS developed a database of over a thousand members of 36 international «terrorist» groups and their financial sources.(57) Another indication of the Beijing government's security involvement in the region is that Central Asian countries are sending their own security officials to China for training. From 2000 to 2020, approximately 1000 Central Asian security officials were trained by China. These trainings mainly aim to combat alleged terrorism and separatists, cyber security and the protection of oil and gas pipelines.(58)

Figure 11: A joint Chinese-Tajikistan patrol team monitors the border region



Source: Getty Images

The Chinese Communist Party's military presence is most noticeable in Tajikistan. In October 2016, the two countries agreed to build 11 border posts and a border guard training center. As part of these projects, a Chinese outpost was established in the Murghab district of Gorno-Badakhshan. Satellite imagery reveals the presence of a helipad, accommodation for 1,000 people and tank ramps in this area. On the other hand, Tajikistan has agreed with China to build a new military base for Tajik special forces in Gorno-Badakhshan, close to the Wakhan corridor. In 2021, China built an airport near the border with Tajikistan. The alleged justification for the construction of this airport was cited as a plan to modernize tourism infrastructure



in Tibet in occupied East Turkistan.(59)

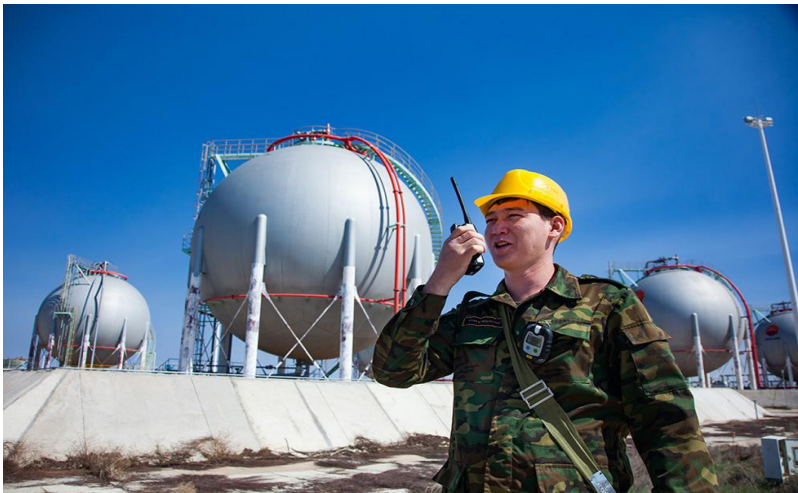
Another aspect of China's pressure on Central Asian countries is the involvement of the Chinese People's Armed Police (PAP) in joint training programs with local security forces in Central Asia. Unlike Russia, China has deepened its relations with security services and police forces in Central Asia. Around 66 percent of Russia's military exercises in Central Asia were conducted by the Ground Forces and Air Force, while the PAP conducted 59 percent of China's exercises. In 2019, China started the 'Cooperation-2019' exercise series, which enables the PAP's Paramilitary Forces (PMF) to cooperate with the police forces of Central Asian countries. Through this series of exercises, China provided counter-terrorism training to local police forces in the PAP, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.(60)

2.3.2 Increase in Chinese private security companies

One indicator of the shift in China's security policies in Central Asia is the increasing use of Private Security Companies (PSCs). Beijing is developing traditional and non-traditional security solutions in critical areas such as industrial zones and infrastructure networks, especially in connection with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. Due to economic dependence and over-indebtedness, the two main candidates for hosting or increasing interaction with Chinese PSCs are

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, but other countries should not be overlooked. The first institution that attracted attention in private security was Bingtuan, one of China's paramilitary organizations. Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), also known as Bingtuan. Bingtuan is in the process of expanding its powers to provide security services to BRI projects. The state-owned China National Electronics Import and Export Corporation (CEIEC) also has a public security agreement with the Kyrgyz government to protect its interests during anti-China protests. China Railway Group, involved in the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project, is working with Zhongjun Junhong Security Company for security services.(61)

Figure 12: China's private security companies employee in the energy field



Source: Oxus Society



It is estimated that between 20 and 40 China-based Private Security Companies (PSCs) operate in around 40 countries worldwide, with more than 7,000 PSCs within China. In light of the growing threats to China's infrastructure and citizens abroad and the Chinese government's hesitancy to send the People's Liberation Army abroad, PMSCs have become an important tool for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to exert influence and power abroad.(62)

More than six China-based Private Security Companies (PSCs) are known to be operating in Central Asia. These companies mostly link their activities to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Zhongjun Junhong, based in Kyrgyzstan, is known as the most influential Chinese PMSC in the region. It is also reported that these security companies work for Chinese citizens and on Chinese-funded projects. Like their Beijing-affiliated counterparts, these companies mainly employ former security personnel with a background in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) or People's Armed Police (PAP). Chinese OSPs in Central Asia tend to cooperate with local OSPs. Local guards are recruited and trained by Chinese security personnel and then sent to projects in China. In Kyrgyzstan, local guards working for Chinese businessmen often receive Chinese language training. In high-risk Chinese projects, Chinese security personnel sometimes work alongside local teams. Some SDSs provide weekly security and political news reports to Chinese businesses in

exchange for subscriptions. Some Beijing-affiliated security companies in Central Asia also provide general risk reports to Chinese businessmen new to the region. These reports cover the domestic political situation, economic risks, military situation, cultural and social threats, and religious trends.(63) Given the relationship of Chinese companies with the Beijing government, the reports to Chinese companies doing business in Central Asia indicate that the people of Central Asia are indirectly under scrutiny.

