

CHINESE INFLUENCE ON SECURITY OF CENTRAL ASIA ÇİN'İN ORTA ASYA'NIN GÜVENLİĞİNE ETKİSİ

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Özet

Bu çalışmada, Çin'in bölgesel istikrarsızlık ve Sincan bölgesindeki iç meseleler karşısında benimsediği savunmacı güvenlik yaklaşımı ele alınmış; Orta Asya'daki güvenlik politikası ve stratejik angajmanı analiz edilmiştir. Terörizm, ayrılıkçılık ve sınır aşan suçların Orta Asya ile Çin'in batı sınırlarında istikrarsızlığa yol açmasının engellenmesine yönelik girişimler, özellikle Çin'in Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü çerçevesindeki çok taraflı ve ikili faaliyetleri üzerinden değerlendirilmiştir. Bölgenin jeopolitik önemi; doğal kaynak zenginliği, iç siyasi istikrarsızlıklar, etnik gerilimler ve küresel güçlerin örtüşen çıkarları çerçevesinde vurgulanmıştır. Elde edilen bulgular doğrultusunda, Çin'in Orta Asya'daki varlığının hegemonik bir güç inşasından ziyade, ekonomik fırsatların sürdürülmesi ve bölgesel istikrarın sağlanması hedefiyle şekillendiği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Bu bağlamda, geleneksel güvenlik paradigmalarının zorlayıcı araçlardan çok, işbirliğine dayalı stratejiler aracılığıyla dönüştürülmeye çalışıldığı ortaya konmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bölgesel Güvenlik, Çin, Orta Asya, Çin Dış Politikası, Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü

Abstract

This article examines China's primarily defensive posture in response to regional instability and internal issues in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, focusing on its security policy and strategic engagement in Central Asia. It analyzes China's efforts to combat terrorism, separatism, and

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transnational crime that may threaten both Central Asia and China's western borders, with particular attention to its bilateral and multilateral activities, especially within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The geopolitical significance of the region is highlighted, influenced by resource wealth, domestic political unrest, ethnic tensions, and the overlapping interests of major powers. The conclusion argues that China's involvement in Central Asia is driven not by a desire for hegemony but by the need to maintain economic opportunities and regional stability through cooperative measures. Thereby, it has been revealed that traditional security paradigms are being transformed through cooperative strategies rather than coercive means.

Keywords: Regional Security, China, Central Asia, Chinese Foreign Policy, Shanghai Cooperation Organization

Introduction

Powerful nations, including the Turks, Mongols, and Russians, have influenced Central Asia (CA). Due to its advantageous location and wealth of natural resources, control over this area has historically provided economic and geopolitical advantages. Additionally, CA is located along the ancient Silk Road trade route. This combination of valuable resources, which serve as an alternative to those in the Middle East, along with the potential for trade routes that do not rely on maritime options, has attracted the attention of major world powers such as Russia, the US, and China (Ari, 2008; Rauf, 2017).

Until the USSR collapsed, Russia and its socialist ideologies were dominant in the region, which resulted in the beginning of political instability, territorial issues, and the threat of terrorism due to the influence of Afghanistan. New republics often lacked experience managing internal and external challenges following their independence. This situation pushed governments to be more autocratic, and as they leaned more toward socialism than democracy. Furthermore, Central Asian Republics (CAR) got into conflicts related to their territories as they were sharing the natural resources in the region and minority rights due to ethnic diversity (Staff, 2021; Olcoot, 2010). Consequently, an unstable CA became vulnerable to terrorism and radicalism due to Afghanistan's influence. Unclear border issues created a suitable environment for drug trafficking and uncontrolled separatist movements (Somzhurek et. al, 2018; Peyrouse et al., 2012).

Despite its high potential, CA governments were often inefficient. World powers have seized the opportunity to exert influence, turning the region into a battleground of competing interests. Russia has always been the primary military partner of the CAR, and China's policy towards the CAR was more economic. At the same time, the US pursued a war against terrorism in the region. However, the US presence was stronger in Afghanistan while they were using CA as their military base. Therefore, the US influence in the region was not prominent. On the contrary, China was the first

country to express its goals regarding CA (Dadabaev, 2014; Peyrouse, 2016). China's Stated objectives in the region are (Peyrouse et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2010):

1. Preventing Uyghur activists from using CA as a base.
2. To prevent CA from becoming a factor that forces China to become more involved in international security issues.
3. Possessing some of CA's raw materials, assets, and hydrocarbons
4. CA should be included in the Chinese market's international expansion plan by widening its borders to the north and west.

