

## Turkey vis-à-vis Central Asia: a geostrategic assessment

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**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to contribute to increase knowledge about a remote region of the world, but of utmost importance in the geopolitical context of today - Central Asia - as a result of its strategic position as a link between East and West, a space of competition and reinforcement of the great powers. Besides, the region has been, in recent years, attracting the attention of foreign investors due to the existence of large reserves of oil and gas. The central argument is that Turkey demonstrates a predominantly economic interest (the search for energy resources) towards the region, pursuing fundamentally realistic-driven policies with regard to it. Alternatively to the participant and non-participant observation, difficult techniques to apply to this object of study, we resorted to the semi structured interview. The field research was done through interviews conducted predominantly in Central Asia to key individuals related to the issues studied. Convinced that the behavior of the states, the power or influence are not likely to translate into tangible realities, mathematical formulas, or mere statistics, we assume that the use of the qualitative method, through the hermeneutic analysis, is the methodology supporting this investigation. We suggest that Turkey inspires itself on the Chinese policy towards Central Asia, which has shown remarkable vigour in recent years, and try to figure out how it can profit from an Ankara-Tehran-Central Asia-Beijing axis, in the context of the Chinese New Silk Road, in order to project its power in the regional sphere and boost (even more) its economy.*

**Keywords:** Central Asia; Turkey; Geostrategy; Realism

**Acknowledgements:** *It is scarce the space to convey the depth of my gratitude to all those who directly or indirectly contributed to the preparation and accomplishment of the two research trips to Central Asia. From the administrative staff, to the translators, teachers, diplomats, entrepreneurs and leaders, the list is extensive. However, a special thank you to Dr. João Soares and to the Aga Khan Network.*

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## Introduction

Several geopolitical doctrines highlight the prominence of Central Asia within the framework of the world economy and geostrategy. Some authors, like H. Mackinder<sup>1</sup> or Z. Brzezinski<sup>2</sup>, stressed the importance of the '*Heartland*' (the Eurasian Balkans), as 'the world axis' and geopolitical space that gives puissance and influence to the power that appropriates it.

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In recent years, mainly due to the discovery of great energy reserves in the region and to the developments related to world and regional security, several lines of thought have reinforced the assumptions of Mackinder and Brzezinski. The debate about the security concept, which emerged in the post-Cold War, conveyed other dimensions – surpassing the State-centric and anarchic vision of the international system (advocated by authors like Morgenthau<sup>3</sup>) – to the idea of security. Effectively, the realist theory, for which the security was inseparably linked to the possession and use of military capabilities, to the power and interests of the State actors, relents progressively. Studies on security, in the 90s, turned it into a global concept. Barry Buzan stood out in that theory which claimed a wider dimension to the concept of security. This would be composed, henceforth, by a military, political, economic (including energy security) and environmental strand.<sup>4</sup> The way for the securitization of the energetic phenomenon was open. For experts like Daniel Yergin, to speak on energy security implied to ensure a stable energy supply, at reasonable prices.<sup>5</sup> Other definitions of the concept would be elaborated subsequently, reflecting both the evolution of the various theoretical concepts, and the interests of energy producers and consumers. Despite the multiple interpretations of the concept by the various theoretical currents, they all converge on the fundamental assumption that a country must have access to its energy resources on a permanent basis, running a minimal risk that they run out. Well, going through the existing literature, we realize that Central Asia is an important alternative in Russian or European energy diversification.

Several authors argue that Central Asia's energy wealth has transformed the region into an intersection of tension between States, of competition between companies and regional actors.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the great powers and multinational companies want to be present in this race to energy. The access to oil reserves, the route of pipelines and the debate about who should build them are in the premises of what some experts call 'New Great Game', or rather, the 'return of the Great Game'.<sup>7</sup> This also includes a logic of defense and military security, and not just of energy competition, reinforcing the importance of Central Asia for regional and extra-regional powers.