2.4. China`s transnational repressions

Transnational repression is a broad problem affecting victims worldwide, including in Central Asia. The People`s Republic of China (PRC) is engaged in an international and transnational campaign of repression against diaspora communities and regime opponents living around the world. This campaign targets Uyghurs, Hong Kongers, Tibetans and other groups. The Chinese Communist Party also targets Chinese citizens and non-Chinese living abroad and exercising their human rights. According to a 1997-2020 study, there have been more than 7,000 incidents of transnational repression against Uyghurs abroad. (64) China`s methods of transnational repression include the following:

- Freezing of economic assets

- Passport controls
- Cyber-attacks and malware
- Intimidation and surveillance from embassies and consulates
- Pressure on families
- Spying through informants
- Smear campaigns
- Abuse of Interpol
- Abuse of extradition treaties(65)

Figure 13: China is engaged in an international and transnational campaign of repression against diaspora communities and regime opponents living around the world



Source: Illustration/NPR

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the emergence of new independent states in Central Asia and created a new

situation for the Chinese government regarding Uyghurs living in the diaspora. The approximately 150,000 members of the Uyghur community in this region have become more vocal in a more liberal environment after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This has led Beijing to take tougher measures against the Uyghur opposition.(66) After the September 11 terrorist attacks, the US administration declared a war on terror. The Chinese Communist Party was one of the first countries to embrace this argument. The war on terror argument has also been used against the Muslim Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and other communities in East Turkistan and the Uyghur diaspora representatives in other countries, especially in Central Asia. In 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping decided to escalate this so-called war on terror. 2014 was also the year that concentration camps began to be built in East Turkistan. The method, renamed by Xi Jinping as the 'people's war against terrorism', is reflected in the international repression methods, with hundreds of Uyghurs being forcibly returned to China from their countries of origin. Since 2017, 724 Uyghurs have been deported back to China, some of them from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

China's transnational repression methods are widespread in Central Asian countries, especially in the border neighbors of occupied East Turkistan. The relatives and contacts of



Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and other Turkic communities living in East Turkistan in Central Asia are targeted by the Chinese Communist Party. In recent years, investigations have revealed that China has increasingly intensified transnational repression. During our visit to Kazakhstan as the Uyghur Research Center this year, we had the opportunity to observe this on the spot. According to the information we received from local people, the Uyghur community living in Kazakhstan is deeply concerned about China's transnational repression. The first is the intensified activity of Chinese intelligence services in Kazakhstan. Uyghurs who fled East Turkistan and came to Kazakhstan are being followed by Kazakh local security forces based on information sent by China. Some Uyghurs are also detained and persecuted with the guidance of China. The city of Almaty in Kazakhstan has become a place where Chinese intelligence services operate.

2.5. China's soft power in Central Asia

China's soft power strategy in Central Asia reflects a comprehensive approach that blends economic, cultural, educational and diplomatic tools. Since economic and diplomatic relations are discussed in other chapters, the focus here will be on China's so-called cultural diplomacy initiatives and the steps it has taken towards the education system. There is

no doubt that the Chinese Communist Party has been proactive in promoting its culture and language in Central Asia. The main purpose of this is to create a positive image of China.

2.5.1 Confucius Institutes

The Confucius Institutes are undoubtedly one of the most effective soft power levers of the Beijing government. Confucius Institutes serve as key platforms for projecting China's cultural and linguistic heritage in Central Asia. By offering Mandarin language courses and cultural programs, these institutes play an important role in introducing Central Asian peoples to Chinese culture. These institutes often operate in local universities or academic institutions. This cooperation is not only a cultural exchange but also a form of educational diplomacy. The institutes are a clear manifestation of China's soft power strategy. By promoting language and culture, China aims to build a positive image and influence perceptions in Central Asian societies. This is vital given the strategic importance of the region for China's geopolitical and economic interests. These institutes, spread across the various countries of Central Asia, are also expanding China's educational and cultural sphere of influence.

Figure 14: Students learn Chinese at the Confucius Institute in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan.



Source: Photo by Ren Qin/China Daily

According to sources close to the Beijing government, there are 13 Confucius Institutes in Central Asia. These institutes play an important role in spreading the Chinese language and culture in the region. Currently, there are five Confucius institutes in Kazakhstan, four Confucius institutes in Kyrgyzstan, two Confucius institutes in Uzbekistan and two Confucius institutes in Tajikistan.

