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Discussing China: Sinophilia and sinophobia in Central Asia



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ABSTRACT

In two decades since independence, Beijing has become one of Central Asian countries main partners. China's growing presence and influence in Central Asia partially structures the domestic orders, social changes, and national narratives of the latter. Exactly how China will intensify its presence in Central Asia is going to depend partly on the approaches and attitudes of the Central Asian states themselves. The rise of Sinophilia and Sinophobia will impact the political, geo-strategic, and cultural the situation in the region, working either to speed up or to slow down Chinese expansion in it. The Central Asian states are at once desirous of the growing Chinese presence, wanting to take advantage of its economic dynamism and geo-strategic influence, but also fearful of its potential demographic and cultural clout.

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Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the generally bad state of Sino-Soviet relations had impeded direct relations between Central Asia and China. Some trade relations started in 1982, formally recognized by China only in 1986, when it began to reform its foreign trade policies.¹ However, with a few exceptions, the Central Asian federated republics were without any access to the outside world. In 1991, the arrival of China on their agenda, both domestic and international, has been sudden. Establishing direct bilateral relations with Beijing has required overcoming several extremely negative clichés of China put about by Soviet propaganda, clichés that reinforced Central Asian societies' already long-standing apprehensions of their large neighbor. An old Central Asian tradition, handed down through centuries-old oral epics, presents China as a distant but recurrent enemy of Turkic peoples and as an historical opponent of Islam. However, in two decades only, Beijing has become one of Central Asian countries main partners.

Chinese interests in Central Asia have been structured in phases. In the first half of the 1990s, Beijing's concern was to sign demarcation treaties, demilitarize the borders, and prevent the strengthening of Uyghur separatism. In the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, it aimed to create a platform for discussion and mutual discovery, and to build a collective security framework through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.² In the first half of the 2000s, China moved to establish itself vigorously on the Central Asian market, mainly in hydrocarbons,³ extractive industries, infrastructures, and communications. Finally, since 2005, Beijing has been trying to establish ways to promote its language and culture and to train Central Asian elites according to the Chinese model. Despite China's initially negative overall image in Central Asia, the Middle Kingdom has succeeded in improving its reputation with soft-power diplomacy, and drastically changed the economic and

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¹ Niklas Swanström, Nicklas Norling, Zhang Li, "China," in F.S. Starr (ed.), *New Silk Roads: Transport and trade in Greater Central Asia* (Washington DC: Central Asia and Caucasus Institute, 2007): 386.

² On the China–Central Asia relationship during the 1990s, see T. Kellner, *L'Occident de la Chine, Pékin et la nouvelle Asie centrale (1991–2001)* (Paris: PUF, 2008).

³ Daniel C. O'Neill, "Risky business: The political economy of Chinese investment in Kazakhstan," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, no. 5 (2014): 145–156; T.S. Eder, *China-Russia Relations in Central Asia. Energy Policy, Beijing's New Assertiveness and 21st Century Geopolitics* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2014).

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strategic given on the Central Asian arena.⁴ It positions itself as the second most influential external actor in the region, surpassing Russia in economic terms, but not strategic or cultural ones.⁵

China's growing presence and influence in Central Asia is not limited to changing the international environment of the new states, or structuring their economic development. It also partially structures the domestic orders, social changes, and national narratives of the latter. Beijing has made it possible to act as a catalyst for indirect political debates on the choices made by governments;⁶ it fosters a reorganization of the social fabric by giving rise to new professional niches that present themselves as “go-betweens” between China and Central Asia; it is an object of academic knowledge, and of expertise, and has entered into the popular imaginary. While in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan there can be no question of having a genuinely pluralistic debate on China or any other foreign or domestic policy issues, political life in the other three states does allow for a greater expression of differences of opinion, giving the media license to discuss topics other than those directly involving the presidential family.

China's influence in Central Asian countries has raised controversies, which have ranged from issues of national integrity to economic questions, and both Sinophile and Sinophobe groups rapidly formed. Exactly how China will intensify its presence in Central Asia is going to depend partly on the approaches and attitudes of the Central Asian states themselves. For this reason it is essential to comprehend not only Chinese objectives in the region but also to look at the indigenous viewpoints of Central Asian governments, and their room for initiative on political and geopolitical issues. Although their scope for action is slight, the Central Asian governments and their public opinions ought not to be taken as mere passive objects in a game between great powers, but as actors in their own right that have well-established opinions on what they want to obtain from China and from any other country.