A brief reflection about realism. Realism can be conceived as the political theory of economic nationalism: the central idea is that governmental economic activities must remain subordinate to the State building goal. Based on such principles, the realist paradigm dominated, considerably, the debates and the research on International Relations, during the post-War, in the USA and in Europe. In the realist perspective, the international society is, fundamentally, in a "state of anarchy" hobbesian, encouraged by the "search for power".<sup>8</sup> In fact, as Victor Marques dos Santos recalls, "political realism characterizes an international society essentially anarchic, in which the actors exist through the possible management of an inevitable 'state of nature'".<sup>9</sup> According to Stephen Blank, "the actors operate according to the old principles of realism and of *realpolitik*".<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, many of the measures they take, and which aim to increase their political influence, are inscribed in the logic of the market economy. The realist and neorealist schools admit, therefore, that "the survival of the national State is the ultimate purpose of governance developed by the unit of power". [...] "All policies are defined as a 'struggle for power'".<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the power "is conceptualized as a means and an end in itself, and its general meaning is that of the ability to influence or change the behavior of others in a desired direction, or alternatively, the ability to resist such influences on their own behaviors".<sup>12</sup>

After the introduction of the realist postulates, as well as the geopolitical importance of Central Asia, we will develop our central argument, i.e. that Turkey demonstrates a fundamentally economic interest (the pursuit of energy resources) in the region, following policies that are predominantly realist compared to this one. Instead of participant and non-participant observation

techniques, difficult to apply to this object of study, we resorted to semi-structured interviews. The field research was done through interviews conducted not only in Portugal, but also, and predominantly, in Central Asia to key individuals related to the issues studied. Within the framework of the research underlying the present article, two journeys were carried out to Central Asia, one from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2011, to Kazakhstan, at the invitation of the Director of the Suleimenov Institute, in Almaty; and the second journey from 28<sup>th</sup> September to 18<sup>th</sup> October, 2012, to two other countries, besides Kazakhstan: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. We opted for using experts from non-governmental organizations working on the field, as well as the staff of embassies in Central Asian republics, among others. In other cases, the interviewees were from the Central Asian republic in question. Some interviewees in Central Asia have requested anonymity or, in some cases, asked to be referred to as local experts (who are connected to American diplomacy in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

Convinced that the behaviour of the states, the power or influence are not likely to translate into tangible realities, mathematical formulas, or mere statistics, we assume, from this point, that the use of the qualitative method, through the hermeneutic analysis, is, certainly, the methodology supporting the present investigation. In this sense, it is imperative to penetrate the sphere of subjectivity, i.e. the understanding of causality inherent in the action of the various actors, that reaches us through the analysis of a whole panoply of scientific articles, monographs, theses, among other available sources regarding the subject of this study, in order to try to understand what drives Turkey to act in this or that way. By questioning the understanding of the sense of the facts and of causality that moves Ankara in the Central Asian sphere, qualitative analysis approaches, particularly, the scope of hermeneutics, of understanding, of which Dilthey tell us about on the famous maxim: "We explain nature, and we understand spirit".<sup>13</sup>

As a final recommendation, we suggest that Turkey inspires itself on the Chinese policy towards Central Asia, which has shown remarkable vigour in recent years, and try to figure out how it can profit from an Ankara-Tehran-Central Asia-Beijing axis, in the context of the Chinese New Silk Road, in order to project its power in the regional sphere and boost (even more) its economy.

Some brief words about the difficulties of this research. The planning of the two journeys to Central Asia involved a thorough and time-consuming research on universities, experts, diplomats, professors, Non-Governmental Organizations, having the Aga Khan Network, among many other actors, provided considerable support. To the difficulties inherent in the selection and previous contact with entities and local experts, we have to add the language barrier, the obtaining of visas and the absence of the Embassy of Portugal in each of the Central Asian Republics, always having to resort to embassies in third countries), to deal with all the bureaucracy characteristic of countries such as Kazakhstan, which requires letters of invitation, among other procedures. Another difficulty concerns the authoritarian nature of the Central Asian Republics, which makes that the displacement of an investigator to these countries raises possible suspicions by the local authorities, which often refuse to issue visas for stays. Although we have not experienced problems in this respect in the countries we have visited (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), Uzbekistan's case is flagrant.

An investigator comes across, therefore, several risks in this kind of countries (since the regime is virtually omnipresent in the lives of citizens and institutions), being that he has to invest, consequently, a considerable time in the preparation of his journeys to avoid, or at least, to reduce the possibility that something goes less well (but, to mention another example, we couldn't avoid being retained, at about 5,000 meters above sea level, by the border guards in Tajikistan who, by preventing us from entering their country, made us think, even if indirectly, of a 'plan B', which consisted of traveling to the opposite end of the Kyrgyzstan to try to cross the border into Tajikistan (this time, successfully).