In addition to these institutes, there are 24 Confucius Classrooms in the region, with over 18,000 students enrolled in these educational institutions. These institutes and classrooms are part of China's broader efforts to increase its cultural and

educational influence in Central Asia. As a result, Chinese has become the second most widely learned foreign language in Central Asia. This is undoubtedly driven by the need to find jobs in the growing number of Chinese companies in Central Asia.(67)

2.5.2 Student Exchange Programs

Another soft power tool used by the Chinese Communist Party is student exchange programs. Offering scholarships and educational opportunities to Central Asian students is another soft power tool. By educating the next generation of Central Asian leaders and professionals, China aims to create a group of individuals who may have a favourable view of China and its policies.

China's student exchange programs with Central Asian countries include several elements:

Scholarships and Grants: China offers scholarships and grants to Central Asian students, covering tuition fees, accommodation, and sometimes living expenses. These opportunities, provided by both the government and universities, range from language courses to full degree programs.

Cultural Exchange: Programs incorporate cultural elements that give students insight into Chinese culture, history and



society and foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of China.

Language Learning: The main focus is on Mandarin language proficiency, which opens up further educational and professional opportunities for Central Asian students in China and in their home countries.

Strategic Importance: The programs are strategically important for China, helping to create a positive image among Central Asia's younger generation and aligning with China's broader geopolitical and economic interests.

It is not possible to obtain precise information on the number of students from Central Asia participating in student exchange programs in China. The available figures are based on previous years. However, as a reference to China's influence in the region, Beijing-based Xinhua published a news report this year with data from previous years, which provides the following information on this issue. From 2010 to 2018, the number of Central Asian students participating in the student exchange program increased more than 2.5 times. From 11,930 in 2010 to nearly 30,000 by the end of 2018.(68)

2.5.3. Cultural activities - sister cities

Cultural activities are another area where the Beijing government is active in Central Asia. China organizes and sponsors various cultural festivals, exhibitions and events

in Central Asian countries. These events showcase Chinese culture, art and history and promote a positive image of China. Chief among these are the Chinese New Year events. There are also events such as the Chinese Lantern Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival and Winter Solstice. These cultural activities are part of China's soft power strategy, which aims to create a positive image and perception of China.

One of the remarkable activities organized by China within the scope of cultural activities is the sister city protocols. The number of sister cities announced so far is 62. The Beijing government has proposed to organize so-called friendship forums between China and Central Asian countries. Beijing's goal is to increase the number of sister cities to 100 within ten years.⁽⁶⁹⁾ These activities are aimed at supposedly strengthening the bond between China and the peoples of Central Asia. This is because, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, reactions against the Chinese Communist Party are growing. There is widespread opposition among the people of both countries to the dependence of their economies on China and the view that China's so-called investments will capture the future of the country.

2.5.4. China's influence on Central Asian media platforms

China's influence in Central Asian media has been described as a growing and strategic aspect of its soft power and

diplomatic efforts in the region. This multifaceted influence includes direct and indirect approaches to shaping media narratives and perceptions about China. The first method that stands out here is media partnerships and collaborations. China has established partnerships with Central Asian media outlets that provide content, technology, and training. These collaborations usually involve the sharing of news, cultural programs and documentaries that present a positive image of China. On the other hand, Chinese state media such as Xinhua News Agency and CCTV (China Central Television) distribute content in Central Asian countries.

Figure 15: China's ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Du Dewen (second from left), is seen during an August 24 visit to KTRK, the public broadcasting company of Kyrgyzstan.



Source: Radio Free Europe

This content is often available in local languages and focuses on promoting China's perspective on global and regional issues. China is also investing in the media infrastructure of Central Asian countries, including everything from providing equipment to offering financial support. In return for these investments, there is an expectation of a pro-China editorial stance. Journalists and media professionals from Central Asia are often invited to China for training programs and seminars. Another aspect is that China's influence extends to digital media, with Chinese platforms and applications becoming more popular in Central Asia. Given China's strong relations with governments and countries' reliance on Beijing for economic investment, there are concerns about soft censorship, where media outlets in Central Asia may avoid reporting negatively on China in order to maintain good relations and continue to receive economic and media support.



3. The Consequences of China's influence in Central Asia

The People's Republic of China's growing influence in Central Asian countries has a wide range of implications in this geography, from the economy to the environment, from the structure of society to regional power dynamics. In short, the picture that emerges is as follows.

Losing economic supremacy to China and the debt trap: The dominant presence of Chinese companies and their increasing use of Central Asian countries' resources solely for their own benefit is taking a toll on local economies. This raises concerns that China is dominating the economy. Some Central Asian countries face the risk of debt dependency due to large-scale borrowing from China for infrastructure projects. This raises concerns about financial sustainability and sovereignty.