This paper will address the multifaceted impact of the China factor on Central Asia. It will, first, outline China's growing political and economic relations with Central Asia from the fall of the Soviet Union. I will then discuss the emergence of Pro-Chinese and anti-Chinese groups in Central Asia, their capacity and limits of influence on Central Asian states relations with Beijing. This will be followed by an analysis of the public and experts (academic circles, think tanks, political circles) opinion on the stakes, profit and risks of the Chinese presence in the region. The rise of Sinophilia and

Sinophobia will impact the political, geo-strategic, and cultural situation in the region, working either to speed up or to slow down Chinese expansion in it. The Central Asian states are at once desirous of the growing Chinese presence, wanting to take advantage of its economic dynamism and geo-strategic influence, but also fearful of its potential demographic and cultural clout. This research is based on a field research done in the five Central Asian states and China over the course of several months between 2008 and 2015.

1. China's growing presence in Central Asia

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, China was quick to become aware of the unique opportunities contained in this new geopolitical situation, which was not however without new risks, particularly in relation to its north and north-west borders. In 1991, Chinese economic power was still a shadow of what it has become two decades later, and the idea that the post-Soviet states were new markets to be conquered had yet to play a major role in Chinese strategies. What dominated were elements of anxiety: despite the satisfaction of seeing a superpower state like the Soviet Union disappear, and with it the historical Sino-Soviet conflict, Beijing was above all concerned about the impact of Central Asia's independence on the situation in Xinjiang, as well as about the risks of conflict linked to the non-resolution of territorial borders. China questioned 22 percent of the total surface area of Central Asia: it laid claim to a territory stretching from Semirechie to Lake Balkhash in Kazakhstan, almost all of Kyrgyzstan, and some 28,000 km² in the Pamir region of Tajikistan. However, with the opening of negotiations, the Chinese authorities toned down their claims and opted for a “good neighborhood” strategy with the new independent states. They agreed to reduce their territorial claims to “only” 34,000 km², chiefly out of a desire to secure allies in Central Asia. It signed border demarcation treaties with Kazakhstan in 1994 (some still disputed zones were settled in 1999), with Kyrgyzstan in 1996 (here also, resolutions over disputed areas were settled in 1999), and with Tajikistan in 2002.

The Sino-Kazakh issue of cross-border river management however remains unresolved. Both of Kazakhstan's main rivers, the Ili and the Irtysh, have their sources in Xinjiang and in the Chinese Altay. In the framework of the “Far West” development program, Beijing has increased its withdrawal of water upstream from both rivers. This question of cross-border rivers has been a topic of negotiations since Kazakhstan's independence. Both countries signed a framework agreement for the protection and utilization of cross-border rivers in September 2001. Nevertheless, the document does not stipulate any rules for the specific treatment of the Ili or the Irtysh, going no further than calling for a “measured” utilization of common waters.⁷ Nine years later, both countries finally declared themselves ready to sign an

⁴ Luba v. Hauff, “A Stabilizing Neighbor? The Impact of China's Engagement in Central Asia on Regional Security,” *DGAPanalyse*, no. 3, April 2013. Aleksandra Jarosiewicz, Krzysztof Strachota, “China vs. Central Asia. The achievements of the past two decades,” *OSW Studies*, No. 45, October 2013.

⁵ B. Mariana, “China's role and interests in Central Asia,” *Safer World*, October 2013; M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, *The ‘Chinese Question’ in Central Asia. Domestic Order, Social Changes and the Chinese Factor* (London, New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2012); P. Duarte, “The Dragon in its Backyard: The Chinese Question in Central Asia,” *Revista Estudos Políticos*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2014): 640–659.

⁶ See for example A. Koval, “Drakon na 'kryshe mira’,” *ZN,UA*, May 17, 2013, http://gazeta.zn.ua/international/drakon-na-kryshe-mira-_html (Accessed July 30, 2015).

⁷ A. D. Riabtsev, “Sushchestvuiushchii opyt vodnymi resursami na transgraniichnykh rekakh,” *Central Asian Water*, April 2006, http://www.cawater-info.net/library/rus/ryabtsev_rus.pdf (Accessed January 4, 2012).

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