This paper examines China's objectives in CA, focusing on its regional goals, which are primarily rooted in national security concerns. This study argues that China's security engagement in CA is primarily defensive rather than offensive to stabilize its western frontier and protect its economic interests. Through this analysis, the study aims to contribute a deeper understanding of China's strategic engagement and broader implications for regional stability and international relations.

The paper is organized into three main sections to provide a comprehensive understanding of China's evolving strategy in the region. The first section discusses the importance of CA for major global powers, including an overview of its historical and contemporary geopolitical relevance. The second section outlines the causes of instability in the region, such as terrorism, separatism, and cross-border crime, threatening both the CAR and China. The third section analyzes China's approach to CA in response to these challenges, examining both bilateral and multilateral frameworks. Particular attention is given to China's efforts to ensure stability in Ca to prevent instability in its western provinces, specifically Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region XUAR (While some scholars and advocacy groups refer to this area as "East Turkistan" to emphasize its distinct cultural and historical identity, this paper uses "XUAR," the term recognized in international and official discourse.).

The study concludes with a review of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the premier forum for resolving security concerns between China, Russia, and the CARs. In addition to China's multilateral strategy, the SCO represents a change in the regional order away from Western models and toward a more Eurasian one. By examining SCO's organization, goals, and operational scope, the research investigates how SCO shapes security governance in CA.

1. Geopolitics of Central Asia

States place a special emphasis on the region because of their goals of establishing supremacy and security concerns due to CA's geographic location, surrounded by powerful and unstable countries (Cooley, 2019). CA holds a significant strategic position in world geopolitics. Halford Mackinder, a British geographer and geostrategist, created the words "heartland" and "pivot area," referring to CA as the region's geographic core and the hub of the Eurasian Silk Roads. Whoever

dominates the Eurasian continent, and whoever controls Eurasia, gains control over the world, claimed Mackinder at the beginning of the 20th century. The assertion captures CA's precarious situation (Hung & Herman, 2013). Furthermore, famous geopolitician Brzezinski said that Eurasia is where the world's power battles are taking place and compared it to a chessboard (Brzezinski, 1997). Therefore, it is crucial to understand the region's geography to grasp its strategic importance.

The region is in the center of Asia. It consists of former Soviet countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, spanning from the western border of western China to the Caspian Sea in the east. Iran, Afghanistan, and China border it on the south, while Russia borders it on the north. The region is dominated by vast plains, steps bordered by the Tien Shan and Altai Mountains on the East, and the Caspian Sea on the West. Consequently, these loosely defined natural boundaries provide a bowl where climatic variations, animal and plant species, and human populations mingled and blended over time (Blagov, 2002). The region's climate is dry, and 60% of the region consists of deserts, which are infertile for agriculture. Due to this situation, the region depends on the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, the major rivers in the region, feeding Aral Lake for irrigation (Britannica, 2022).

Figure 1: Map of Central Asia



Source: <https://www.freeworldmaps.net/asia/central/physical.html>

Uzbek, Kazakh, Tajik, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz are the five biggest ethnic groups in CA in terms of population. Except for the Tajik, who speak a language related to Persian, all of those ethnicities speak languages related to Turkish. The majority of followers of the prevalent religion are Muslim. The region has a multiethnic character due to its historical integration into Russia and the Soviet

Union, where it was a significant ethnic minority (Olcott, 2010). As a result, there are many commonalities among the five countries; they are primarily Muslim, most of the population speaks a Turkic language, and several common traditions are also found in all five (Aydin, 2015; Laurelle & Peyrouse, 2012).

Natural resources abound throughout CA. The main pillars of their economic development are Kazakhstan's oil, natural gas, and non-ferrous metals, the gold and uranium of Uzbekistan, and the oil and natural gas of Turkmenistan. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also have significant gold and uranium deposits and plentiful water power supplies (Kassenova, 2009). The wealth of natural resources in CA and the ability of most of these resources to be sold to the global market play a role in the region's strategic location. However, the unplanned usage of these sources harms the region's population and economic development (Peyrouse et al., 2012). Consequently, rich natural resources in the region attract the attention of world powers: the US, Russia, and China. This situation creates a tug of war to gain regional dominance (Rauf, 2017).