Political, social, cultural and environmental issues: There is growing concern among the people of Central Asia about the erosion of cultural and social structures. The influx of Chinese workers and businesses is causing tensions in local communities. Projects by Chinese-owned companies, especially in mining and construction, are causing land degradation, environmental pollution and thus depletion of natural resources. On the

other hand, China's growing influence can lead to political dependence, where Central Asian governments may feel pressured to accommodate China's foreign policy objectives, potentially at the expense of their own national interests. The elements briefly summarized above will be evaluated in this section.

3.1 China's Debt Trap

Announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was touted to the world as a social development program. However, 10 years later, it is clear that BRI has put many countries in debt. The BRI initiative has put developing countries in debt for projects they cannot afford.

An analysis of a dozen of the countries most indebted to China found that this debt has reduced their capacity to use tax revenues to keep schools open, provide electricity and pay for food and fuel. In countries such as Pakistan, Kenya, Zambia, Laos and Mongolia, this is depleting foreign exchange reserves used for loan interest payments and has left some close to running out of money. In the process, China's reluctance to forgive debt and the extreme secrecy of the terms of its lending have prevented other major lenders from helping. Moreover, the requirement for debtor countries to make mandatory cash deposits into secret escrow accounts gives China priority in the



ranking of creditors to be paid.(70)

China is a major creditor of Central Asian countries. In May 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged \$3.7 billion in loans and grants to five Central Asian neighbors. The China Development Bank has also established a special loan of \$1.45 billion for China - Central Asia cooperation.(71) The loans provided by the Chinese Communist Party are directed towards energy resource development, mining and infrastructure projects in Central Asia. However, it should be emphasized that China did not only provide loans for the realization of the projects. It required the participation of Chinese companies in each project. This is another indication that China is the only winner in BRI projects.

The Beijing government has three main institutions that provide loans to Central Asian countries. These are the People's Bank of China, Export-Import Bank of China and China Development Bank. These institutions provide funds especially to countries with oil and gas resources, such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. If Kazakhstan was unable to repay its loans, it faced the consequences of increasing China's share in the oil industry. During the economic crisis, China provided Kazakhstan with USD 5 billion, most of which was spent on repaying debts for technical equipment previously purchased from China. In Turkmenistan, the inability to repay loans led the country to give China a share of its gas sector(72).

Among the Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are in the worst situation in terms of indebtedness to China. China's loans to the poorer provinces of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan account for more than one-fifth of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP)(73). Unable to renegotiate existing debts or obtain foreign assistance, the capitals of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Dushanbe and Bishkek, may be forced to cede control of critical infrastructure and strategically important companies to Beijing as a last resort. However, project finance experts note that it is very difficult to get infrastructure projects and local companies out of a debtor country once the debts are paid off. Both countries have significant mineral deposits (gold, iron, etc.) and critical water resources, including hydropower, making them strategically important littoral states.(74)

Looking first at the situation in Kyrgyzstan, the country's total debt is reported to be about \$5 billion, of which 40-50 percent belongs to China, primarily the Export-Import Bank. In mid-May, the Information Office of China's State Council announced the construction of a 433-kilometer highway «within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative», which will increase the country's debt.(75) Details of Kyrgyzstan's loan agreements with the Chinese Communist Party gradually began to appear in the media after 2020. According to Kyrgyzstan's debt management strategy for 2022-2024, the maximum debt payment to a creditor should not exceed 45 percent of total debt and the total national debt should not



exceed 70 percent of GDP. As of July 2022, Kyrgyzstan owed China Exim Bank about \$1.7 billion, accounting for 42.9 percent of total external debt. Kyrgyzstan's external debt repayments to China are expected to peak between 2025 and 2027 and decline thereafter. Taking this into account, the country is projected to repay all its debts to China by 2035. In this process, the government started to take various measures to rebalance the state budget, which had decreased due to debt payments.(76) One of the most important projects in Kyrgyzstan's economy is the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway. The discussions about the project lasted for years and finally the decision was taken to start it. However, it is not yet clear how the project will be financed. While Kyrgyzstan faces an increasing debt burden in the coming years, the railroad cost, estimated at 4-5 billion dollars, constitutes one of the biggest challenges in the project. The fact that Kyrgyzstan is seeking new loans for the railway despite its outstanding debts to Beijing has created a dilemma. This has the consequence that large segments of the population face low incomes, new tax burdens and growing social inequality, while widespread corruption among government officials is financed by Chinese loans.(77)

One of the remarkable statements of Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov concerns the risks Kyrgyzstan faces. In March 2021, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov stated that if Kyrgyzstan fails to repay its foreign debt to China, some of the country's key

facilities could fall under Chinese control. Among the facilities that could be affected are the Bishkek Thermal Power Plant, the largest power plant in Bishkek, the Datka-Kemin power transmission line and the road connecting the north and south of the republic.(78)

