

AKYLAI ALIEVA. CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS OF REALIZATION OF THE “BELT AND ROAD” INITIATIVE IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES. *Condensed abstract.*

Keywords: Central Asia, China, BRI, infrastructure, challenges, problems.

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1. Schmidt M. Reconfigurations in Central Asia: Challenges, Opportunities and Risks of China’s Belt and Road Initiative // *China and the New Silk Road* / Pechlaner H., Erschbamer G., Thees H., Gruber M. (Eds.). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2020. P. 77–85.

2. Kukeyeva F.T., Zhekenov D.K., Ordabayev A.K., Abdikamal A.M. Problems of Realization of “Belt and Road” Initiative in Central Asian Countries // *Vestnik Karagandinskogo universiteta*, 2020, № 4 (100). P. 41–46.

Matthias Schmidt, PhD, Augsburg University, [1] analyzes a long history of external influences on the political and economic space of Central Asian countries, focusing on the current role of China in the region. The author notes that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) raises not only great hopes, but also challenges and risks for the countries of Central Asia. The researcher believes that long-established value of Central Asia lies in its role as a bridge between the East and the West. During the golden age of Central Asia – the early Middle Ages – trade between China and the West was carried out along the Silk Road. In the

following centuries, the Russian Empire (and later Soviet Russia) dominated the region. After being confined to the Soviet boundaries, following independence the region opened up to international trade and cooperation. The states of Central Asia now participate in global trade and communication networks. The researcher notes that China's Belt and Road Initiative facilitates further reorientation. As a key transit region, Central Asia has the major role in the BRI. Infrastructure development is therefore needed in order to realize the potential of the region. First and foremost, a well-functioning railway system should be put in place. At the moment, two different railway systems mean transshipment at border stations. Thus, Chinese investment could meet the need to improve transport infrastructure and connect the densely populated Fergana Valley with Xinjiang. This is essential for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, since they are unable to fund such projects on their own. Moreover, China supports the construction of hydroelectric power plants and the modernization of power lines, which would make transmission of electric power to Xinjiang possible. However, the author points out that China's endeavours to develop transport and energy infrastructure in Central Asia could significantly contribute to the economic development of the region, if it were not for the associated large public debt.

The change in the trade structure of Central Asia is yet another consequence of the opening of borders with China and its active presence in the region. Low trade barriers enabled some countries, Kyrgyzstan in particular, to assume the role of hubs for the transshipment of Chinese goods throughout the region. For instance, 80 per cent of final consumption goods in Kyrgyzstan are imported from China. The author believes that Central Asia will remain a market for Chinese goods in the future, despite the accession of Kyrgyzstan to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the corresponding amendments to the foreign trade policy. The growing geopolitical and economic influence of China and massive investment, notably within the framework of the Belt

and Road Initiative, are perceived with optimism, but also raise suspicions in the region. The region is of great interest to China and Europe and could become a major supplier of energy resources, given a high potential for the use of renewable energy sources. However, underdeveloped transport and energy infrastructure and erratic governance hamper the development of resource potential. Therefore, the Chinese initiative offers Central Asia an opportunity to become an exporter of energy resources, thereby reducing its dependence on Russia. At the same time, the influence of China is steadily increasing; today China already controls 30 per cent of all oil production in Kazakhstan. Thus, Chinese investments could not only improve infrastructure and facilitate economic development in the region, but also deepen its dependence on China.

Moreover, Chinese investments increase the risk of a debt crisis in recipient countries, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. About 50 per cent of their external debt is owed to Chinese institutions. Nevertheless, Dushanbe intends to continue to increase the public debt in order to finance infrastructure projects in the energy and transport sectors. This is also facilitated by rather favourable credit conditions offered by China. The fact that Chinese loans have no domestic policy requirements is appealing for the governments of Central Asian countries. The fact that China expects its borrowers to be committed to the One-China policy is often neglected.

The researcher highlights the following significant issues:

- All the loans allocated by China physically remain within Chinese borders. The lending system works in such a way that a Chinese lending bank reinvests in a Chinese contractor company, which in turn supplies the recipient with Chinese equipment and workforce.

- China's increasing presence and influence is provoking xenophobic reactions among the population in Central Asia. The local population fears Chinese migrants taking all the jobs, as well as the possibility of China demanding land to settle the debt.

The author concludes that China's presence in Central Asia is expected only to grow, despite the region's high dependence on Chinese investments and loans and a large debt burden. After over a century as a major external power in the region, Russia no longer dominates the economic and cultural space. As for other players, the EU remains an important partner and donor for Central Asia, as well as the US. To a certain extent, Iran, Turkey and the states of the Persian Gulf are involved in the cultural and religious sphere. Meanwhile, China is now the largest economic player in the region. Thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative, China's economic dominance in the region is expected to boost its political influence. Until now, the BRI has not yet generated vast job opportunities or brought about economic diversification. A new 'great game' could mean an array of opportunities for Central Asia, but limited natural and human resources, economic and political constraints, and weak intraregional and external strategic position narrows down the choice of the development vector. Nevertheless, the Chinese project remains a good chance for development and access to world markets. The author deems the multi-vector foreign policy of Central Asian states is a reasonable strategy to avoid absolute dominance of a single player in the region.