Due in large part to its location in the heart of the Silk Road, CA has always held a prominent regional and global trade position (Staff, 2021). CA continues to serve as a link between the eastern and western worlds, just as it did in the past. The safety of the area's transportation, communication, and energy transmission systems further highlights the region's significance. Numerous energy transmission line projects are planned for the area (Aydin, 2015; Peyrouse, 2016).

There are common developmental difficulties brought on by CA's location close to the middle of the most significant land mass on the planet. It is cut off from lucrative and effective marine routes. As a result, it has been difficult for CA countries with abundant mineral resources or agricultural potential to compete with non-landlocked countries. Establishing transportation systems and other infrastructure is crucial for these nations; most influence-seeking entities have directly contributed to local infrastructure. The enormous Silk Road Initiative launched by China is a case in point (Wilson, 2022). However, it is not an easy task to improve welfare in the region without stability and security.

2. Chinese Perspective on Security Issues of Central Asia

CA experienced the winds of change blowing through metropolitan Russia, Ukraine, or the Baltic republics less intensely during the last two decades of Soviet history due to its remoteness and economic backwardness. However, from 1979, Soviet intervention in neighboring Afghanistan produced ripple effects across the frontier (Larin, 2011). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the CA countries gained independence from the USSR and established their own countries. This process was relatively smooth compared to other Soviet countries, as there were no internal disputes about new regional governments (Dadabaev, 2014).

However, this independence left these countries with underdeveloped political institutions and limited governance experience, as they were used to the USSR's stability. These inexperienced

governments struggled to handle internal and external issues, leading to regional instability. Problems began to manifest in the form of territorial conflicts, terrorism, separatism, and a decline in human security throughout the region (Mackerras, 2014). Additionally, the eagerness of world powers to assert their dominance for their benefit poses further threats and may impede the region's development (Cooley, 2019).

2.1. Political Instability: Terrorism, radicalism, and drug trafficking

The political rhetoric of the new CARs, unwilling to leave the Soviet Union despite growing unhappiness and antagonism towards Moscow in the 1980s, corresponded to the relative "newness" of these nationalities. However, each CA state had its distinct nationality, culture, language, and history during independence (Musaoglu, 2009). New Governments in CA have been established without opposition or bloodshed. There was no transition from autocracy to democracy as well. Table 2 shows that they are still considered autocratic regimes.

Table 2: Democracy in Central Asia based on data in 2024

	Overall Score	Global Rank	Regime Type
Kyrgyzstan	3.52	111	Authoritarian
Kazakhstan	3.08	118	Authoritarian
Uzbekistan	2.10	146	Authoritarian
Tajikistan	1.83	159	Authoritarian
Turkmenistan	1.66	161	Authoritarian

Source: EIU Democracy Index Report (2024), <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/>

Democracies have struggled to establish themselves in CA due to opposition from rulers. These leaders often want us to believe that the lack of democracy is an advantage rather than a disadvantage. These governments frequently use historical and cultural grounds for authoritarian control to paint their citizens as politically unsuited for democratic administration (Olcoot, 2020). Additionally, they claim that their traditional Asian values lead their people to dislike democracy and favor strong leadership. Most importantly, they use security to justify maintaining strict social order and stability (Nourzhanov, 2009). This instability, in turn, heightens the risk of Islamic radicalism, as some believe that an Islamic government could provide the stability that their countries need (Beydullah, 2019).

The independence that came after the fall of the Soviet Union raised fears that it would lead to an expansion in religious activities in CA nations, which are also Muslim nations that border Afghanistan. In particular, it was expected that this situation would fuel anti-Western and anti-

Russian sentiments, sever Muslim-Christian ties, and spark a war in the area. Mosques, madrasas, and schools—representatives of religious culture—were attempted to be demolished during the Stalinist era. Despite this, it is still easy to discern the traces and impacts of Islam in every aspect, in CA nations, have not quite lost their Islamic character (Ari, 2008).

The reason why Islamic extremist organizations can flourish is because of the leadership gap created by previous institutions. Socially underprivileged communities see radicalism as the only means of advancement and hold the notion that honest Islam will bring them justice and resolve their issues. Due to the region's proximity to Afghanistan and the Middle East, the fear of terrorism and religious extremism hangs over CA all the time (Larin, 2011). By offering sanctuary and training possibilities, the Taliban movement in Afghanistan also supported the Islamist movements in the CAR. Specifically, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan were vulnerable to such influence (Kerr & Swinton, 2008).