The situation is somewhat different in Tajikistan, where in recent years some Chinese have claimed that their territory belongs to China. In 2011, it gave the Badakhshan region, rich in natural resources, to China in exchange for large loans. Looking at the data for 2022, Tajikistan has \$3.3 billion, of which \$1.98 billion was drawn from China's Eximbank. Most of Tajikistan's gold mines (84%) are operated by Tajik-Chinese joint ventures.(79) Tajik leader Emomali Rahmon, who has been in power for 29 years, and Xi Jinping, the head of the Chinese Communist Party, cooperate closely in the repression of the Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking Muslim ethnic group spread across Central Asia. If the capitals of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Dushanbe and Bishkek, are unable to renegotiate the debts they have already incurred or receive foreign aid, the last resort would be to give Beijing control of critical infrastructure and strategically vital companies as a collateral payment. However, project finance experts note that it is virtually impossible to remove infrastructure projects and local companies from a debtor country in the event of a payment.(80)



It is a fact that the Chinese Communist Party uses the BRI project to expand its economic dominance, while also paving the way for corruption. While the Beijing government remains the largest investor in Central Asia, it is also questioned how successful these investments are. According to experts who have conducted research on this issue, part of the money committed during the implementation of projects is lost due to corruption and administrative dysfunction, projects are not subjected to higher sustainability standards and are evaluated primarily according to their profitability. One of the most striking examples is that former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Rezzak, one of the biggest advocates of BRI projects, was convicted on the grounds of corruption. A similar phenomenon is also seen in other regions, especially in Central Asia.

Because, China has also made economic integration efforts that feed the local appetite for rent-seeking, discouraging region-wide reform commitments and development aid from the international community depending on the reforms. In Kyrgyzstan alone, between 2014 and 2019, there were five major corruption scandals involving a Chinese company and elite local politicians, including two former prime ministers and two former mayors of major cities.⁽⁸¹⁾ The low level of regulation and oversight in the countries of the region has allowed the spread of problems that can be described as ‘crony capitalism’ of the BRI in Central Asia. The construction projects brought to the agenda in the BRI have also enabled local and

regional elites to increase their power. It is noteworthy that a former Kyrgyz employee of a gold mining company stated that «you can only find a job through corruption or relatives.» Considering these and similar examples, the investments made by the Chinese government, especially through the BRI, have further strengthened the existing local corruption in Central Asia.(82)

Consequently, if there is a precedent in Central Asia, particularly the transfer of strategic assets such as roads and vital infrastructure projects to China in exchange for loans, this could jeopardize regional connectivity and cooperation.

3.2 Central Asia`s Increasing Dependence on China

Central Asian countries` dependence on China is multifaceted, encompassing economic, political and strategic aspects. While it offers significant opportunities for development and growth, it also poses challenges related to maintaining sovereignty, managing debt, and balancing regional and global relations. These are briefly discussed below.

Economic leverage and political incentives: The picture that emerged especially after the BRI shows that Central Asian countries` greatest dependence on China is economic. Central Asian countries` trade with China is the most important



indicator of their dependence. China accounts for around 22% of Central Asia's exports and 37% of its imports.(83) In 2022, the volume of trade between Central Asian countries and China reached record levels compared to previous years. For example, Uzbekistan's trade volume with China increased from \$7.4 billion in 2021 to \$8.15 billion in 2022.

Turkmenistan has also become more economically dependent on China, with its trade volume with China increasing from \$6.84 billion in 2021 to \$11.18 billion in 2022. Kazakhstan experienced a similar increase. From \$22.9 billion in 2021 to \$31 billion in 2022. (84) On the other hand, with the BRI, many infrastructure projects in Central Asian countries, from highways to energy pipelines, are being carried out by Chinese companies and funded by Beijing-affiliated financial institutions. This means that these countries are becoming more financially dependent on China.

Central Asian countries' economic dependence on China, especially for trade and investment, can lead to political alignment with the Beijing government. Relying heavily on Chinese investments and loans, these countries feel obliged to align their political stances with China's interests in order to maintain positive economic ties. This dependence limits their autonomy to make independent foreign policy decisions. These countries, which have historically advocated independence in their relations with great powers, are now beginning to risk

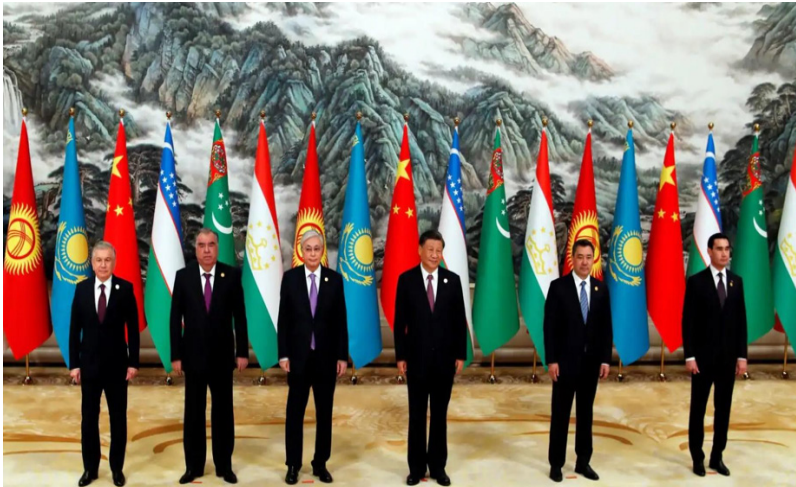
their autonomy due to their dependence on China. On the other hand, this change is also causing reactions among the societies in Central Asia. As a result of these reactions, demonstrations were organized both in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