## Central Asia

### *Characterizing the region*

Under the new energy atlas, Central Asia is located in a strategic region, with strong ties to neighboring regions. Its development depends, firstly, from the access to the rest of the world. Central Asia is an important part of world's political and economic system, being "surrounded by some of the most dynamic economies in the world, among three of the so-called BRICS countries (Russia, India and China)".<sup>14</sup> As Armando Marques Guedes<sup>15</sup> stresses, "Central Asia is, somehow, a strategic zone", which has been "regaining undoubtedly a structural cyclical extraordinary importance". According to this expert, "if there were three major brands of the century, conflicts that had positive impact on the reconstruction and creation of a new international order, these were Afghanistan, Iraq and the invasion of Georgia by the Russian Federation".<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, "these three conflicts occurred in Central Asia".<sup>17</sup> And it is true that, if there is "a conflict that humanity currently fears", this involves Iran, which is no more than "a southern extension of Central Asia".<sup>18</sup> For centuries, Central Asia has been the crossroads of Eurasia, or, as Jack Caravelli<sup>19</sup> notes, "the intersection between East and West", which makes it an "interesting" region. Effectively, it is the point of confluence of four civilizations that have both controlled and been controlled by Central Asian people.

Central Asia is one of the pivot regions of the world. It is located in the nucleus of the Eurasian continental space and is a crucial link between several robust and dynamic economies, such as China, European Union, India, Japan and Russia. According to Khwaja, "Central Asia owes its importance to the vast economic potential and geostrategic location of which it is endowed, becoming progressively in a world economic center".<sup>20</sup> The Central Asian Republics, with their considerable energy and human potential are confronted simultaneously with "a challenge and an opportunity", insofar as "the Eurasian economic space is an active part of a new phase of global integration".<sup>21</sup> In fact, Central Asia is "the region where the effects of geopolitics and competition between the great powers has been more felt compared to any other part of the world".<sup>22</sup> Indeed, "ethnic and religious conflicts, energy competition, the strategic positioning of the various actors and the political unrest in the region, have proved a recurring feature in Central Asian regional context".<sup>23</sup>

The economic structure of Central Asia, as well as its political characteristics are strongly marked by its geographic location, more precisely, by "the difficult access to other parts of the world".<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, "the survival of the Central Asian Republics essentially depends on the maintenance of several corridors and links".<sup>25</sup> In fact, these corridors are as, or more, important than the energy potential of the region, in that they expand in all directions, connecting China, Russia, Europe, the Caucasus region, and the Indian Ocean.

From a political point of view, as Doris Bradbury<sup>26</sup> notes, "Central Asia is a more stable region than Afghanistan, Iran, the Middle East, in general". As Zhao Huasheng indicates, it "forms a buffer zone between the great powers, although Russia has special relations with the countries of the region".<sup>27</sup> Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the competition between the great powers around energy resources has intensified, contributing to a rapid rise in energy prices, and also to new outlines in terms of energy security. In this context, and as a result of its energy reserves, "Central Asia has proved to be an area of competition and rivalry between the great powers" (regional and extra-regional), which affects the relationship between these, as well as the balance power, influencing thus the "international framework" that emerged in the "post-Cold War".<sup>28</sup>

### *The geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the region*

Several authors do not hesitate to assign to Central Asia a 'prominent position in the context of a new world order'.<sup>29</sup> If we look at the history of oil, "the general ambition, since the 70s, since the

big oil shocks [by the various consumer countries], has been to rely less on the Persian Gulf, as it is a highly volatile area".<sup>30</sup> In fact, "much of the remaining oil reserves in the world, are located in unstable countries in the Middle East, and far from areas of consumption, "which raises "concerns about the security of oil supplies".<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, one should note that "the ambition to discover 'other Persian Gulf' never happened and it will probably will never", since "hardly, other regions of the world will have the same capacity of reserves as the Middle East".<sup>32</sup> However, "in the current highly competitive world, at the energy resources level, Central Asia and, particularly, the Caspian region, are of crucial strategic importance in the world market", if one wants to "attempt to diversify energy sources".<sup>33</sup>

When we recall our recent history, it is clear that the "North Sea or West Africa", regions that ultimately serve as a "counterweight to the dominance of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East in world's oil production", had been they, too, object of interest on the part of the consuming powers.<sup>34</sup> However, if "the energy resources of the North Sea" proved "an attractive option in the period that followed the oil shocks", nowadays it is essential to find other alternatives capable of replacing a production that has been falling, "particularly in the UK and Norway".<sup>35</sup> With regard to the North Sea, for example, "production declined from 6.4 mbd in 2000 to less than 2.1 mbd<sup>36</sup> in 2005".<sup>37</sup> Given this scenario, Central Asia has, therefore, a very important role in the diversification of energy sources.