In addition to this, the problems on the borders make it easier for drug dealers to smuggle drugs into the region from Afghanistan, and even transport them to neighboring countries. Transnational criminal groups exploit the open borders in the region by bribing border officials. Additionally, vulnerable individuals and illegal migrants often travel through unofficial routes that cross national boundaries. The situation is challenging for the states in the area, which find it difficult to address these pressing issues (Somzhurek et al., 2018). To tackle the significant non-traditional threats posed by transnational organized crime—threats that undermine state institutions and hinder long-term economic development — CA states must continue to strengthen their law enforcement and security capabilities, while also engaging in active international cooperation (Aben, 2019)

2.2. Territorial Disputes: Separatism

Moscow's divide and rule strategy during the 1920s was the root of the territorial disputes in CA. Russian hegemony over the area began in the 17th century and persisted until the last independent Uzbek khanates were captured or turned into protectorates in the 1870s. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Soviet control supplanted that of the Russian tsars. Subsequently, the area was incorporated into the Soviet system through a planned economy and improved communications. Therefore, the five nations of CA were part of the Soviet socialist republics that the Soviet Union established in the 1920s and 1930s in the area. To provide the USSR's textile industry with raw materials, southern CA under Soviet administration began a massive cotton-growing program (Larin, 2011).

Even though Soviet rule caused them to surpass their culture, language, and values, the Planned Economy helped them to improve to accommodate the demands of the central planners, and the region's economy further deviated. On the other hand, Russian colonialism has planted the beginning of resentment between these brother nations as Russia disregarded ethnic and historical

ties in the region. Due to their shared political, economic, and cultural heritages, CARs are usually seen as a single entity (Musaoglu, 2009; Olcott, 1995).

To stifle nationalist feelings, Soviet authorities purposefully drew administrative borders that ignored historical and ethnic realities. This aimed to prevent ethnic revolts by mixing all the ethnicities in the region (Cooley, 2019). For instance, the Hujan region of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic was transferred to Tajikistan in 1929 and given the name Leninabad; however, around ten years later, with the completion of the canal in the Fergana valley, a portion of Leninabad was returned to Uzbekistan. Additionally, Moscow included the Karakalpakstan area in Uzbekistan in 1938 after it had been united to Kazakhstan in 1924. Furthermore, Moscow did not pay attention to these borders when it built railways to transport goods from the region, resulting in people passing through each other's territory when they needed to travel (Ari, 2008).

Such a division resulted in ethnic mixing in the region. After gaining independence, Kazakhstan's population was made up of 39% Kazakhs and 38% Russians; Kyrgyzstan's population is 52% Kyrgyz, 22% Russian, and 13% Uzbek; Tajikistan's population is 62% Tajik, 24% Uzbek, and 7% Russian; Turkmenistan's population is 71% Turkmen, 29% Uzbek, and 9% Russian; and Uzbekistan's population %71% Uzbek, %8% Russian, and %5% Tajik (Walsh, 1993).

Historical territorial disputes were made more complex by the complex minority rights issues brought up by these diverse demographics. The legacy of Soviet-era borders still exacerbates tensions, especially in areas like the Fergana Valley, where several nations have overlapping claims, even though the demographic landscape has changed over the previous three decades, largely favouring particular ethnic groups (Larin, 2011).

Table 1: Ethnic and Religious Distribution in Central Asia

Kazakhstan (2023)	Kyrgyzstan (2021)	Tajikistan (2014)	Turkmenistan (2003)	Uzbekistan (2017)
Kazakh %71	Kyrgyz %73.8	Tajik %84.3	Turkmen %85	Uzbek %83.8
Russian % 14.9	Russian %5.1	Uzbek %13.8	Uzbek %5	Russian %2.3
Ukrainian %1.9	Uzbek %14.8	Other %2	Russian %4	Tajik %4.8
German %1.1	Dungan %1.1		Other %6	Kazakh %2.5
Uzbek%3.3	Other %5.2			Karakalpak %2.2
Tatar %4.9				Tatar %1.5
Other %0.3				Other %2.9
Muslim %69.3	Muslim %90	Muslim %98	Muslim %93	Sunni Muslim %88

Christian %17	Christian %7 (Russian Orthodox %3)	Shii %3 Sunni %95	Christian %6.4	Orthodox %9
Other %0.2	Other %3	Other %2	Buddhist, folk religion, Jewish %3	Other %3
			Other and unspecified %2	

Source: CIA World Factbook: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/>

The least difficult boundaries among the CA nations were those of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, whose borders underwent the required processes and became unproblematic. Border disputes between the two nations and their neighbors were resolved amicably (Ashurov et al., 2020). Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan boundary disputes with Kazakhstan were settled in 2001, 2002, and 2017. When Turkmenistan finished its final studies on border determination with its neighbors, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in 2017, it became the first nation to resolve border disputes with the nations in the region. The borders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan are the most problematic disputes in the region, as in the Fergana Valley, where the three states claim each other's territory. Over 150 tensions and clashes between them during the past 11 years have been documented, with many casualties. This is due to agricultural irrigation, animal grazing, smuggling, and illegal border crossings (Berker & Abdulkirimov, 2022; Peyrouse, 2016).