The Attractiveness of the Non-Interference Policy: China's so-called policy of non-interference in internal affairs is particularly attractive to Central Asian governments that are economically dependent on China. These governments prefer Chinese investments. This is because these investments often take place without the political and human rights conditions attached to Western aid and investment. This approach strengthens China's political influence as it becomes a preferred partner vis-à-vis more critical Western countries.

Use of Regional Organizations: In economically dependent Central Asian countries, China's role in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is becoming more important. These platforms allow China to expand its influence by offering economic incentives and cooperation in exchange for political and strategic alignment. In another step outside the SCO, the Beijing government has laid the foundation for a separate cooperation organization with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In May 2023, high-level delegates from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan met in Xi'an with Chinese leader Xi Jinping at

the C+C5 forum, which aims to strengthen China's regional alliances. This forum is part of China's initiative to promote a shared future with Central Asia to deal with growing global divisions.

Figure 16: Chinese President Xi Jinping (centre) and the Central Asian presidents in Xi'an



Source: Reuters

China is active in strengthening economic partnerships through new industrial programs and investment opportunities. The establishment of the C+C5 secretariat represents a significant shift from China's previous bilateral approach and more closely aligns Central Asia's aspirations with China's interests.⁽⁸⁵⁾ These developments also affect how Central Asian countries balance their relations with other powers such

as Russia and the United States. While they seek to maintain a degree of independence, their heavy dependence on China's economic support could tip the balance in China's favor, potentially leading to a realignment of regional dynamics.

Risk of Economic Dominance and Political Influence: China's economic dominance in Central Asia risks turning into political influence. Here, dependence on Chinese financing and investment can lead to a situation where Central Asian countries must closely align their policies with Beijing. This raises concerns about sovereignty and the ability of these nations to pursue policies that conflict with Chinese interests. China's political influence is evident as Central Asian governments adopt authoritarian governance practices reminiscent of the Chinese model. In addition, China's economic strategies are perceived to encourage local corruption and hinder the adoption of reforms dependent on international assistance. China's dominance in trade and investment is also seen in its efforts to block investments in the Central Corridor, such as alternative trade routes that could provide Central Asia with more direct links to Europe. Chinese involvement in technology and education is extensive, outpacing European efforts and strengthening its presence in the region. On the other hand, growing Chinese influence poses a challenge for Central Asian countries seeking to preserve their sovereignty and room for maneuver.(86)



Soft Power as an Instrument of Influence: China's soft power strategy of cultural exchanges and educational initiatives is becoming more effective in economically dependent countries. As these countries increasingly interact economically with China, they become more open to Chinese cultural influences, which can subtly shift public and political perceptions in China's favor.

In sum, Central Asian countries' dependence on China is multifaceted, encompassing economic, political and strategic aspects. While it offers significant opportunities for development and growth, it also poses challenges related to maintaining sovereignty, managing debt, and balancing regional and global relations.

3.3 Human rights violations

Although Central Asian countries have ratified the core instruments of international human rights law, implementation is still lacking. Significant steps need to be taken, particularly in the areas of press freedom, rule of law, judicial independence, anti-corruption. While the constitutions of these states emphasize the democratic character of their political regimes, regional politicians often claim that democratic practices are «unique» to the region. Western criticism of certain human rights violations is also based on arguments that they can be justified by the cultural characteristics of the

region. However, such incidents can be seen as indicative of democratic deficiencies in the region.(87) Today, there are serious human rights problems in Central Asia, including the killing of civilians by security forces, the detention of human rights defenders and journalists, restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, and violations of the rights of women and minority groups.

Figure 17: Anti-government protests in Kazakhstan against Chinese economic expansion



Source: Ruslan Pryanikov/AFP/Getty Images

Today, the Chinese Communist Party is seen as a threat to human rights around the world, from Asia to Europe. At the United Nations, Chinese officials seek to rewrite norms and manipulate existing procedures not only to minimize scrutiny



on the Chinese government's behavior, but also to achieve the same for all governments, according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). The BRI and the Chinese-affiliated institutions that support it have become Beijing's tools to change norms, which are of great interest to Central Asian countries and will supposedly lead to social development. Chinese authorities are now extending local censorship to business communities, from academia to diaspora communities and global enterprises.(88)