According to Guedes, "it is not obvious that Central Asia is an area (within the meaning assigned by the International Relations to the concept of *region*)", provided with "an internal cohesion and distinguished from the other areas" which allows us to call it a "region".<sup>38</sup> This is due to the fact that "a large part of the regionality of Central Asia has fluid borders and often negatively defined".<sup>39</sup> Central Asia is, to this author, "a region of variable geometry, situated between Russia, India, China, the Islamic world and the West", which corresponds, in a way, to the "old Silk Road".<sup>40</sup> I.e. Central Asia is not, from the analytical point of view, more than a "label", it "is not a concept".<sup>41</sup>

According to the Consul Fernando Antunes, there are three fundamental reasons that explain "the importance of Central Asia to the great powers".<sup>42</sup> Firstly, "[the area] has energy resources in relevant amounts in both oil and gas".<sup>43</sup> In this respect, Zehra Akbar states that "regional and transregional states are well aware of the importance of the energy potential of Central Asia".<sup>44</sup> The region is, in fact, about to become "a major global supplier of energy" in particular" in the sectors of oil and gas".<sup>45</sup> Returning to Antunes, the second reason for the importance of the region to the major powers, is due to the fact that their neighbors, "namely China, Russia, the Caucasus and Europe" encounter "transportation problems", likely to be mitigated by "the countries of Central Asia".<sup>46</sup> Finally, the region is significant, since it is composed of countries which have gained independence about 20 years ago, "have a very significant potential of economic growth".<sup>47</sup> With a population of 92 million people and abundant energy resources, Central Asia is an attractive destination for investment and trade.<sup>48</sup> As an example, from 2000 to 2009, the flows of direct investment in the region increased nine times, while its gross domestic product grew on average 8.2 per cent per year.<sup>49</sup> In fact, as a result of the growth of Central Asian markets, the strengthening of the potential for trade in agricultural products, and the existence of a service sector favorable to exploration, the Central Asian Republics can be vital trade links between Europe and Asia.

### Turkey's goals in Central Asia

Until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey had no 'strategy' towards Central Asia, due to its security policies which had formerly been limited by the imperatives of the Cold War era. In turn, "Turkish public opinion seemed to be much more sensitive to the Turkish communities in Central Asia, which are often perceived as the "Turkish nation".<sup>50</sup> However, post-1991, "the public opinion and the Turkish policy makers saw the development of a greater interest in the region".<sup>51</sup>

Henderson and Weaver report that "Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the Republics of Central Asia, immediately after their independence in the early 90s".<sup>52</sup> The emergence of 'brother states', sometimes referred to as 'Turkic Republics', generated a burst of enthusiasm in almost all political wards in Turkey. William Hale observes, in turn, that "the idea of a Turkic world, from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China", became a "new subject of discussion in the Turkish political circles and in the media".<sup>53</sup>

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Turkey aspires to become "the new energy center in the region", a key state in the transit of oil and gas, "connecting Europe, the Caspian region, the Middle East and the Mediterranean".<sup>54</sup> In fact, Turkey plays an increasingly important role regarding oil transit, being strategically located at the crossroads between Central Asian Republics, rich in energy resources, the Middle East and the European consumption centers. As Mehmet Ögütçü explains, "being a regional energy hub does not mean, of course, only the possession of pipelines crossing its territory".<sup>55</sup> For Turkey to operate as a core of natural gas, it needs to "be able to import a sufficient quantity of gas to meet both its own domestic demand, and any obligation to re-export, as well as to provide capacity to transport gas from the Caspian and the Middle East to Europe".<sup>56</sup> At the heart of Ankara's energy policy there is a rapidly growing economy, with extremely high levels of dependence on energy imports, and an intention of the Government to strengthen Turkey's position as a regional power.