Nevertheless, new governments knew they required political stability, economic growth, and security. This is especially true considering the region is on the ancient Silk Road route that connects Europe and Asia, which increases its importance as a bridge, an alternative to maritime routes for trade (Cooley, 2019). However, they could not stabilize politically or economically, resulting in a search for a stabilizer; in this case, China was right there with its goals directed at CA (Somzhurek et al., 2018).

3. Policy of China on Security of Central Asia

China has been focusing on CA for several reasons: it seeks alternative trade routes, requires energy supplies, and aims to demonstrate its peaceful rise on the global stage. Additionally, the instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan further complicates an already challenging environment for China. Consequently, China's approach in the region is primarily defensive. It wants to prevent CA from becoming a hub for exporting the Uyghur conflict and aims to avoid direct interference in its domestic handling of this issue. Its goal is maintaining regional stability while incurring the least possible cost (Kerr & Swinton, 2008; Mackerras, 2014).

As a result, China was one of the first countries to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with CA nations following their independence (Peimani, 2009). One reason for this prompt action by China was to prevent other regional powers from taking over the space left by Russia (Duran &

Purevsuren, 2016). A more prevalent motive was China's "Peaceful Rise" policy. During rapid growth, Beijing sought to carve out a new position in the international arena, where it could effectively leverage its political, economic, and military resources while fostering friendly relations (Kavalski, 2010). As Beijing recognized that the term "rise" suggests an increase in relative power and could challenge the existing global status quo, primarily dominated by the US since the end of the Cold War, it replaced "peaceful rising" with the phrase "harmonious worldview." This concept encompasses three guiding principles for the relationship between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and CA. China is actively advancing multilateralism to achieve standard security, promote mutual benefits and cooperation for a prosperous society, and foster an accommodating attitude leading to a "harmonious world" (Hung & Herman, 2013; Zhao et al., 2010).

China and the countries of CAR have similar security interests. Everyone benefits from stabilizing CA and China's western border regions (Zhuangzhi, 2007). In addition, China sees CA as an essential trade partner, as the area can provide an alternative trade route to the West (Somzhurek et al., 2018). Therefore, China must advance security cooperation in its CA foreign policy to prevent the emergence of any conflict and instability in the region.

China is becoming a more significant presence in Central and South Asia. A great power to be taken seriously militarily, diplomatically, and economically in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond is China. No area on China's periphery has seen Beijing take more initiative over the past twenty years than CA, as China was the first country to express its interest in CA openly. Beijing believes the area is weak and has a high potential for instability. On the other hand, Beijing is concerned that instability in CA could cause upheaval in China's western regions (Makerras, 2014).

Globalization, commerce, investment, and economic interdependence all influence geopolitical issues. In this emerging narrative, relying solely on geography to analyze international politics is inadequate. We can observe the interconnectedness of economies and national security, particularly regarding military and political stability. In this context, China prioritizes economic objectives over military or political dominance in the region. Beijing believes that enhancing its economy will improve welfare, ensure political stability, and strengthen its capacity to address terrorism, separatism, and drug trafficking (Rauf, 2017).

Stability in CA is considered a key strategic interest for China, and it aims to have CA play an essential role in maintaining regional security. China has committed to ensuring security in the CA nations, promoting peace in the border regions, and enhancing military cooperation. This includes efforts to combat the "Three Forces," which refer to Uyghur separatists and their collaborations with CA countries. Additionally, China seeks to assist these nations in preserving CA as a non-nuclear and drug-free region. The strategy involves starting multilateral cooperation following the strengthening of bilateral relations (Zhuangzhi, 2007).

China's relations with its neighbors in CA have evolved over three stages since the end of the Cold War: “the establishment and strengthening of diplomatic ties (1991–1996), the resolution of border disputes and cooperation in traditional and nontraditional security, (1997–2000), and extensive cooperation under the SCO (since 2000)” (Hung & Herman, 2013; Ari, 2008).