The Chinese Communist Party, particularly under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, has not only sought to neutralize United Nations human rights mechanisms' investigations into China, but also to undermine their capacity to hold any government accountable for serious human rights violations.(89) While the surveillance and harassment of diaspora communities by the Beijing government is nothing new, it appears that holding a foreign passport does not fully guarantee the right to freedom of expression. It is also true that leaving China has become more difficult; in recent years, Beijing has made it more difficult for people to leave China by revoking or confiscating the passports of some communities, increasing border security to prevent Tibetans and Uighur Muslims from fleeing the country, and pressuring other countries to do the same.(90)

Surveillance systems based on advanced technology are undoubtedly one of the most important factors showing the

impact of the Chinese Communist Party on human rights violations in Central Asia. Similar surveillance systems, which were piloted in East Turkistan and turned into a tool of genocide, are becoming widespread in Central Asian countries. The cooperation on surveillance systems has become concrete especially with the Digital Silk Road established in 2015. The Digital Silk Road is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which provides technological and financial support to China's communications infrastructure and technologies, and to the development of artificial intelligence and intelligence capabilities. China's technology has played an important role in enhancing surveillance capacities, including «Safe City projects» in Central Asian countries that monitor citizens' activities using tools such as facial recognition cameras, data management systems and control centers.

In Kazakhstan, President Tokayev praised the facial recognition system integrated into cameras in the cities of Almaty and Shymkent, but was criticized by the US for its role in supporting the repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. This shows that Chinese technology is being used as an effective tool to strengthen surveillance and control mechanisms in Central Asia.⁽⁹¹⁾ According to one study, three Central Asian countries - Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan - have become heavily dependent on foreign companies, mostly of Chinese origin, such as Huawei, China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC, a state-

owned company) and IZP Group, for telecommunications and surveillance technologies. In Tajikistan in particular, Huawei provides 90% of the country's telecommunications hardware, installed hundreds of CCTV cameras in Dushanbe in 2013 and updated these systems with facial recognition technology in 2019. These technologies are planned to be rolled out across the country.

Figure 18: A Chinese-made outdoor surveillance camera can be seen June 5 in Bishkek - an example of security assistance provided by Beijing to Kyrgyzstan



Source: Central Asia News – Photo: Kanat Altynbayev

Uzbekistan is building a large - scale surveillance network in cooperation with Chinese companies such as

Huawei, CITIC, Costar and HikVision as part of the Safe City project launched in Tashkent. Turkmenistan has less active cooperation with China in telecommunications and AI technologies, although some local companies, such as Dogrulyk HJ, are using Chinese technology for their own safe city solutions.(92)

The rulers of Central Asian countries under the guidance of the Beijing government do not allow criticism of China under their rule. Authoritarian governments, who think that criticism and demonstrations against China will affect economic and diplomatic relations, punish those who participate in demonstrations. On the other hand, in Central Asian countries, opposing the Uyghur Genocide in East Turkistan is also considered a crime. The arrest and attempted imprisonment of Serizhan Bilash, the founder of Atajurt Eriktleri (Motherland Volunteers) is one of the most striking examples of this.(93) The people of East Turkistan, where a large number of Uyghurs live and many of them have relatives tortured in concentration camps or Chinese prisons, are under great pressure in Central Asian countries. In particular, they are monitored by advanced surveillance technologies exported by China. On the other hand, there is no way for them to make their voices heard before governments and in the press.

Figure 19: Protest during a demonstration against China's brutal crackdown on Uyghurs, in front of the Chinese Consulate in Istanbul, Turkey



Source: VOA

One of the most important methods of repression established by the Chinese Communist Party in Central Asia is the deportation of human rights activists. The Beijing government justifies its right to do so on the basis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, of which it is a founding member. This is because the agreements signed in the SCO allow a member state to extradite a so-called terrorist to his or her country of origin.⁽⁹⁴⁾ For example, in 2015, the Tajik parliament ratified the Tajik - Chinese agreement on the mutual extradition of suspected and convicted criminals. In 2021, lawyers belonging to Uyghur groups brought to the

International Criminal Court allegations that Tajik political authorities had cooperated with Beijing to extradite Uyghurs to China and that Dushanbe had played a role in facilitating the extraordinary rendition of Uyghurs from Turkey.(95)

In the current Central Asian political environment, efforts to promote democracy and human rights face major challenges, with or without Chinese influence. Central Asian leaders are increasingly distancing themselves from Western democracy promotion initiatives, perceiving them as interference and economic aid in exchange for democratic reforms and human rights improvements. In addition, Western donors do not invest as much as China or Russia and therefore cannot compete on the same level with these countries. In addition, Central Asian political elites view China's alternative model of democracy and the ways in which it is promoted favorably for their own purposes. This is supported by their policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries and their emphasis on a «win-win» solution under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).(96)

3.4. Support for Authoritarian Governments

On May 17 — 19, 2023, the Chinese city of Xi'an hosted for the second time the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, as well as the People's Republic of China. Until 2021, these meetings were



held at the level of foreign ministers, but it was agreed that heads of state would now meet regularly every two years. This summit also once again demonstrated China's influence over Central Asian governments to the international community. Both diplomatic and economic relations were discussed at the summit. Based on this summit, this section will discuss China's support for authoritarian governments in Central Asia.