The article by F.T. Kukeyeva, DSc(Hist.), Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, and a group of authors [2] studies cooperation in the field of transport infrastructure between China and the countries of Central Asia and identifies problems that might hinder the effective implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. The authors examine relations between China and the countries of Central Asia through the prism of the theory of sustainable development and the "New Regionalism" concept. According to the article, projects of cooperation between Central Asia and China should be reviewed in terms of long-term effects and compliance with the standards of sustainable development of the countries in the region. Otherwise, cooperation aimed at short-term profits may prove to be unprofitable in the long run.

Integration of the new regionalism with regard to Central Asia is the idea of the growth of economic interdependence, establishment of autonomy “from below” and multidimensional nature of cooperation.

The authors note that due to the favourable prospect for the region to become the focal point in the new architecture of the global economy, China enjoys the unequivocal support of Central Asian governments. At the same time, the low degree of relevance of the objectives of the BRI to the strategic needs of the region may give rise to variety of challenges and risks. Thus, the authors provide a brief overview of intra-regional debates on the topic. Pointing out a number of problems in cooperation with China, Kyrgyz and Tajik experts emphasize the need to modernize the transport system for the development of states in the region. The authors note that the concept of the development of regional infrastructure has been formulated through Kazakh State programmes since 2014. Back then Nursultan Nazarbayev identified the establishment of a transport and logistics system as a key to the development of Kazakhstan. Uzbek experts believe that the implementation of the Chinese initiative might strengthen the regional foreign policy of Uzbekistan. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan highlights the operational advantages of the International North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) passing through Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. On the whole, the constraining factors for the implementation of the initiative are the following: the geographical features of the region, disagreements between countries in the region and geopolitical threats. However, the discourse on the problems with implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative is still developing, as well as the initiative itself.

Discussing challenges associated with the implementation of the initiative, the researchers point to the clash of different powers in the region. Its nature parallels the global (West-Russia and US-China rivalries) and regional patterns of relations (India-Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, as well as Russia’s “pivot to the

East"). As for Sino-Russian relations, the authors note that both Russia and China support the status quo in Central Asia. By creating the NSTC Russia seeks to increase its transit attractiveness and undermine the competitiveness of the BRI. At the same time, Russia's efforts to maintain its monopoly in the region are hindered by the debt of certain countries to China. Confrontation with the West and security-related issues bring China and Russia closer together.

The authors point out that transport logistics in the region is hampered by the poor quality of roads. Only 30 per cent of international corridor routes are paved. Along with the inability of the internal market of Central Asia to meet the growing demand for transport services, poor roads slow down cargo transportation and result in wear and tear of vehicles. Differences in the technical specifications of railways complicate multilateral projects with China. The lack of up-to-date wagons and technologies slows down transportation and reduces competitiveness of transportation through Central Asia.

Institutional and political problems in the region also slow the flow of traffic. Most often, there are customs problems, such as different customs procedures and corruption within customs administrations. Political challenges mean difficulties in bilateral relations that could affect border checks, as was the case between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan when Astana imposed greater controls on the Kyrgyz border. In order to fully realize the transit potential, it is essential that Central Asian countries remove existing barriers and develop transport infrastructure.

The authors note that in parallel to the Chinese projects, other cargo transportation lines are being developed. Despite the political instability in Afghanistan, there are a number of projects designed to connect the country with Turkey, Europe and Iran. The countries in Central Asia aspire to be part of those projects involving Iran and Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has already established a train service with Afghanistan and works on its further development. In 2014, the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran

railway line was put into operation. Multiple alternative infrastructure projects make it clear that there are numerous ways for Central Asia to become a hub for the whole of Eurasia. The most ambitious project, however, is China's Belt and Road Initiative.

The authors come to the following conclusions. The Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia faces both technical and geopolitical challenges. To solve some of the issues, the countries of Central Asia should harmonize their railway system with the Chinese one, improve transport routes and resolve problems at customs. It should be noted that customs issues arise from corruption and intraregional disagreements. Alongside the work on the BRI, Central Asia should also develop transport projects with other countries in order to reduce the economic burden and the perils of overdependence on China.

ELENA DMITRIEVA. DYNAMICS OF THE RELIGIOUS
WORLDVIEW OF BASHKIRS AND CIVIC IDENTITY OF THE
POPULATION OF BASHKIRIA IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD.
Condensed abstract.

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Bashkiria, civil and ethnic identity,
international relations, religiosity of the
population.*

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