Both Turkey and the countries of the Caspian region are today faced with threats of various kinds, to the security of transportation routes and infrastructure, likely to disturb or even interrupt the flow of energy in the region. The international oil companies depend significantly on tankers passing through the Bosphorus, a navigation route that measures only "700 meters wide" at its narrowest point, being "one of the busiest maritime choke points in the world, through which transit 2.9 million barrels of oil daily in 2010".<sup>57</sup> The Turkish authorities are aware that an accident with a tanker, or a terrorist attack, could lead to the closure of the Bosphorus, which would, of course, have serious economic, political and environmental consequences, first for Turkey. Moreover, it should be noted that the Workers' Party of Kurdistan has, on several occasions, carried out attacks against domestic pipelines, "which nonetheless has an impact abroad" to the extent that the International Community questions whether Turkey is effectively able to protect the energy infrastructure found in its territory".<sup>58</sup>

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought new perspectives and opportunities - that were previously outside the scope of Turkish foreign policy - particularly in the Middle East, in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Economically vibrant and politically "more nationalistic and assertive", today Ankara does not intend to continue to play the role of 'subordinate partner', and has also demonstrated, repeatedly, that U.S. concerns weigh less in its regional decisions.<sup>59</sup> Currently, a majority of Turkey's security challenges are concentrated in the Caucasus and the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Iran. Thus, by necessity, Ankara has been increasing its attention on these areas.

Energy is an important issue in Turkish politics, both at the domestic and international levels, reflecting the needs of a rapidly growing economy. Data from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2013) indicate that the Gross Domestic Product of Turkey increased 171% between 1990 and 2008. The growth rate of the country was 9% in 2010 and 8.5% in 2011. Turkey recovered "relatively quickly" from the economic crisis that began in 2008.<sup>60</sup> This growth, however, took place at the expense of an extremely high dependence on energy imports, since with very limited domestic reserves, Turkey imports almost all the oil it consumes. To illustrate this, in 2010, "Turkey's energy production met only 29% of its energy demand", which is "one of the major weaknesses of the country's energy security, which affects its foreign policy".<sup>61</sup> According to Mehmet Ögütçü, "the shortage of energy supply in Turkey" is compensated by the extraordinary geographic position of the country, located "between the second largest gas market - Europe, and the substantial gas reserves of Russia, the Caspian Basin and the Middle East".<sup>62</sup> This location provides Turkey with the opportunity to be the main hub of European gas and a key actor towards the gas policy throughout the region.

The main energy priority of the Turkish government is to ensure security of supply at affordable prices. The economic vitality of the country, its strong transatlantic ties, and the existing energy infrastructure, make Turkey an attractive partner for European countries importers of energy resources. According to former National Security Advisor of the USA, Stephan Hadley, "Turkey has become one of the five or six most important countries of the world"; [...] "It's ironic... if we look at its economic performance, we will be in doubt whether Turkey should join the European Union or, instead, the European Union should join Turkey".<sup>63</sup>

Turkey's location provides it with an easy access to supplies from the Caspian Sea, the Middle East, Russia and North Africa. Turkish representatives are euphoric that "70% of the [worlds'] proven reserves of oil and gas are to be found in its immediate vicinities".<sup>64</sup> The country plays an important role in the transit of oil and gas from these regions. Several pipelines bring significant quantities of oil and gas from Russia and Azerbaijan to Turkey, where large amounts of Russian and Kazakh oil are shipped through the Bosphorus. Turkey also provides an important outlet for Iraqi crude oil, through the Kirkuk - Ceyhan pipeline, built in the late 70s.

### **Final remarks and policy recommendations**

We sought to describe Turkey's interests in Central Asia as being impregnated with a certain realism and pragmatism. In fact, we wanted to explain that the desire of strengthening relations with the five Central Asian Republics primarily gravitates around a pursuit for power and influence, valued by realism. However, power is here understood as an 'energetic', but also cultural, power, since Ankara has strong historical bonds to the region.

We suggest here that Turkey deepens the diplomatic efforts that it has been, quite well, developing regarding the Central Asian states. It's not unreasonable to propose, at a time when the United States' priority in Eurasia is to prevent the emergence of any regional hegemon or pivot, be it Chinese, Russian (after all Central Asia is Russia's 'near abroad'), Iranian or Turkish - that Ankara turns Central Asia into a kind of 'soft power laboratory'. Through investments, trade, regional cooperation on several matters, Turkey can present itself as a responsible and mature neighbour towards the countries of the region which, in turn, want to maximize their interests, without becoming too dependent on any great power.