In bilateral and multilateral meetings, the leaders of China and the CA states have vigorously displayed a conscientious attitude towards security cooperation and building trust. The CA countries have visited China countless times since 1992 (Zhuangzhi, 2007). Kazakhstan received a security guarantee from China in a statement officially released in February 1995. China has pledged to refrain from using nuclear weapons against Kazakhstan. A confidence-building pact was signed on April 26, 1996, by the leaders of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, China, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan. The five nations agreed to take measures to foster more trust along the border in regions under their military control. Another agreement to reduce military presence along their shared borders was signed on April 24, 1997, by the presidents of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It had considerable political and military significance because it was the first document on border disarmament in the Asia-Pacific area. That demonstrated trust well (Peimani, 2009).

3.1. Separatism and Radicalization in XUAR

Newly independent CAR does have at least a modicum of sympathy for the Muslim population in China's westernmost regions, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union has increased China's political security concerns in CA. The Chinese government's most significant concern is that ethnic nationalism, whether acting independently or in concert with a resurgent Islam, might cause instability in the country's northwest provinces (Gansu and Qinghai) and autonomous areas (Ningxia, Xinjiang, and Tibet) (Walsh, 1993; Millward, 2007). Building positive relationships with neighboring nations is a crucial strategic decision for East Turkestan separatists, as it helps them avoid receiving assistance from those countries. As mentioned earlier, CA is experiencing heightened nationalism and territorial disputes driven by ethnic separatism, which also affects XUAR. In this context, border and regional security significantly shape China's security interests in CA (Ekrem, 2011).

After independence, roughly 25,000 Uyghurs lived in Kazakhstan and another 50,000 in Kyrgyzstan. The Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported on a gathering of the For a Free Uyghuristan party on July 29, 1992, in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek. The party pledged that it would only do so by the rules of international law, albeit vaguely about what it understood such "norms" to be. The party's objective was to create an independent state of Uyghuristan in XUAR province. Additionally, there was the Ittipak (Union) and the Kyrgyzstan Uyghur Association. The Almaty-based Association of Uyghurs and other Uyghur organizations existed in Kazakhstan. When issues arose and Chinese authorities mistreated Uyghurs in XUAR, these organizations frequently held press conferences and demonstrations in Bishkek and Almaty (Pannier, 2020).

Uyghur organizations in Kazakhstan reported fighting in July 1996 between Chinese security forces and the United Revolutionary Front of East Turkestan (URFET). This separatist Uyghur organization claimed responsibility for the deaths of some 450 Chinese soldiers and security personnel. Chinese soldiers opened fire on Uyghur demonstrators in the city of Ghulja (Yining in Chinese) who had demanded independence from China. However, the border treaties replaced by the earlier Soviet-Sino boundary treaty signed in April 1996 in Shanghai by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, and China included non-interference in the issues in XUAR. Uyghur organizations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan claimed that after the deal was signed, China began a wave of arrests in XUAR. The border accords required the governments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to refrain from assisting Uyghur rebels in XUAR. However, they did little to quell Uyghur demonstrations against China in their countries (Kerr & Swinton, 2008; Shichor, 2005; Mackerras, 2014).

Since late 2002, China has sought the assistance of neighboring CARs to push the few Uyghur supporters to the margins. Before this, China had already enlisted the support of the Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan presidents to acknowledge that "national separation is a detrimental destructive force." These leaders pledged to "take resolute action to combat the separatists so that they would not establish a foothold in their nations." (Ong, 2005; Cooley, 2019).

Another important point concerning XUAR is the impact of terrorist actions carried out by radical Islamist groups influenced by Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Uyghurs have become increasingly reliant on Islam due to a rising sense of alienation, hostility, and distress at home, as well as the emergence of militant-fundamentalist Islam abroad. XUAR's instability and terrorism are caused by several "Islamic" organizations, according to Chinese authorities. According to Beijing, there are many similarities between and tight ties between Uyghur national secession and religious Islamic terrorism. They have been seen as a threat to the security of China, both at home and abroad, including CA, in addition to the stability of XUAR (Schichor, 2005; Mackerras, 2014). Therefore, China felt that it needed to prevent other border nations from falling into terrorism, which would destabilize the western border of China even more, especially considering the US presence in the region due to Afghanistan, which was pressuring Chinese security (Dadabaev, 2014). Regarding this, SCO is the most influential in the region in pursuing stability.

4. Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The "Shanghai Five," which included China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, increased border confidence and disarmament agreements that had been discussed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The 'Shanghai Five countries' meetings and documents were crucial for the regional security of CA (Kavalski, 2010; Laurelle & Peyrouse, 2012). The first step

of the Shanghai Five was the “Agreement on Confidence Building in the Military Sphere in the Border Areas,” signed in 1996 (Blagov, 2022). Other multilateral agreements were held in Moscow in 1997, Almaty in 1998, Bishkek in 1999, and Dushanbe in 2000 (Peimani, 2009). Later, China convinced CA countries to establish a multilateral organization to tackle the three evils – defined as separatism, terrorism and extremism. The meeting in 2001 transferred the organization into a formal international institution. (Somzhurek et al., 2018).

The policies of SCO are set by the ‘Shanghai spirit’, which involves mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, and joint development by providing information and communication between nations (Dadabaev, 2014; Berdiyev & Can, 2020). Subsequently, SCO has become a representation of Chinese security involvement in CA. After the SCO achieved its initial goals of demilitarizing the Sino-Soviet border zones and facilitating their delimitation, it set out to create a shared fight against the so-called "three evils" of fundamentalism, extremism, and secessionism (san gu shili) (Peyrouse et al., 2012; Peimani, 2009). Therefore, it appears that the SCO primarily reflects Chinese desire to back a so-called "healthy CA order," free of the "three evils" and devoid of pro-Western elements that would move to destabilize China (Kavalski, 2010).

However, for CA countries, the attractiveness of the SCO was due to internal issues. CA experienced internal disputes due to political instability and ethnic nationalism, which resulted in the US's goal to promote its view of democracy and human rights, which was different from CA's perception. Therefore, they supported the SCO with the Chinese view of community building to bring stability to the region (Kavalski, 2010; Cooley, 2019). Conversely, it would benefit China to enhance its influence in CA and promote a culturally secular, internally authoritarian, and externally moderate region.

Within the scope of the SCO's confidence-building initiatives, the border security pact between China and CA nations has had some success. China's influence in the area, and among other countries, is growing. In other words, this project can shatter the influence of regional and global powers in the region and eradicate the perception of the Chinese threat in CA countries. The SCO's member nations share a similar perspective on regional security, including cooperation against terrorism (Dadabaev, 2014; Somzhurek et al., 2018).

Military training activities are significant in this environment. Therefore, SCO has scheduled several joint military training and military aid sessions in CA. The first multilateral military exercise was held in Kazakhstan and China in 2003 with the purpose of anti-terrorism, and the second one was held in Russia to tackle drug trafficking in 2007. China has participated in more than 20 bilateral or multilateral military exercises with other SCO members. Despite such exercises, SCO stresses that they are not an army bloc but is committed to ensuring the stability and security of the region (Peimani, 2009).

In other words, it is constrained by the acceptance of the Conventions on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism. Security cooperation in the SCO is mainly of a declaratory type. Collaboration in international relations and world politics is limited to sharing information, building a shared database, and reaching agreements among participating nations on several significant subjects (Somzhurek et al., 2018). To conclude, SCO is a collective security organization rather than a collective defense, as China does not wish to involve itself in others' internal issues or does not wish others to interfere in its internal matters.

Conclusion

The CA region has garnered significant attention from major global powers due to its abundant natural resources and its strategic position as a bridge between the West and the East (Cooley, 2019). These two attributes render CA particularly valuable to various nations. Within this context, three countries emerge as pivotal players in the region: the United States, Russia, and China. While the US has primarily concentrated on addressing issues in Afghanistan, it has utilized CA as a military base. Consequently, the US has not exerted substantial influence over CA. In contrast, Russia has positioned itself as the foremost military partner of CA, while China has solidified its status as the predominant trade partner in the region (Laurelle & Peyrouse, 2012).

In most cases, China's approach in the CA is considered pragmatic and non-hegemonic, rooted in mutual benefits. This perspective is partially accurate; China indeed emphasized economic cooperation and partnership through initiatives such as Belt and Road Initiative (Anwar, 2019; Cai, 2017). Specifically, China has proactively sought to foster amicable relations based on mutual benefits across various sectors with CARs (Omurova et al., 2024). Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that China also harbors security objectives concerning CA. These security-oriented initiatives encompass anti-terrorism, the mitigation of separatism, and efforts to counter radicalization, all designed to bolster mutual trust between CA and China. This trust-building is particularly pertinent in relation to neighboring countries, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Kavalski, 2010; Peyrouse, 2016). Deep down, these initiatives were a set of complex strategic calculations centered around its domestic security, particularly in relation to its XUAR (Millward, 2007).

