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China's Strategic Policy to Expand its Sphere of Influence in Central Asia

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Extended Abstract

The grounds for China's active presence in the Central Asian region were provided after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the independence of the regional governments. In addition to geopolitical proximity, Beijing has put the continuation and expansion of relations with Central Asian countries and an increasing presence, especially in the energy equations of the region, on the agenda, and has sought to develop influence in the layers of power in Central Asia, which, in addition to helping China become the future leading power in the region, can provide the necessary grounds for expanding Beijing's power on the international stage. The region's proximity to China's western borders, rich energy resources, the region's consumer market, the region's need to attract foreign investment, the activity of the Uyghurs in the

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region, and the geographical location of Central Asia, which provides China with the possibility of establishing connections with Eurasia, the Middle East, and Europe, are among the attractions that have increased Beijing's attention to this region. China sees Central Asia as an important region that can develop its economic growth through trade routes and meet China's need for hydrocarbon resources. In addition, the stability and economic development of neighboring states in Central Asia are considered an important prerequisite for ensuring stability and security in China's western regions.

China's doctrine towards Central Asia can be seen as having three main aspects: The first aspect is rooted in China's history, which has always considered Central Asia as the first bulwark for its security on its western borders. The possibility of instability in Xinjiang has always been an intellectual concern for Chinese statesmen. The seven million Muslims in this region, who are mainly Turks and Uyghurs, feel closer to the Muslim ethnic groups of Central Asia than to the Han Chinese. The autonomous and Uyghur-populated Xinjiang region is highly vulnerable to separatist tendencies and anti-Chinese propaganda. The second aspect, or economic dimension, of China's doctrine towards Central Asia involves efforts to create a free Central Asian zone in order to improve China's economy and security. The economic development of Central Asia can be both attractive and dangerous for China's backward and remote regions bordering the region. Chinese leaders, especially after the Tiananmen Square unrest in 1989, realized the importance of investment for the economic growth of these regions. The third pillar of China's doctrine towards Central Asia stems from its increasing desire to play a role in the global security system. In order for China to have an effective and prominent presence on the world stage, it must first be able to assert its voice in the Central Asian region. In a short time, China has become the most important player in the Central Asian energy equation and has been able to direct a significant part of the region's energy resources to its consumer market, which is the largest in the world, through extensive investments. China's energy strategy towards Central Asia mainly has three dimensions. First, establishing long-term energy relations with the region through economic integration and developing trade relations; Second, the construction of direct pipelines carrying oil and gas from producing countries in the region

to China, and third, the reduction of the role of greedy trans-regional countries in the governments of Central Asia.

China has become the dominant economic power in the Central Asian region by implementing a comprehensive, long-term and targeted planning. Its extensive economic presence and influence in the Central Asian region in the three areas of energy exchanges, trade relations and investment in the economic infrastructure of Central Asia have played an important role in developing the country's economic influence in the region and have narrowed the space for the entry and role of actors such as Russia and Iran. The result of these developments, namely China's rise and dominance in the Central Asian economy, has led some analysts to speak of a "Chinese Marshall Plan" by Beijing for Central Asia, which is reminiscent of the Marshall Plan of the United States of America after the end of World War II. The interpretation of this symbolic interpretation and historical simulation is to pay attention to a long-term trend and planning by the Chinese to create a capable market for purchasing Chinese products, ensuring energy security and increasing China's economic influence in the Central Asian region, which has significantly changed and transformed the geo-economic picture of this region.

For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the threat of an American presence in Central Asia became very serious for China when the United States invaded Afghanistan in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. In the wake of this event, Central Asian states sought to develop their strategic, military, and economic relations with Washington, but China's response to this issue was proactive; meaning that Beijing sought to redouble its efforts in the region, and did so by developing bilateral security agreements with regional countries and strengthening the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China's strategy in this regard has been to present Beijing as a real and reliable security partner for Central Asian states, thereby providing them with a reliable alternative to developing military and security cooperation with the United States. Since 2002, China has signed a series of military and security agreements with Central Asian countries, including providing \$3 million in military aid to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, an extradition agreement with these two countries, an agreement on cooperation in combating extremism, separat-

ism, and terrorism with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the opening of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's "Regional Counter-Terrorism Center" in Tashkent, and the holding of annual joint exercises with Central Asian countries under the title "Peace Mission." The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the formation of new republics in Central Asia opened up new opportunities for Beijing's leaders to develop political, economic, and military relations with the Central Asian republics and thereby regain their former interests in the region. Beijing's top priority in Central Asia is economic and trade, and investment in oil and gas fields. As the largest investor in Central Asia, China has focused on infrastructure development through the Belt and Road Initiative. Two international corridors of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative pass through Central Asia, connecting China to the Middle East, South Asia and Europe. Apart from its economic importance, Central Asia plays an important role for Beijing from a security perspective. With the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, China became interested in the issue of border security. However, due to China's increasing global influence, monitoring the region is very important given its proximity to China and Russia. The insecurity on the borders of Xinjiang and the fight against religious extremists have led Beijing to expand its relations with Central Asian countries, and in this regard, Chinese authorities are taking steps to ensure regional security and ensure internal stability, especially in the western regions of China.

Key words: China, Central Asia, Xinjiang, national interests, rational choice.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.