As closely followed by the international public opinion, the Chinese Communist Party has accused those who recognize the Uyghur Genocide in East Turkistan or states that speak out about the Uyghur Genocide of interfering in their internal affairs. It explains this argument with the principle of 'non-interference in internal affairs'. However, these analyses to date have revealed that China's principle of non-interference in internal affairs actually means supporting authoritarian regimes all over the world, especially in Central Asian countries. This perspective, which ignores universal international rules, also applies to the relations between China and Central Asia.

China cooperates with Central Asian countries in the field of security, especially within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This cooperation includes military exercises, intelligence sharing and counterterrorism efforts. Such cooperation strengthens the security apparatus of authoritarian regimes in the region. On the other hand, China is a major exporter of surveillance technology, including

facial recognition systems and internet monitoring tools. Some Central Asian authoritarian governments use these technologies to strengthen their control over their populations, suppress dissent and monitor dissent. Kyrgyzstan, for example, is leading the way in its relations with China, given its media influence, high-level political ties, and the aggregate amount of physical presence of Chinese private security companies and businesses. Some observers describe the country as a testing ground for the further use of Chinese influence techniques in the region.

An important point to emphasize here is the following. China's surveillance technology exports are seen as having the potential for Beijing to exert control over the population in Central Asia. According to Article 11 of China's National Security Law, all Chinese companies must provide any information requested by the Chinese government, including user data and security systems, if necessary. Chinese companies working in Central Asia are also subject to this obligation. There is growing concern about the loss of data sovereignty and the protection of personal data privacy due to the weakness of laws in the region. Despite several data breach scandals in Kyrgyzstan, there is limited public information about the use of Chinese IT technologies.(97)

The influence of the Chinese Communist Party's political approaches is also visible in Central Asia. In order to minimize



uncertainties and increase its influence on Central Asian states with similar political systems, Beijing has planned to align with their governance and foreign relations policies. China has only one goal, the protection of its economic interests and investments, which it has taken to a new dimension with the BRI. To this end, Beijing supports authoritarian political regimes in Central Asia to oppose Western-promoted efforts towards democratization and universal human rights in the region. This policy is concretely manifested in Chinese rhetoric in support of Central Asian policies that restrict political rights and stifle opposition activism, and the export of technology that allows governments to monitor the population. This leads to the restriction of political rights, including anti-China activism.(98)

With regard to security, Beijing's main focus is on preventing democratization processes in the region. Opposing the popular movements that attracted the attention of the world public opinion with the Arab Spring, the Beijing government has proposed to cooperate more closely against these events, which it does not recognize as 'color revolutions'. This is also seen as a message to the West. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is worried about both the destabilization of the region and its becoming a source of negative inspiration for Chinese society.(99) Therefore, it exports the security systems it has established in East Turkistan to authoritarian regimes in Central Asia. The result of this technological system export is the strengthening of authoritarian systems in the Central Asian states and the spread of the repressive perspective to all levels

of the state.

Due to Chinese training programs for security officials, Central Asian officials are fed with a positive Chinese perception of security management, which increases cooperation between the two sides. The observations of a Central Asian intern express admiration for China's rapid urban development and security measures and support for China's position on the Uyghur situation. China's governance model emphasizes a prominent role for the state in all aspects of life. The Chinese Communist Party believes that promising its citizens a better life requires the sacrifice of political freedoms. Propaganda can impede the right to information, and security agencies can restrict the freedom of expression and movement of those who question the Party's legitimacy. Digital surveillance inside the country is used to consolidate authority and spread Party ideologies. This plays an important role in Central Asian countries' relations with China and can have an impact on their governance in the region.(100)

As a result, authoritarian governments in Central Asia continue to follow China's repressive style of governance, which they see as supposedly successful. Governments that crack down on civil society, detain or deport journalists, and arrest protest leaders before or after demonstrations continue to receive international support from China. This support helps Central Asian leaders to counter criticism from the international community, especially against human rights violations.



Conclusion

This report reveals a multifaceted and deeply impactful narrative of China's infiltration into Central Asia. Through a combination of diplomatic initiatives, economic investments, and security alliances, China has successfully expanded its influence in this strategically important region. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Belt and Road Initiative have emerged as critical instruments in this expansion, facilitating infrastructure development, trade, and regional cooperation. However, this growing influence has not been without its challenges and controversies.

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China's deepening infiltration into Central Asia and its growing presence in the region have caused a series of acute adverse effects. Central Asian countries are increasingly falling into China's debt trap and losing their sovereignty. Corruption among government officials is rampant as Chinese capital flows in. The region's democratization process has been set back by the CCP's support for authoritarian regimes. The human rights situation is also deteriorating. Transnational repression of Uyghurs and Kazakhs fleeing East Turkistan is happening across the region. These are some of the negative consequences of China's infiltration into Central Asia.



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