In this Central Asian New Great Game - in which Turkey and Iran, two regional powers, are often forgotten or underestimated by experts - Ankara and Tehran can propose themselves as viable alternatives, as the logic of geography teaches us, by helping the Central Asian countries to easily gain access to international markets, favouring, for example, the access to the Indian Ocean or to the European continent to the so-called '*landlocked*'.

But if Turkey can be an important partner for the Central Asians, Central Asia is also crucial for the projection of Ankara into a regional sphere, as well as while regional market for Turkish products. In this regard, we suggest that Turkey inspires itself on the Chinese policy towards Central Asia, which has shown remarkable vigour in recent years. Although Washington has its own version of the New Silk Road - which excludes Iran from any initiative, putting, instead, Afghanistan in the centre of the economic revitalization of the ancient Silk Road - we argue here that Turkey can and should cooperate with Tehran rather than exacerbate the marginalization and isolation to which the International Community (and the USA in particular) has condemned the country. It should be noted that after the signs of rapprochement between Washington and Tehran, a new Turkish-Iranian partnership has been developing. From a pragmatic and realistic point of view, it makes perfect sense, at least because Iran is Turkey's third largest export market, being both economies highly interdependent, therefore.

It is pertinent to add here the fact that Turkey's role, once seen by the West as a model for Islamic democracy in the region, has been relegated to the background as regards its ability to mediate the issues assigned to the Middle East. Indeed, Washington has been consulting Ankara's

recommendations less and less in what concerns issues of security and geostrategic nature related to the Middle East. Faced with this fact, won't the economic imperatives of a Turkey that thirsts for energy and markets justify, from a realistic and pragmatic point of view, that Ankara dares to 'lightly' sacrifice its loyalty to Washington to get closer to Tehran? It's a complex question, but that is nonetheless interesting to ask, since an axis Ankara-Tehran-Central Asia-Beijing can provide extraordinary opportunities from an economic point of view to Turkey, of course, if it knows how to use a sufficiently skillful diplomacy to maximize its interests without hurting the alliance with Washington and the exemplary image that this secular state, a crossroads between Asia and Europe, has, yet, by the West. The Ankara-Tehran-Central Asia-Beijing axis makes perfect sense, if we take into account that the timing could not be more propitious, especially since China is promoting its own version of what it considers to be the New Silk Road, different from the one that is conceived by the USA.

In the Chinese conception of the New Silk Road there is no room for excluding countries, Iran above all, which Beijing considers to play a fundamental role within the terrestrial corridors (road and rail) that Chinese have been building and financing in the region to facilitate the flow of the Chinese products and, above all, to try to mitigate the consequences of a possible blockade of the Strait of Malacca, extremely harmful to Chinese energy security, in the event of military hostility between Beijing and Washington. In this context, Iran, but also Pakistan (where China is investing in modernization and expansion of the port of Gwadar) are two vital parts in the Chinese New Silk Route.

It is, therefore, Ankara's role to know how to deal with the Chinese, approaching them, to take better advantage of the benefits of this Chinese 'New Silk Road' which, unlike Washington's, does not exclude ideologies, regimes or creeds... the Chinese just want to do *business*. After all, that's what Beijing's consensus is about. Ankara must propose itself as a useful and long-lasting partner, capable of helping China, and above all, as realism advocates, helping itself to live (survive) on the realistic struggle for power, in a context in which, as we have stated, Turkish and Iranian economies are highly dependent. We believe that Ankara can fully strengthen its terrestrial connections (road and rail) to Iran, as well as betting on the creation of new gas and oil pipelines that cross Iran and are destined for Central Asia. This would aim to open, on the one hand, new export routes for Central Asian oil and gas (since Russia controls mainly the infrastructure through which circulate the gas and oil from these *landlocked* countries), as well as to create alternative land bridges (road and rail) to the flow of Iranian, Central Asian and even Turkish products. Everyone would benefit.

Based on this line, let us launch a challenge to future work. We encourage here other researchers to explore in detail the contribution that the Ankara-Tehran-Central Asia-Beijing axis can provide in the context of the Chinese New Silk Road and how Turkey can profit from such an initiative, in order to increase (even more) the growth of its economy and to project its power in the regional sphere.

## Notes

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