China was concerned that its neighbors could be impacted by terrorism and drug trafficking from Afghanistan, which could threaten its borders (Blagov, 2002). Addressing terrorism and radicalization while fostering regional trust mutually benefits CA. Additionally, the establishment of CA, with its complex issues surrounding ethnic nationalism, has encouraged separatist movements among Uyghurs in China's XUAR region, which are already influenced by Islamic radicalization (Schichor, 2005). Consequently, China recognized the necessity to stabilize the area and build trust if it intends to maintain its 'One China' policy and enhance its engagement

concerning secure trade and energy extraction in the region (Laurelle & Peyrouse, 2012). By promoting stability in CA and countering Uyghur separatism, China aims to prevent the internationalization of its internal conflicts. As a result, it has actively sought to prevent neighboring countries from becoming havens for separatist movements and radicalization (Kavalski, 2010).

This dual approach of economic growth and security involvement presents several significant challenges. Firstly, although China refrains from direct military or political engagement in CA, its increasing economic impact leads to imbalances in bilateral relations, as the weaker economies of CA become more reliant on China (Ashurov et al., 2020). This situation raises concerns about sovereignty in the long run, even if not immediately. Secondly, China's domestic pressures have compelled CARs to suppress or marginalize the Uyghur diaspora, despite China's stance on non-interference and mutual respect. This dynamic complicates the narratives surrounding human rights issues related to China, which are frequently overshadowed by diplomatic rhetoric (Omurova et al., 2024).

The SCO stands as the most influential organization regarding Chinese engagement in Central Asia. In theory, it shows a dedication to regional security and mutual prosperity. This reflects China's shift in international relations from bilateral engagements to multilateral collaborations, pursuing a peaceful ascent while avoiding a hegemonic stance (Somzhurek et al., 2018). Yet, the scope of engagement within the SCO has been limited, focusing primarily on joint exercises, military assistance, and information sharing, indicating a desire to establish enduring capabilities. Still, it serves more as a forum for dialogue and symbolic partnership, operating more as a collective security mechanism than as a collective defense entity (Dadabaev, 2014). Moreover, SCO avoid directly addressing political repression or governance deficits that are the main root of the instability. In this regard, the organization serves as a legitimization platform for authoritarian regimes rather than transforming them through security and development (Laurelle, 2020).

Another concern is increase in authoritarian regimes in CA. The common belief is that China's model of engagement might contribute to persistence of authoritarianism by prioritizing the state to state relations focusing on elite driven strongman regime and offering investments without conditions, China undermines the incentives for political reforms. It risks to foster elite driven power structures and development which might not benefit the wider population (Kavalski, 2010; Berdiyev & Can, 2020). Furthermore, it is important to point out China's long-term strategic depth which embeded itself in the security of CA while using it as a buffer zone for its Western frontiers. The focus on "peaceful rise" obscures a more covert kind of strategic expansion that prioritizes normative alignment, security coordination, and economic reliance above outright force (Laurelle, 2020).

Additionally, it is essential to consider the limitations of China's influence in CA. While Beijing has undoubtedly made progress, its presence has raised suspicions among the broader public (Kassenova, 2017). In many CA countries, public sentiment remains cautious of Chinese initiatives, even as they recognize the advantages these projects offer. Furthermore, China contends with Russia's established military presence across CA and the lingering influence of Western institutions. This multifaceted competition makes it challenging for a single hegemonic power to dominate CA (Cooley, 2019). In this scenario, China must continually balance its ambitions with the need for restraint.

In conclusion, China's influence in CA is not as prominent as it appears. Rather, its objectives in the region are primarily economic rather than security-focused. China's approach is complex, adaptable, and influenced by a combination of economic and security needs. A stable CA is essential for China to ensure a peaceful border and foster stronger economic ties, as it can serve as an alternative trade route and energy source. While it steers clear of traditional hegemonic strategies, its increasing influence is altering regional dynamics. The SCO acts as a limited but valuable platform for these goals. Consequently, China needs to move past state-centric tactics and engage more with the structural factors that contribute to instability, notably authoritarian regimes, unresolved ethnic conflicts, and frail institutional frameworks. Unless these underlying issues are addressed, the stability of CA will remain tenuous, regardless of how carefully framed China's ambitions are.

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